

POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

SEPTEMBER 2021

Debacle in Afghanistan

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What You Should Know

With President Biden ordering a complete U.S. retreat this summer, Afghanistan became ground zero of the worst American foreign policy debacle in generations.

America's military involvement in Afghanistan tracks back to September 11, 2001, when terrorists struck the United States, killing almost 3,000 people. It was quickly clear that this was the work of al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, who was then hosted in Afghanistan by the Islamist Taliban regime. Weeks later, the U.S. led a military coalition of NATO allies and partners into Afghanistan, swiftly deposing the Taliban and launching what became a ten-year hunt for bin Laden. For almost 20 years, the U.S. and its allies kept a military presence in Afghanistan, supporting a friendly government in Kabul and countering a Taliban insurgency and other terrorists infesting Afghanistan's rugged terrain. In 2015, the Afghan military took over major combat responsibilities, while still relying on U.S. and allied forces, especially for vital air support. In April, 2021, President Biden announced his decision to withdraw all U.S. forces by September 11 and end America's role in what he called a "forever war."

Biden's withdrawal turned into a rout. With critical American military support abruptly gone, the Taliban swept back to power. By the 20th anniversary of September 11, the Taliban—still harboring al Qaeda—controlled more of Afghanistan than before the U.S. intervened, and were parading their plunder, flying their flag over the presidential palace and celebrating their defeat of the American superpower.

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Why You Should Care

America's humiliation in Afghanistan sends a dangerous signal of weakness and bad faith to the world. The ramifications are huge and grim; discouraging to our allies and emboldening to our enemies.

- Biden can boast that he ended U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan, but he did so at immense human cost to Afghans who had placed their trust in America, and staggering strategic cost to America's credibility and power of deterrence.
- Biden's helter skelter rush to the exit in Afghanistan has paved the way for worse trouble ahead, including a likely surge in terrorist attacks on America and our allies, and a rising probability of outright war in other theaters, where China and its despotic partners are seeking to replace the post-World War II Pax Americana with a much darker 21st century world order, molded to their advantage.
- Domestically, the Biden administration has tried to duck responsibility for the catastrophe in Afghanistan, with a welter of falsehoods, distractions and self-congratulatory messaging. This breaks faith with the basic integrity needed of government in a free and democratic society.

More Information

Afghanistan is a country of some 39 million people, located in a pivotal part of Central Asia—sometimes described as the gateway from Europe to Asia. This is terrain where foreign powers have long contended for dominance. Past conquerors include Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. In the 19th century, when Afghanistan served as a buffer between Czarist Russia and a British empire then ruling India, this contest was known as “the Great Game.” Today, the main power seeking dominance is China, increasingly a patron of Pakistan and Iran—which, like China, border on Afghanistan.

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Tribal, and impoverished, with per capita income averaging less than \$2 per day, Afghanistan in our time has become a base for radical Islamist groups, notably the Taliban, and including al Qaeda—which remains a significant presence in Afghanistan to this day.

Tumultuous Modern History

Afghanistan became an independent nation in 1919, ruled as a monarchy from 1926 until 1973, when the king was deposed in a coup. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Islamic tribal leaders, known as the mujahedeen, fought back, with U.S. support. In 1989, after a decade of war devastating to the Afghans and costly for the Kremlin, the Soviet military withdrew, leaving in power a puppet Afghan ruler, Mohammad Najibullah. In 1992, the

mujahedeen took Kabul, deposing Najibullah, who took refuge for the next four years in a United Nations compound in Kabul, while Afghan warlords fought over turf.

In 1996, with backing from Pakistan, the Taliban came to power, carrying out a gruesome public execution of Najibullah, promising an end to war and corruption, and establishing a brutal Islamist regime. That same year, Osama bin Laden—who had joined the Afghan mujahedeen during the Soviet occupation—moved back to Afghanistan from his previous foothold in Sudan. The Taliban gave haven to bin Laden and his terrorist training camps, as al Qaeda hatched the plots that produced the bombing in 1998 of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the attack in 2000 on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen’s port of Aden, and, in 2001, the September 11 hijacking of four airliners, two of them flown into the World Trade Center in New York, one into the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed in a Pennsylvania field when the passengers fought back.

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In Afghanistan, the war evolved into a long-running U.S.-led mission of NATO and its partners to stabilize and develop the country, while combating Taliban insurgents and other terrorist groups. Progress was dogged by corruption, and the raw difficulty of establishing democratic institutions and a stable government in a heavily tribal country devastated by decades of war and misrule. According to the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. spent roughly \$825 billion on U.S. combat operations and related support for Afghan forces, and \$144 billion on aid during almost 20 years in Afghanistan.

The U.S. Drawdown

Under President Obama, the U.S. initially surged troops, then began a drawdown, in which the Afghan military in 2015 assumed responsibility for combat operations, while the U.S. and other coalition members provided support. In early 2020, President Trump reached an agreement with the Taliban in which full withdrawal of U.S. troops by May 2021 was conditional on the Taliban denying haven to al Qaeda and other terrorists, refraining from attacks on U.S. forces, and embarking on peace talks with the elected government of Afghanistan. The Taliban were never likely to honor Trump’s deal, but he at least demanded conditions that took that into account. The Taliban violated these conditions, which meant that Biden, when he took office, was under no obligation to honor the agreement.

Nonetheless, effectively discarding the conditions of Trump’s deal and setting a new deadline, Biden announced on April 14, 2021 he would withdraw all U.S. troops by September 11.

His choice of deadline appeared driven chiefly by optics in Washington—picked so Biden could mark the 20th anniversary of al Qaeda’s attacks on America by announcing the war in Afghanistan was over. In early July, the U.S. military departed from its main base at Bagram Airfield, in the dead of night, and “without notifying the Afghans,” according to the BBC. With crucial American help disappearing—especially air support—the Afghan army began disintegrating. As the Taliban gained ground, Biden moved up his deadline for troop withdrawal from September 11 to August 31.

The Fall of Kabul and the Evacuation

On August 15, 2021, the Afghan capital of Kabul fell to the Taliban, bringing scenes reminiscent of the 1975 fall of Saigon—or worse. Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the pro-U.S. government collapsed. The U.S. abandoned its embassy, running down the American flag and helicoptering diplomatic personnel to the Kabul airport. The Taliban captured Bagram Airfield, freeing thousands of their cohorts held in a prison on the base.

Without the use of Bagram, and with Biden intent on completing his withdrawal, U.S. troops and diplomatic personnel were left to carry out a massive emergency evacuation in which the only exit was Kabul’s commercial airport—surrounded by Taliban forces and checkpoints. Biden ordered in an additional 6,000 American troops to help with the evacuation, and the military performed professionally and heroically. But the spectacle that transfixed the world was the American superpower, hamstrung by the orders of its own commander-in-chief, devoting its enormous military might not to beating back the Taliban, but to organizing a desperate retreat.

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The last U.S. service member left on the last military evacuation flight on August 30. The departure came in time to meet Biden’s August 31 deadline. But even after airlifting out more than 5,500 Americans and more than 100,000 Afghans, that deadline meant leaving behind as de facto hostages of the Taliban many Americans, citizens of allied nations, and Afghan co-workers. The evacuation included the agonizing scene of Afghans trying to cling to the undercarriage of a departing U.S. Air Force plane, and falling to their deaths. Huge crowds tried to make their way past the Taliban, seeking entry to the airport, and in that crush a suicide bomber blew himself up, killing 13 American troops and scores of Afghans.

Biden’s Betrayals

President Biden took office in January promising that one of his priorities would be “restoring America’s global standing.” Instead, as Senator John Barrasso neatly summed it up: “Our enemies are emboldened and our allies are enraged.” Biden’s withdrawal from Afghanistan has done colossal damage to U.S. global standing and credibility on at least three fronts:

Afghans

While the Biden administration touted the numbers airlifted out of Afghanistan in August, many thousands who had helped the U.S. and its allies were left behind; targets of Taliban retaliation. For Afghans who worked with America and our allies, and especially for Afghan women who heeded America's urging over the past 20 years to stand up for their rights, the return to Taliban rule is a catastrophe.

Allies

Biden talks a lot about rallying America's democratic allies, but in his plans for withdrawing America's remaining 2,500 troops from Afghanistan, he failed to consult with allied forces who still had some 7,500 of their own service members in the country—and ended up scrambling to get them out. As Kabul fell, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson reportedly had to wait a day-and-a-half to get Biden on the phone. As an August 19 Wall Street Journal editorial noted:

"...everything about Mr. Biden's withdrawal has been a slap to those allies. They didn't want the U.S. to leave, but he did. The botched execution has left them scrambling to airlift out thousands of their citizens and thousands more Afghan translators and others who assisted each nation's war effort.

Americans

Biden's helter-skelter withdrawal turned into a degradation of America's global standing, in effect a surrender. This is humiliating for the country, and profoundly demoralizing to many of the American warriors who served valiantly in Afghanistan, where 2,461 American service members died, and more than 20,000 were wounded.

White House Propaganda

As Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the blitz of misinformation, disinformation, evasions and outright lies from Biden and his team reached levels that invited comparison with Iraq's Saddam-era charlatan of "information," Baghdad Bob. A few examples:

- On July 8, Biden told the press there was almost no chance of a replay in Kabul of the terrible scenes from the 1975 fall of Saigon. Not true.
- On August 16, Biden disparaged the courage of the Afghan army, saying they had no will to fight. Not true. *More than 66,000 Afghans have died fighting the Taliban and other insurgents.*
- Biden said repeatedly that he would leave no one behind in Afghanistan, including a promise on August 19 that if any American citizens were still on the ground by his August 31 deadline, "we're gonna stay to get them all out." Not true. *(Nor did it reflect well on the White House when press secretary Jen Psaki doubled down on the broken promise by scolding a Fox News reporter for asking about those left stranded.)*

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- Biden repeatedly described himself as boxed in by Trump’s agreement to withdraw U.S. forces. Not true.
- Biden and his team keep calling the 20-year war in Afghanistan America’s longest war. Not true. *The U.S. has had troops in South Korea since 1950, when North Korea triggered a hot war by invading the South. An armistice has been in place since 1953, but 71 years after the Korean war began, it has never officially ended, nor has the threat from North Korea. Meantime, after decades of poverty and dictatorship, South Korea under the U.S. umbrella has become a developed democracy.*
- Biden rightly honored U.S. troops, but tried to appropriate their frontline courage as a gloss for his debacle, calling the evacuation an “extraordinary success,” while ignoring his own spectacular failures, which had put them in a terrible position.
- Biden described his options in Afghanistan almost entirely in terms of extremes: America could leave now, or stay forever; withdraw all troops, or ramp up to enormous levels. He displayed no serious consideration of a course between extremes, or of the value of maintaining a presence in Central Asia—now prey to China’s hegemonic ambitions.

Strategic Fallout

With the fall of Afghanistan, hostile regimes worldwide are taking stock of their own opportunities in a shifting global order—an order in which the American superpower cuts and runs from the victorious Taliban.

This comes at a time when worldwide threats to America were already on the rise. In an August 31 speech titled “on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” Biden himself outlined some of the chief dangers: “We’re engaged in a serious competition with China. We’re dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts from Russia. We’re confronted with cyberattacks and nuclear proliferation.”

Unfortunately, far from deterring these threats, Biden’s self-inflicted calamity in Afghanistan has fueled them. Biden went on to say “there’s nothing China and Russia would rather have, or want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan.” That’s fantasy. The actions of Russia and China, in Central Asia and well beyond, are a clear display that as they seek to shape the 21st century world order, what they want even more than America bogged down in Afghanistan is America drastically downsized and gone from what they see as their rightful spheres of influence.

China, above all, has been gloating over America’s defeat, and while grinding down the formerly free society of Hong Kong is eyeing its next potential conquests. Risk has soared that China might soon try to seize Taiwan, a prospect that would annihilate Taiwan’s pro-U.S. democracy, expand Beijing’s threat to vital

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shipping lanes, and potentially spark a major war in Asia. While the U.S. has been fleeing Afghanistan, China's propaganda organs have been trumpeting the idea, as spelled out in the Chinese Communist Party's *Global Times*, that the "U.S. will abandon Taiwan in a crisis."

In Kabul, China kept its embassy open while the U.S. was run out of town, and is already proposing ways to slot Afghanistan into its vast, hegemonic Belt and Road project. This July, China bragged up its welcome of a visiting Taliban delegation. In an Op-ed last month for the *New York Times*, on August 20, a recently retired colonel of China's People's Liberation Army, Zhou Bo, declared that with the West's war in Afghanistan ending "ignominiously," China sees a "golden opportunity," and is "ready to step into the void."

Terrorism and the "Forever War"

Since Biden took office, North Korea has restarted its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, which Pyongyang uses to produce plutonium for its nuclear arsenal. It has long been a concern that North Korean tyrant Kim Jong Un, even more cash-strapped than usual by the COVID-19 pandemic, might sell nuclear weapons or material to terrorists or other terror-sponsoring states, such as its longtime business partner in arms deals, Iran. Such prospects have not gone away. They are now more dire.

That's doubly alarming because, contrary to Biden's assertions, al Qaeda was never "gone" from Afghanistan. According to the United Nations, al Qaeda has maintained a presence there, closely tied to the Taliban. On September 14, the Associated Press reported that "U.S. intelligence agencies are seeing early signs that al Qaeda militants have begun to return to Afghanistan." Al Qaeda is one of an array of terrorist groups bunkered in Afghanistan, such as ISIS-Khorasan, which might not like each other, but have a shared hostility toward the United States.

Biden and his team are correct that America has much greater "over-the-horizon" capabilities today than 20 years ago. But these are no substitute for boots, and eyes, on the ground; no substitute for the networks assembled by the U.S. in Afghanistan at great cost, over almost 20 years—now in ruins. And with Biden's abysmal failure to control massive illegal immigration across the U.S. southern border, the U.S. is now far more easily accessible to hostile actors than 20 years ago.

While Biden says he has ended America's "forever war" in Afghanistan, and tries to change the subject to COVID-19, climate and blowout spending, the catastrophe in Afghanistan has set the stage for big trouble ahead. Clawing back America's credibility, global standing and vital powers of deterrence is going to need depth of vision and strength of will on a scale to date not visible in the Biden White House.

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What You Can Do

Get Informed

- **CRS: U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions**
- **PBS: A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan**
- **NATO and Afghanistan**

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

CONNECT WITH IWF! FOLLOW US ON:

ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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