

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN BY AMERICA'S GENERALS

HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN BY AMERICA'S GENERALS

Tuesday, March 19, 2024

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
ashington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:05 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Michael McCaul (chairman of the committee) presiding.

Chairman McCAUL. Committee on Foreign Affairs will come to order. Chair would like to remind our guests today that demonstrations from the audience, including the use of signs and placards as well as verbal outbursts, are a violation of the rules of the House. And you will be escorted.

Purpose of this hearing is to discuss the Biden Administration's deadly withdrawal of Afghanistan and to hear from the generals who advised President Biden against his disastrous foreign policy decision. I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

On April 14th, 2021, President Biden announced the United States would unilaterally withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan. For months before that announcement, the intelligence community and his senior military advisors, including both gentlemen testifying here today, issued dire warnings about the withdrawal's consequences. After the announcement, I along with other Republican and Democrat Members of Congress urged the President to prepare for the withdrawal and its inevitable fallout.

Unfortunately, those warnings were ignored. As a withdrawal dated neared, the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated as the Taliban gained significant ground across the country. Yet the Biden Administration's failure to plan for their withdrawal threatened the safety and security of U.S. personnel in country.

As a result in July 2021, 23 State Department employees in Kabul sent a cable channel to Secretary Blinken warning of their grave concerns for Afghanistan stability and for their own safety, yet nothing was done. Instead, our investigation uncovered the White House refused to listen to warnings about the situation on the ground. Disturbingly, we have uncovered that State Department leadership prohibited its employees from even uttering the word NEO, shorthand for emergency evacuation, until as late as August 2021. Too little, too late.

Additionally, this committee learned that the State Department did not even request an emergency evacuation until after Kabul was surrounded by the Taliban. As a result, the airport was not se-

cured until August 17th, 2 days after Kabul fell. As the saying goes, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. And fail they did.

The next 2 weeks created international outrage and humiliation for the United States. People all over the world watched as babies were flung over a barbed wire fence by mothers without hope. Desperate Afghans fell to their deaths from airplanes.

And hoards of people surrounded the airport as they tried to flee for their lives. The damage to our reputation and our credibility, the United States credibility, around the world, that damage will last for generations. Our servicemembers were forced to watch as American citizens and Afghan allies were beaten and murdered outside the gates of the airport.

These brave Americans were told to stand by as terrorists brutalized innocent civilians. And then on the morning of August 26, we watched in horror as reports of a terrorist attack at Abbey Gate flooded the news. Thirteen U.S. servicemembers were murdered with dozens more injured. A hundred and seventy Afghans were killed with countless injured as well.

Some of the Abbey Gate Gold Star families members are here today, and we honor you. We honor your sacrifice here today. To the families here today and to the American people, I say I will not rest until I get to the bottom of this tragedy.

You deserve answers. The American people deserve answers, and I intend to deliver. With the last U.S. military plane left, on August 30th, 2021, more than 1,000 American citizens remained trapped in Afghanistan as were tens of thousands of Afghan allies who risked their lives serving beside our troops and diplomats. Many if not most of those allies are still trapped, constantly in fear for their lives.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for being here today. Despite current DOD officials actively trying to limit your testimony, you have agreed to appear here voluntarily. And I am grateful to you, both of you, sirs, for your service to our country and your service to this investigation.

I also want to thank the Abbey Gate Gold Star families for joining us here today. And while the President has never publicly stated the names of your children, I will here today. Their names are Darin Hoover, Johanny Rosario, Nicole Gee, Hunter Lopez, Daegan Page, Humberto Sanchez, David Espinoza, Jared Schmitz, Rylee McCollum, Dylan Merola, Kareem Nikoui, Maxton Soviak, and Ryan Knass.

Those are the names of the fallen. May God bless them. They will not be forgotten. And with that, the chair now recognizes the ranking member.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And let me start by thanking former Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley and former Commander of the United States Central Command General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. for testifying before this committee today and sharing, as you did before the House Armed Services Committee in 2021, key military and policy insights of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan. I also want to thank you both for the years of sacrifice and service to our great country and recognize the hundreds of thousands of American servicemembers, diplomats, and development professionals that

work to support the United States efforts in Afghanistan over the course of our presence in the country.

I want to also recognize the 2,461 American military personnel who gave their life in Afghanistan for our country. And of course, that includes who my heart bleeds for, the 13 brave Americans who were killed in an ISIS terrorist attack while facilitating the evacuation of 124,000 people over the course of 17 days in August 2021. And as I've previously said, President Biden's efforts to end the 20-year war in Afghanistan and bring our troops home was the right one.

And while that decision was in our country's best interest, a number of contributing factors complicated the withdrawal, namely President Ghani fleeing Afghanistan on August 15th, 2021 and the resulting collapse of the Afghan government. As we heard in our hearing just last month from former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, former President Donald Trump's Doha deal empowered the Taliban at the expense of the Afghan government. The Trump Administration's commitment to facilitate the release of Taliban prisoners in Afghan and the Afghan government that they were in their custody and initiated significant unilateral U.S. troop drawdowns placed the Taliban in the strongest position since the United States first arrived in Afghanistan 20 years earlier.

Continued troop drawdowns, despite the Taliban not fully complying with terms of the Doha agreement undercut the United States leverage with the Taliban. During the transition between the Trump and Biden Administrations, it also became clear that the Trump Administration lacked a comprehensive plan for withdrawing from Afghanistan despite the May 1st deadline fast approaching. Upon taking office, President Biden conducted a thorough interagency review and determined he had two options.

The President could either continue the withdrawal started by his predecessor or break the agreement and return us to an active war with the Taliban, a decision that would necessitate a significant surge of troops for an undefined time. The Taliban made clear that backing out of the Doha agreement would result in the resumption of hostilities which would place our servicemembers once more in the crosshairs.

Let me be clear. This is not my opinion on the timeline and facts. This is the picture painted by the Afghanistan after review—after action report conducted by the State Department which DOD has corroborated throughout its own internal reviews of the withdrawal.

These are the facts outlined by this committee's own investigation which has been comprised over 100 hours of transcribed testimony, multiple public hearings, and 11,000 pages of documents produced by the State Department. And I also again like to reinforcement the importance of broadening the scope of Afghanistan. Proper oversight of Afghanistan requires an honest look back not just at a few months but at the entire 20 years of war over four Administration.

Generals Milley and McKenzie, I look forward to your continued commitment to truth and transparency today, helping us gain a better understanding so we may learn from our successes and mis-

takes. And I want to commend the efforts of all who contributed to the successful evacuation and airlift of 124,000 people from Afghanistan. We understand over the course of our interviews and investigations that this was an all hands on deck undertaking.

And while I'm thankful such an airlift was successful given the dynamic and chaotic situation of the ground, you must also scrutinize the lessons learned, including from a tragic bombing at Abbey Gate. So I look forward to hearing how the Defense Department similar to the State Afghanistan's AAR has taken ethics to assess and learn from our withdrawal so that we do not repeat those mistakes in the future. Let me close just by saying I would like also to make special mention of our previously bipartisan commitment to ensuring Special Immigrant Visas for the Afghan allies who work with U.S. servicemembers and diplomats throughout our mission in Afghanistan.

Thus far, the Republican leadership in the House is refusing to increase the SIVs to the Administration's requested amount. So I know Chairman McCaul and the majority of members on this committee agree that Congress must act on fulfilling our promises to them. And I hope to have your support in working with Democrats on getting that done. And with that, I yield.

Chairman McCAUL. Ranking member yields. Let me add to that comment. We are working in a very bipartisan manner to increase the number of SIVs. I think it's vitally important when we talk about Afghan partners left behind to provide the visas necessary for them to get out of there.

And I'm pleased to announce but I do not want to announce the number yet because it's being negotiated that we will have an agreement. So with that, I'm pleased to have with us here today the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley and former Commander of U.S. Central Command General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. Both generals played a pivotal role throughout the Afghanistan withdrawal but also a pivotal role throughout our Nation's history in many conflicts. And I commend you for your service to our Nation.

Your full statements will be made a part of the record. And I'll ask each of you keep your remarks to 5 minutes. And finally as a reminder, today's hearing is subject to the veracity protections of Section 1001 of Title 18 of the United States Code which makes it a crime to knowingly make any false, fictitious or fraudulent statements to the committee in the context of this investigation. With that, I now recognize General Mark Milley for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF MARK MILLEY (RETIRED), FMR. CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF AT THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

GENERAL MILLEY. Thank you, Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Meeks and members of the committee. And thank you for your efforts in what you're doing. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be here with General McKenzie.

And my purpose here today is to help you form a holistic assessment of our efforts in Afghanistan. But most importantly, I am personally here today voluntarily to help the families of the fallen, the

13 fallen at Abbey Gate, and the thousands of fallen and tens of thousands of wounded and countless other members who suffer the invisible wounds of war, to help them get answers. I'm humbled to be here today with three Gold Star families from Abbey Gate, and I know the other families could not make it.

But I intend to contact them in the coming weeks. They know my feelings for them. They know that there are no words by me or any general or any politician or anyone that can ever bring back their fallen.

But all of us can and all of us must honor their sacrifice to protect our country and to be forever grateful that they answered the call to the colors. Each of them paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom like so many before them in order to keep our Nation safe. And we owe them answers.

And I am committed to assist in the effort to get them answers. But we should also not be under any illusion. We're not going to get all the answers here today. It's a process that's going to take a considerable length of time.

And we must also recognize that much of the record, in fact, is classified and beyond the scope of this open hearing. So over two decades between 2001 and 2021, about 800,000 of us in uniform in the United States military served in Afghanistan and thousands of others from my agencies in our government. Of those, 2,471 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines gave their lives.

Almost 30,000 more were wounded in action and countless others suffer those invisible wounds. And that includes the 13 from Abbey Gate. We must always honor all of their sacrifice, each of them, over two decades of fighting the Taliban, bringing Osama bin Laden to justice, and ultimately protecting the American homeland.

We lost over 200 U.S. international troops and many more wounded in action in units that were under my direct command in several tours and multiple years of combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. And every commander who's ever served in combat knows that we personally issue the orders that gave the task, the purpose, the place, and the time of that soldier's death or wounds. And we also know it was the enemy that killed or wounded them.

Combat is an unforgiving environment. And those of us who have served in the brutality of ground combat live with that dark reality every day and every night. And we'll live with that for the rest of the days of our lives.

There's no military leader who's lost troops in combat who does not know that feeling. So this is personal to me. And I will do everything in my power to ensure that these families and all of our veterans and families know the truth and have the answers.

At the peak of our military commitment in 2011, the United States had just under 100,000 troops and about 20,000 DOD contractors. That same year, the United States began to steadily draw-down troops, close bases, and retrograde equipment. Nothing we're going to discuss today happened overnight.

It was a process of withdrawal that spanned a decade. The outcome in Afghanistan was the cumulative effect of many decisions over many years of war. And like any complex phenomena, there's

no single causal factor that determined the outcome but multiple factors in combination.

In the fall of 2020, as I previously testified publicly, my analysis, my personal analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal would likely lead to the general collapse of the Afghan Security Forces and the Afghan government resulting in a large scale civil war reminiscent of the 1990's with a complete Taliban takeover. In November 2020, DOD received orders from the White House to reduce troop levels, to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. When the current Administration took office in January 2021, there were, roughly speaking, 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground with about 22,000 NATO troops and contractors.

Beginning in February 2021, the National Security Council conducted a 10-week interagency review of the Doha agreement and various options were presented and debated. In previous public testimony, I noted that at that time, my analysis based on my assessment and the recommendations of the commanders to include General McKenzie and the consensus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was that we needed to maintain a minimum force of 2,500 troops on the ground, mostly Special Forces with allied troops and contractors, in order to sustain the Afghan national security forces and its government until the diplomatic conditions of the Doha agreement were met. Without this support, it was my view at the time that it was only a matter of when, not if the Afghan government would collapse and the Taliban would take control.

Again, I previously publicly testified and I consistently supported a negotiated end of the war but only if there was a reduction in violence leading to a permanent cease-fire and there were Afghan to Afghan negotiations leading to a power sharing agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. And it was my view that absent those conditions, I was not in favor of a unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces because of my assessment of the associated costs and risks. The fundamental tension facing the President, in fact, two Presidents, was that no one could satisfactorily explain when or even if those conditions would ever be met.

And if we stayed indefinitely, an open war would likely begin with the Taliban again with increased risk of additional casualties. On 14 April 2021, President Biden made the formal announcement of his decision to honor the Doha agreement with a military withdrawal while maintaining a continued diplomatic presence. The Department of Defense understood that our mission was to conduct a retrograde of the remaining U.S. military forces and equipment while leaving a contingent to defend the American Embassy while diplomatic outcomes were negotiated.

On 14 August, the noncombatant evacuation operation decision was made by the Department of State. And the U.S. military alerted, martial mobilized, and rapidly deployed faster than any military in the world could ever do. It is my assessment that decision came too late.

The deploying forces quickly took operational control of the airport with significant elements and the 82d Airborne Division, Marines, National Guard, and Special Forces along with our CIA partners and selected NATO forces. Additionally, we set up multiple bases to process evacuees in other countries throughout the Middle

East, Europe, and CONUS. In short, the United States military performed one of the most incredible evacuations under pressure in recorded history and in an extremely difficult dynamic and dangerous environment.

That performance is due to the individual bravery, competence, and compassion of every private to general who had any role in this NEO. At the end of 20 years, we, the military, helped build an Army, a State. But we could not forge a nation.

The enemy occupied Kabul and overthrew the government and the military we supported for two decades faded away. That is a strategic failure. But the U.S. military also provided hope for 20 years to the Afghan people. We provided unprecedented opportunity to millions.

In the final days, we gave 130,000 people their lives and freedom at very high cost. And most importantly, we protected the United States from terrorist attack from Afghanistan which was our original mission. And that mission continues today. There are many lessons to be learned from 20 years of war and the 10-year drawdown of forces and the final evacuation. And Mr. Chairman, I have a lengthier paper for written testimony that I would like to submit for the record with your permission.

Chairman MCCAUL. Without objection. so ordered.

General MILLEY. To the American people, the most important lesson I think to learn is that your troops, the United States military, from private to general did all that bravery and duty could ever do. Your military defended you successfully for 20 years and continues to do that. And for that, every American should be eternally grateful.

So to all the veterans of Afghanistan, hold your heads high. And I know there are several in the room today. Know that you did your duty.

Each of you did what your country asked of you under extreme circumstances. Many of you like Congressman Mast lost limbs and were grievously wounded. And you did it selflessly with professionalism, courage, compassion, and with great sacrifice.

And finally to the Gold Star families that are here with us today and those that could not make it, there's nothing that I can say or do that's going to fill that gaping hole in your heart. But as I've told you before, I'm committed and I will honor that commitment to get you the answers, to get you to the truth. And I will personally, and I know everyone else will as well, honor your sacrifice and the sacrifice of your loved one. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Milley follows:]

General Mark A. Milley (Ret)
Written Statement
House Foreign Relations Committee
Tuesday, March 19, 2024

Thank you, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here with General McKenzie to discuss this country's twenty-year effort in Afghanistan and the 2021 withdrawal. My purpose is to help you form a holistic assessment of our efforts in Afghanistan.

But most importantly I am here today to help the families of the fallen, the 13 fallen at Abbey Gate and the thousands of fallen and tens of thousands of wounded and countless numbers who suffered the invisible wounds of a 20-year war.

I am humbled to be here today with 3 Gold Star families from the Abbey Gate attack and there are no words by me, any other General, any politician, or anyone that can ever bring back their fallen. But we can and must honor their sacrifice to protect our country and be forever thankful that they answered the call to the colors. They each paid the ultimate sacrifice on the altar of freedom like so many before them in order to keep our nation safe.

We owe these 13 families and all the families of the fallen and all Veterans of Afghanistan from private to General, the CIA officers, and State Department diplomats, or any other American who served in Afghanistan, we owe them all the truth in order to try an answer the questions- what did it all mean, why did my son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, friend or colleague die or suffer grievous wounds?

These are difficult, gut-wrenching questions, and at best, we can only get part of the way there with this hearing, building on previous hearings of this committee and hearings from the House and Senate Armed services committees, memoirs, interviews, books and other accounts that are out there.

But we must also recognize that much of the record is still classified and beyond the scope of this open hearing. It will likely take professional historians years to mine the records in order to produce dispassionate analytically accurate accounts of the US war in Afghanistan.

This hearing today is but one step in that process.

Over two decades—between 2001 and 2021—approximately 800,000 members of the United States Military served in Afghanistan and thousands of others from many agencies in our government. Of those hundreds of thousands, 2,461 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines lost their lives; almost 30,000 more were wounded in action; and countless others suffered the invisible wounds of war. This includes the brave men and women who were killed or wounded during the United States's withdrawal from Afghanistan in the ISIS-K suicide bombing at Abbey Gate on 26 August 2021.

We must always honor the incredible sacrifices each of them and their families made fighting the Taliban, bringing Osama bin Laden to justice, denying sanctuary to al-Qaida, and ultimately protecting the American homeland.

We lost over 200 US and international troops and many more wounded in action in units under my direct command in several tours and multiple years of combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Every commander who has ever served in combat knows they personally issued the orders that gave the task, purpose, place and time of their soldier's death or wounds. And we also know it was the enemy who killed or wounded them. Combat is an unforgiving environment and those of us who have served in the brutality of ground combat live with that dark reality for all the days of our lives. There is no military leader who has lost troops in combat who does not know that feeling. This is personal to me, and I will do everything in my power to ensure these families and all our Veterans and families know the truth and have the answers.

At the peak of military commitment in 2011, the United States had just under 100,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan alongside 42,000 NATO allies and about 20,000 DOD US contractors. Beginning that same year, the United States began to steadily draw down troops, close bases, and retrograde equipment. This began a ten-year effort that spanned three administrations and ultimately led to a full withdrawal of American forces.

Nothing we are going to discuss today happened overnight or, indeed, even over a period of months or weeks. It was a process of withdrawal that spanned a decade. Three Presidents; 5 Secretaries of State; 10 Secretaries of Defense; 8 Directors of the CIA; 4 CJCS ; 24 Joint Chiefs; 4 Commanders of CENTCOM; and 5 US Commanders in Afghanistan.

The outcome in Afghanistan did not occur in the last 20 days or 20 months. It was the cumulative effect of many decisions over many years of war. And like any complex phenomenon, there is no single causal factor that determined the outcome but rather multiple factors in combination that will take years to sort out and arrive at something approximating truth.

But the story of the endgame I would suggest begins with the Doha Agreement signed on 29 February 2020 by Ambassador Khalizaid on behalf of President Trump with Secretary of State Pompeo present. It was a bilateral agreement between the US and a State Department designated terrorist organization -the Taliban. The agreement guaranteed that the United States would withdrawal all troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to meet certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.

There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban and eight to the United States and importantly Doha was negotiated without the input of the Afghan government nor the US military.

At the time of the agreement the US had about 13,000 troops along with 8500 NATO troops and 11,000 DOD US contractors.

The Taliban failed to uphold their end of the Agreement. With the exception of foregoing any lethal attacks on United States forces, they failed to fully honor any other condition, including renouncing linkages with al-Qaida, reducing violence, establishing a

ceasefire, or participating in Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan. We, the United States, adhered to every condition of that Agreement to the letter.

In the Fall of 2020, as I previously testified, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal would likely lead to the general collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government, resulting in a large-scale civil war reminiscent of the 1990s or a complete Taliban takeover. Secretary of Defense Esper recommended, and I supported, maintaining 4,500 troops on the ground in Afghanistan until conditions were met. Shortly following Secretary Esper's removal, I received an order signed by President Trump directing the United States military to withdraw all troops by January 15, 2021, in approximately 60 days. On November 17, I received a new order to reduce troop levels to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. The Department of Defense acted accordingly.

When President Biden took office in January 2021, there were roughly 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground, with about 7000 NATO forces and around 6000 DOD US contractors along with 9000 non-US contractors.

The National Security Council conducted a rigorous 10-week interagency review of the Doha Agreement and a broad range of options were presented and debated. The uniformed military was fully a part of this process and our views were thoroughly presented and considered.

In previous public testimony, I noted that at that time, my analysis based on the Commanders recommendations and the consensus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was that we needed to maintain a minimum force of 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground, mostly Special Forces, with allied troops and contractors, in order to sustain the Afghan Security Forces and government until the conditions of the Doha agreement were met. Without this support, my view was that it was a matter of when, not if, the Afghan government would collapse, and the Taliban would take control.

Again, as I previously publicly testified, I consistently supported a negotiated end to the war but only if there was a reduction in violence leading to a permanent ceasefire and there were Afghan to Afghan negotiations leading to a power sharing agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Absent those conditions, I was not in favor of a unilateral withdrawal of US forces because of the associated costs and risks.

The fundamental tension facing President Biden was that no one could satisfactorily explain when or even if the Doha conditions would ever be met and if we stayed indefinitely then open war would likely begin again with the Taliban.

On April 14, 2021, President Biden made the formal announcement of his decision to honor the Doha Agreement with a military withdrawal while maintaining a diplomatic presence.

Planning for the final withdrawal was significant and required substantive interagency coordination. There were multiple interagency meetings and rehearsals. The uniformed military understood that our mission was to conduct a retrograde of the remaining US military forces and

equipment while leaving a small contingent to defend the American Embassy while diplomatic outcomes were negotiated.

That mission was successfully accomplished under the leadership of General Scott Miller. He retrograded or destroyed all US owned military equipment and all of our remaining US military personnel except the contingent to defend the embassy. The US manufactured equipment that was captured by the Taliban was ANSF owned and had been given to them over the previous 20 years. It was not US military owned equipment. General Miller's specified mission was complete in early July 2021.

The second mission given to the DOD was to support the Department of State in case the Ambassador or the Secretary of State ordered a Non Combatant Evacuation Operation. The Embassy of course was in Kabul and the Kabul International Airport was the designated evacuation airfield. HKIA, as it was known, was secured by NATO Turkish forces in combination with Afghan security forces.

When the NEO was finally ordered on 14 August 2021 by the Department of State, the Government of Afghanistan leaders were fleeing, the ANSF was melting away, the Taliban were on the outskirts of Kabul, thousands of civilians were seeking safety at the Kabul airport, and the Turk contingent and ANSF at HKIA ceased to provide security.

In my view, NEO and the withdrawal of the Embassy could and should have been approved for execution significantly earlier.

Nevertheless, the US military alerted, marshalled, mobilized, and rapidly deployed faster than any military in the world could ever do. The deploying forces quickly took operational control of HKIA under the leadership of LTG Chris Donahue and Admiral Pete Vasely with significant elements of the 82d Airborne, Marines, National Guard, and Special Forces alongside our CIA partners and selected NATO forces. Additionally, we set up multiple bases to process evacuees in other countries throughout the Middle East, Europe and CONUS.

In short, the US military did not fail. The US military performed one of the most incredible evacuations under pressure in recorded history and in an extremely difficult, dynamic and dangerous environment. That performance is due to the individual bravery, competence, and compassion of every soldier sailor airman marine special operator from private to general who had any role in the NEO.

At the end of 20 years, we the US military helped build an army and a state, but we could not forge a nation. We could provide the weapons and training but when on 15 August 2021, the senior Afghan leaders boarded planes and abandoned their country it was apparent that while many Afghans fought valiantly for 20 years and even to the end, we could not create the will to fight at the national leadership level. One former Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan said: "We could provide advice; we could provide training support. But we couldn't give the Afghan army a soul. Only the political leadership and people of Afghanistan could do that. And that was a failure. The Afghan government remained extraordinarily corrupt."

The enemy occupied Kabul and overthrew the government and military that we supported for two decades. The war was a strategic failure, and we are still feeling its impact.

But we also provided hope for 20 years to the Afghan people, we provided unprecedented opportunity to millions, and in the final days we gave 130,000 people their lives and freedom at a very high cost.

And most importantly, we protected the United States from terrorist attack from the territory of Afghanistan—that was our original and most essential mission. In that mission we succeeded and that effort continues today.

Let me offer just a few broader strategic lessons learned:

1. We had several missed opportunities over the course of 20 years. Perhaps the most consequential was the decision to not to kill or capture Bin Laden in the winter of 2001/2002. We had solid intel, perhaps not perfect, but very good, and conducting an operation at that time was a real possibility. We did not, but had we done so, it would have changed the entire trajectory of the US involvement in the war.

2. As a result of the Bonn agreement, it was decided that the US would have lead responsibility to create the Afghan Army while the Germans would lead in creating the Afghan Police. It was decided the end-strength of the total Afghan security forces would be approximately 350,000 with half being police and half being army. The Germans decided to model the police on the European police forces charged with investigating crimes and policing traffic. But the situation in Afghanistan demanded a national counterinsurgency type police force. So, by design in 2002, roughly half of security forces were ineffective for the type of war being fought. Additionally, we designed the Army in the mirror image of the conventional US military with similar doctrine, organization, weapons and tactics. We did not develop the Afghan special forces, village protection forces and border forces until years later and they proved to be the most effective at fighting the Taliban. Additionally, estimates at the time called for a force of around 600,000-700,000 Afghan troops to adequately secure the country in accordance with counterinsurgency doctrine for the size of the country, the population, and the estimated size of the Taliban. We built a force that was about half of the doctrinal requirement and even less so if you discount the Afghan police who were both corrupt and ineffective. Essentially, the Afghan government was fighting a 50,000-100,000 guerilla-insurgency with roughly about 175,000 conventional army troops while trying to protect a population of 30 million. The correlation of forces was imbalanced from the early years of the war in favor of the Taliban.

3. We did not fully appreciate the village war that the Taliban were waging. With a lack of sufficient Afghan forces and a tendency to stay close to their bases or fixed sites, especially at night, the villages were fundamentally ceded to the Taliban shadow governments beginning in late 2004 and early 2005 and only grew over time with little notice by the coalition forces or the ANSF. This proved very difficult, and it became obvious that the Taliban had the initiative in the countryside and the Government could do very little that was truly effective.

4. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq and we did not significantly expand our military to meet the demands of wars in two countries simultaneously. Instead, we drew down forces in Afghanistan to shift to Iraq and the remaining level in Afghanistan was fundamentally too small for the assigned military tasks, further ceding the initiative to the Taliban. We began to see a demonstrable increase in Taliban attacks beginning in 2005 as a result.

5. We never satisfactorily dealt with the unimpeded access to and from the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan. As a result, the Taliban could always recruit, re-arm, re-fit, plan, train and organize for offensives each year. Insurgencies that maintain freedom of movement and protection from a sanctuary in a neighboring country are rarely defeated.

6. The legitimacy of the central government of Afghanistan was never fully established primarily due to longstanding unique Afghan historical factors and governmental systemic corruption from the local level to the national level. In the end, this proved to be a very significant causal factor the outcome of the war and is one of the main reasons the ANSF and Government collapsed so quickly- it was perhaps the decisive factor

7. We never fully understood the culture nor had a fingertip understanding of the nature of the fight we were engaged in while supporting an endemically corrupt government. These factors proved decisive in my view.

8. We drew down our forces from roughly 13,000 US Military in February 2020 to 8,600 in the summer of 2020 to 4,500 in the fall of 2020. By doing so we removed our advisors from the Afghan Kandaks (Battalions) and consequently we rapidly began to lose our situational understanding and awareness of what was happening in the various Afghan military units throughout the country. In essence we gave up our Human Intelligence Collection capability at the ground level and substituted technological capabilities to “see” the ANSF. The over reliance on technology limited our ability to understand the situation and I believe contributed to our intelligence gaps in the summer of 2021 which misjudged the speed of the Afghan collapse.

9. The decision to withdraw US military but maintain a diplomatic presence in a country at war was fundamentally flawed. The State Department should have drawn down the Embassy at the same rate the military was retrograding. And the State Department clearly made the decision to conduct a NEO far too late for a coordinated and safe execution. That lesson has been learned as we saw more recently in Ukraine and Sudan.

10. Strategic decisions have consequences. The outcome in Afghanistan is the cumulative effect of strategic decisions made over 20 years of war. Understanding the decisions at each phase of the war will help us in any future conflicts.

There are many more lessons that deserve full review and I offer these 10 for initial consideration.

But the lesson all Americans should know is that our troops from private to general, did all that bravery and duty could do. Your military defended you successfully for 20 years from terrorist attack out of the mountains of Afghanistan and continues to do that. And for that every American should be eternally grateful.

To all the veterans of Afghanistan, hold your heads high knowing that you did your duty, each of you did what your country asked of you, under extreme circumstances, and you did it selflessly, with professionalism, courage, compassion and with great sacrifice.

And to the families of the fallen, there is nothing any of us will ever do or say to fill the gaping hole in your heart, but we will get you the truth and we will always honor the sacrifice of you and your loved one.

Chairman McCAUL. Thank you, General Milley. I now recognize General McKenzie for his opening statement.

General MCKENZIE. I'd like to ask for this opening to be submitted for the record.

Chairman McCAUL. Without objection, so ordered.

STATEMENT OF KENNETH MCKENZIE JR. (RETIRED), FMR. COMMANDER OF UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND AT THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

General MCKENZIE. Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks, distinguished members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I'm here to voluntarily testify today about the military component of our withdrawal from Afghanistan. Before I begin, I'd like to recognize the Gold Star families that are here today. I hope that we discuss today will reduce their pain.

Like General Milley, I am humbled to be in their presence here today. As you are aware in September 2021, I provided over 10 hours of open and closed testimony in this subject to the two congressional committees charged with oversight and military operations, the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee. Much of my testimony will be of necessity mirror that earlier transcribed testimony.

As a theater commander, I will confine my opening remarks to those matters that were under my direct operational control. Specifically, the withdrawal of U.S. military forces and the subsequent Noncombatant Evacuation Operation or NEO. These were two distinct and separate operations. We had detailed and constantly updated plans for each of them.

We executed both of those plans, although separated in time. Thanks to the valor and dedication of thousands of men and women in harm's way, we completed both missions, but not without loss of life. We honor the 13 brave Americans who died at Abbey Gate, joining the over 2,400 other servicemembers who lost their lives in this 20-year campaign.

Their sacrifice stands with those of our coalition partners and of course the Afghans who fought beside us for so many years. I briefed President Trump on a plan to completely depart Afghanistan on 3 June 2020. This plan envisioned the complete withdrawal of all our forces and our diplomats and citizens. It also contemplated the possible withdrawal of Afghans who served with us.

The plan has a number of options, but it was the framework for everything that followed. Ultimately, President Trump selected a branch of the plan that maintained 2,500 U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan by inauguration day in January 2021. We had branches to that plan to complete a withdrawal by May 2021 had we been so ordered.

On 11 April 2021, I received orders from President Biden through the Secretary of Defense to execute a full military withdrawal by 11 September 2021, a date which was subsequently modified to the end of August. This decision did not include the withdrawal of our embassy, our citizens, and at-risk Afghans. It's important to understand that we had a complete plan to execute that task as well but were not ordered to do so.

The President's decision was to maintain an embassy to not require our citizens to leave and of course to not expedite the extraction of at-risk Afghans. This was not a military decision. We substantially accomplished the military withdrawal by 12 July 2021 when I relieved General Scott Miller as the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

My orders then were to retain a military platform of 650 personnel solely designed to provide security for the U.S. embassy in Karzai International Airport. During this period and with minimal to no support from us, the Afghan Security Forces and more importantly the government of Afghanistan, crumbled in the face of Taliban pressure. The order to execute the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation, bringing out our embassy, our citizens, and at-risk Afghans was received on 14 August.

These dates are important because I believe that the events of mid and late August 2021 were the direct result of delaying the initiation of a NEO for several months, in fact, until we were in extremis and the Taliban had overrun the country. As you are aware, the decision to begin a NEO rests with the Department of State, not the Department of Defense. Despite this, we had begun positioning forces in the region as early as 9 July.

But we could do nothing to commence the operation, the evacuation until a NEO was declared. Our operations at Karzai International from 14 August through our ultimate departure on early 31 August were both heroic and tragic. This was a combat operation of the most difficult sort, carried out in contact with the enemy.

We eventually put 5,784 U.S. troops, almost 2,000 more coalition and other forces, eight U.S. maneuver battalions on the ground at Karzai International. I'd like to talk a little bit now about Abbey Gate. It was a tragic event, one of many that have occurred over our 20-year engagement in Afghanistan.

It remains my opinion that if there's culpability in this attack, it lies in policy decisions that created the environment of August 2021 in Kabul. Culpability and responsibility do not lie with the troops on the ground who performed magnificently. It does not lie with platoon, company, or battalion commanders or the flag officers who oversaw operations on the ground in Kabul.

The simple fact is this: On the battlefield, even with good planning, tremendous execution by brave people on the ground, the enemy sometimes has success. To ignore this fact is to ignore the fundamental reality of the battlefield. If there's fault, it lies in a policy decision that placed the joint force in this situation and exposed the force over time to the possibility of these kinds of attacks.

We did not rely on the Taliban for our security. We used them as one tool among many to beef up our defensive posture. We avoid a number of potential Abbey Gate attacks, and I'm proud of the commanders and troops who prevented them.

This is a small comfort to those who lost loved ones, and I realize this. Nonetheless, what's remarkable about Kabul is not that the tragedy of Abbey Gate happened but that many other attacks did not happen. I'll lend my statement with this observation.

I was the overall commander. And I and I alone bear full military responsibility for what happened at Abbey Gate. Thank you, Chairman. I'm ready for questions.

[The prepared statement of General McKenzie follows:]

STATEMENT WAS NOT AVAILABLE AT PRESS RELEASE

Chairman MCCAUL. Thank you, General McKenzie. I now recognize myself for questions. We have a Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews here today.

I want to thank you, sir, for your service and your courage for testifying before this committee almost a year ago to the day. He was a sniper at Abbey Gate and testified to us that he had the suicide bomber in his sights that was identified to be on the lookout. He sent the sniper photos and other related documents to his commanding officer for permission to engage the suicide bomber.

Yet that warning was ignored. He never heard back. I and the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee after that testimony sent a letter to the Department of Defense requesting that these documents and sniper photos be delivered to the Congress, produced to the Congress by this document, this letter request.

To date, that has been ignored. The Department of Defense has refused. We've also requested the testimonies of General Chris Donahue and Admiral Peter Vasely who were the commanding officers on the ground during the Abbey Gate disaster.

To both of you, to General Milley, do you think that these documents should be turned over to the United States Congress? And do you think that both General Donahue and Admiral Vasely should testify before Congress?

General MILLEY. Sure, absolutely. I believe in transparency. You're the board of directors for this corporation called the American government. And I believe that you're entitled to those within the bounds of classification, absolutely.

So whatever documents are out there should be turned over to the appropriate committees, jurisdiction, and oversight. And whatever witnesses are needed to establish truth and transparency within the bounds of classification, absolutely, absolutely. That's why I'm here.

Chairman MCCAUL. Thank you. Chairman McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I agree with General Milley, and I associate myself with his remarks.

Chairman MCCAUL. So also on accountability, I've asked the State Department officials who was responsible for the catastrophic emergency evacuation? Not surprisingly, they point their fingers at the Department of Defense. But I want to set the record straight. While the DOD helps conduct the emergency evacuation, it's the State Department that is responsible under law for developing the plan and leading the evacuation. Is that your understanding?

General MILLEY. Yes, the State Department is the lead Federal agency for planning and execution, oversight of the execution of the noncombatant operation. And the Department of Defense is in support of and other departments are in support of the State Department. The State Department is the lead Federal agency for NEOs. That's correct.

Chairman MCCAUL. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I agree with that.

Chairman MCCAUL. It's the State Department responsible under law again for requesting the emergency evacuation. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct. And I think actually the—I think that's done at the Ambassadorial level to tell you the truth. I'd have to check the law. But I think the Ambassador can make the decision to execute a NEO. But typically, it'll be either him or the Secretary of State.

Chairman MCCAUL. And did the State Department, specifically Embassy Kabul, have an evacuation plan for Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. So Chairman, every embassy has an evacuation plan for Afghanistan. And Embassy Kabul had a plan—had what we would call an F-77 list which is the list of U.S. citizens and their families that are in the country. And we struggled to gain access to that plan and work with them over much of July until we finally got a decision to execute the NEO which as I've already mentioned occurred on the 14th of August. Now we worked with the embassy before then, but we did not have authority to move out and do the things that you have to do to make a NEO happen until the 14th of July—correction, the 14th of August. And as I noted, we were in extremis at that point.

Chairman MCCAUL. And August 14th, just days before the fall of Kabul and the evacuation of the embassy. August 14th is when they finally put forward this plan?

General MCKENZIE. Now that's when we got authority to execute the plan.

Chairman MCCAUL. That's when you got authority. And you urged the White House and State Department to put pen to paper to develop a plan to get Americans and our Afghan allies out of Afghanistan, correct?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, I did. In fact, I was concerned by the middle of July. I was concerned about the different pace of Department of Defense planning as compared to Department of State planning. And I took an opportunity then to make representations to the Secretary about my concern over that, the fact that we were moving pretty fast on this. They were not moving fast, and I was concerned that we were going to arrive at different locations just based on it.

And I went to the Secretary. We spent some time talking about that and actually followed up with a written idea on some things that we could do. Sent a letter with ten recommendations to the Secretary of Defense on that.

Chairman MCCAUL. And is that your recollection, General Milley?

General MILLEY. Absolutely. Without breaching things like executive privilege, et cetera, my assessments at the time—and Frank McKenzie submitted assessments. Scott Miller submitted assessments. The general consensus of the military up through and including the Secretary of Defense was that the embassy should be coming out, roughly speaking, the same time we should be coming out. And then after the decisions were made to keep a diplomatic presence there, as the situation deteriorated through the summer

and the fall of the breach of capitals, et cetera, we were clearly pressing for early calls to execute a NEO.

Chairman MCCAUL. And they did eventually develop a plan?

General MILLEY. Well, they—go ahead on the plan.

General MCKENZIE. So they had a plan. Like I said, it's a requirement to have the plan. But it's one thing to have the plan. It's a second thing to do the actual coordination of the plan, to talk about the specifics of execution.

Having a plan is one thing. Preparing the plan, vetting the plan, coordinating the plan with the people that are going to actually carry you out, the Department of Defense, that's another set of tasks completely.

Chairman MCCAUL. And that was too little, too late?

General MCKENZIE. It was my judgment that it was far too little, far too late.

Chairman MCCAUL. Was that your assessment, General Milley.

General MILLEY. It was. And I would broaden it a little bit by saying it was a pretty consistent assessment by me and other members of the uniform military up through and including the Secretary that the withdrawal of the military forces and the contractors and the NATO forces that went with it would ultimately, as I said in my opening statement, to a general collapse of the ANSF and the government. And as I mentioned, the tension was when would those conditions be made. It was also our assessment at the time that keeping an embassy open in a war zone which Afghanistan was and, to do that without the presence of the U.S. military and the contractors and NATO, et cetera, that that embassy would be untenable.

Chairman MCCAUL. And that was your advice to the State Department and the White House?

General MILLEY. Well, as you know because of the requirements of executive privilege, et cetera, I can tell you what my assessments were at the time. And those were my thoughts at the time.

Chairman MCCAUL. Do you believe that the failure to plan timely created the chaos at HKIA airport?

General MILLEY. I think the call to execute the NEO came too late. And as General McKenzie mentioned, it was logged in on the 14th. At that point in time, the Afghan government senior leadership was preparing to depart, and they departed the next day on the 15th.

The thousands of Afghan civilians were gathering at the airport. The Afghan Security Forces were collapsing on the various provincial capitals and although there were some still around Kabul. So the general situation at that point with 750 U.S. soldiers in and around the embassy, the Turkish troops were required along with some ANSF to protect HKIA.

They melted away. So you had a situation with the U.S. embassy and 750 troops when that NEO was called. And that's—now we leaned forward.

So I think it's the 9th, 10th, or 11th timeframe. We had already put forces on alert, et cetera. But in essence, we alerted marshalled, deployed the 82d Airborne Division, the Division Ready Brigade, and the MEU out of Saudi that was underneath General McKenzie's control.

They rapidly deployed along with Special Forces to take control of that airport. It took them two to 3 days. That's where those videos come from. But they eventually wrestled control of that airport.

Chairman McCAUL. And General McKenzie, do you agree with that assessment?

General MCKENZIE. I do. That was the opinion I had at the time and the opinion I have now.

Chairman McCAUL. I believe that accountability ensures mistakes in the past are not repeated. But from where I sit, the President and this Administration refuse to acknowledge their failures. There's an inscription at the National Archives down the streets that reads what is past is prologue. I launched this investigation to make sure that the mistakes made in Afghanistan never ever happen again. With that, I recognize the ranking member.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me start by saying thank you. You are here voluntarily. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. Correct.

General MCKENZIE. That is correct, sir.

Mr. MEEKS. Although you did receive the threat of a subpoena at one point. Is that also correct?

General MILLEY. Received?

Mr. MEEKS. A threat of being subpoenaed to come today?

General MILLEY. Chair McCaul mentioned that he wanted us to appear and that there are compulsory measures which I took to mean subpoena, sure. But that wasn't necessary from the beginning.

Mr. MEEKS. I know you can voluntarily. But I just want to get the point out that there was something in regards to a subpoena to come, correct?

General MILLEY. I was not subpoenaed.

Mr. MEEKS. I said the threat of a subpoena to come or something compulsory?

General MILLEY. I'll answer it like this. Before I retired, I testified several times as well as General McKenzie in open and classified hearings on Afghanistan. Prior to retirement, Chair McCaul asked me, would you be willing to discuss with the committee? I said, absolutely, yes.

No threat of subpoena, no compulsory, nothing. I said yes. I saw Chair McCaul again after retirement and he reminded me of that conversation. I said, sure, absolutely. So in January and February of this year, we worked out some of the details. I said I wanted to go back and review records, et cetera.

And then it was originally supposed to be closed, classified hearing, and I still think we're going to do one of those after this. And I thought that was important to be a classified hearing because a lot of information is still classified. And then there was a discussion of a public hearing.

Mr. MEEKS. So just speaking of that, when you—you've testified before. You testified before the Armed Services Committee. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. Testified before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees in both classified and open hearings. And then I've testified about Afghanistan and several other testimonies that we're—

Mr. MEEKS. Same with you, General McKenzie.

General MCKENZIE. That's correct, sir.

Mr. MEEKS. And is your testimony—has anything changed from when you were in uniform and testifying to which you've testified today? Is there anything that you did not testify to before that you're testifying to now? Is there any change of thought of what took place today from what you testified to previously?

General MILLEY. In general for me, everything that I testified before is still true and accurate today. And in open testimony, that would be correct. I have learned more about Abbey Gate because of the investigations that wasn't available during previous testimony. For me, it wasn't. But I have since read those investigations and briefed on them. But they weren't available the first time.

Mr. MEEKS. So your testimony to date is still basically consistent and transparent testimony?

General MILLEY. It's totally consistent.

Mr. MEEKS. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. That's the same for me.

Mr. MEEKS. Right. So there's not really anything new that learned today because you've testified to it before, right?

General MILLEY. I'll leave that to you all to determine if there's anything new.

Mr. MEEKS. I'm just asking you, from your testimony, from what has been made public and what has been public—

General MILLEY. Sure.

Mr. MEEKS [continuing]. Is basically this is not something new.

General MCKENZIE. Ranking Member, as I mentioned in my opening statement, much of what I say today is going to mirror the 10-hours of—

Mr. MEEKS. That's my point.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Testimony I gave earlier.

Mr. MEEKS. This is not anything groundbreaking or anything that is being discovered newly. This is something that has been out in the public from the time that you testified back in 2022, right? Nothing groundbreaking here.

Fact of the matter is let me ask this question. I think maybe it was you, General Milley, said that the framework for what took place during the 20 years because I think that we should be looking at—if we really want to figure out what went wrong, what we need to fix, we need to look at the entire 20 years of being in Afghanistan, not just the last few months. Would you say that's correct?

General MILLEY. Yes, and I said that before as well in previous testimony. Now in the written remarks submitted for the record, I've elaborated on what I think are, say, top ten lessons learned. But there's many more.

You're not going to learn all the lessons of a 20-year war in short sessions. But I think there's a huge amount of lessons to be learned over the course of 20 years. Should we have gone after bin Laden in 2001 in that winter when we had him more or less from an intel standpoint?

We thought we had him located. Should we—could we have? Yes. Should we have? I think yes. In hindsight, that would've changed

the trajectory of the whole war. And there's a whole series of lessons along the way.

Specific to this hearing and to help these families, I think the focus is more recent relative to the withdrawal itself and the Abbey Gate and NEO. But you're correct. A holistic view, absolutely, I think. But that's going to take a considerable amount of time.

Mr. MEEKS. 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—

General MILLEY. Of course.

Mr. MEEKS [continuing]. And leading on up to what took place at Abbey Gate? There was a nexus there. Is that not correct?

General MILLEY. Yes, I think the end game, if you will, the final months, I think the framework of that is set by the Doha agreement, absolutely.

Mr. MEEKS. So if we're going to study to find out the findings of what we should do, we should be talking about what happened during the Trump Administration as well as what took place during the Biden Administration because they are connected. They're not separate. And so if we're serious about trying to figure out what took place and why it took place, we should be looking at both, what took place under the Bush administration, the Obama administration, the Trump Administration, and—is that not correct?

General MILLEY. Sure. As you point out, four presidents. I think there's half a dozen Secretaries of Defense, half a dozen Secretaries of State. There's half a dozen Chairmen of Joint Chiefs of Staff. There's another four commanders in Afghanistan.

So yes, there's absolutely lessons to be learned through all of this. And the end game using the Doha agreement if you wanted to say that was the start point, sure. There's a lot to be said about that as well, and there is a continuum. As I mentioned in my opening statement, there's no phenomena at the end of the war—

Mr. MEEKS. My point is this. If we're taking a serious look at this—

General MILLEY. Sure.

Mr. MEEKS [continuing]. You cannot just take a peek at one little segment of it and say this is the reason everything happened without looking at what preceded it because you'd have to look at it in its entirety. Isn't that correct, if you're serious about trying to figure out how we're going to make sure the mistakes that may have made and the things we did right? You can only do that in a serious investigation if you take all of it and look at all of it and you examine all of it, not just piecemealing that. Would you agree with that?

General MILLEY. Of course. I mean, I said that in my opening statement I said in previous testimony that a holistic look at the whole war in order to really determine outcomes, et cetera. In anything as complex as a war is not the result of a single causal factor.

There's multiple factors and multiple decisions. So yes, in general, I agree. But I'm here for these families to try to get them answers and to try to get answers on the immediate issues that are at hand.

Mr. MEEKS. So I know the chairman went—so I just want to do the same amount of time that he had. I do not want to get cutoff

there. So let me ask this. With the conclusion of the Doha deal, the Taliban stopped attacking U.S. forces inside of Afghanistan. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. They—well, yes, lethal attacks. They committed to not doing it. There were some attacks. But they committed to not conducting lethal attacks. And by my memory, I do not think there was a lethal attack on U.S. forces—

Mr. MEEKS. So let me ask this. I'm running out of time. I saw the chairman finished about with 5 minutes there. So when the United States committed to the Doha deal, that was to withdraw—and I quote, "withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting service personnel." Is that correct? That was a Doha deal done under the Trump Administration. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. As I recall, I think there were seven conditions that the United States signed up to and eight conditions that the Taliban signed up to. And I think you rattled off most of the key ones. It was a very explicit thing. It said you have to go from—there were 13,000, more or less—13,000 U.S. troops when Doha was signed. And then you had to go to 8,600 in 135 days.

Mr. MEEKS. Let me just do this. I want to make sure. And so therefore, the withdrawal was well underway in January 2021 after President Trump withdrew U.S. forces, notwithstanding concerns about the Taliban's behavior. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. The withdrawal was absolutely underway. The drawdown of forces was underway. That's correct.

Mr. MEEKS. So I do not have time, but I would like—because I would like to do a complete investigation. That is what I think that our committee has the responsibility so that we can really be transparent with the American people on everything that took place in the 20 years in Afghanistan. Not just one piece but everything if we are serious and not playing politics with this issue. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time is expired. I will say the Afghanistan Commission has been commissioned to look at the last 20 years. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the evacuation.

I will hold the members accountable 5 minutes under the rules of discipline so that we can get to every member on this committee who deserves to be heard. And we thank you for showing up. With that, I recognize Mr. Smith.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for calling this important hearing. Thank you to the two generals, for your distinguished service to our country. Thank you so very much for that.

General Milley, you mentioned how you had suggested a minimum of 2,500 troops to remain. Who rejected your advice? Was it the President? Did you ever get a written or oral feedback as to why they rejected that advice?

General MILLEY. Well, again, I cannot say President said this, President said that. That's beyond the scope of the law or actually with executive privilege. But it's obvious that the President made the decision and the President made an announcement on the 14th.

And our recommendation was as I mentioned. Or our thoughts at the time was as I mentioned. And every President has a right

to make those decisions. He's looking at things from a much wider angle than a military angle.

Our military assessment was keep 2,500. And with them, it's not just 2,500. It's 2,500 plus the NATO plus the contractors. And the contractors are key here. And then that we thought—our assessment was that would keep the Afghan government and the military stable until such time as a diplomatic outcome could occur in accordance with the conditions set in the Doha agreement.

Mr. SMITH. In retrospect, would that have made the difference?

General MILLEY. We will never know, I guess, because it did not happen. So I do think, though that—I believe that the Afghan government and the Afghan Security Forces would not have collapsed in August 21 had we maintained that posture. Those are high end special forces capable of defending themselves and conducting operations as they had been for a while.

And I think my assessment probably moderate to significant risk on U.S. forces. But is that worth that risk? Again, the Doha agreement had conditions.

But where was the problem for two Presidents. Nobody that I recall, nobody, zero, could coherently argue how it would end or how those conditions—the diplomatic conditions were going to be obtained. It's not a military problem, but how were those diplomatic conditions going to be obtained?

Mr. SMITH. Let me just ask you. I asked Secretary of State Blinken on September 2021 about the infamous phone call with Ghani. And Reuters did get a copy of that phone call, the transcript and apparently an actual verbatim. They listened to it.

And in it, he said that there's a need whether it's true or not—this is our President of the United States saying this—whether it's true or not, there's a need to project a different picture about the Taliban's capabilities. General McKenzie, you talked about how there was no plan to get U.S. citizens out. Then there seemed to be a bewilderment on the part of the Administration why Americans weren't flocking to leave.

They did not have many ways of doing it anyway. And I'm just wondering what you thought of that phone call. I mean, I asked Blinken. He said, I do not talk about something that's been leaked.

Well, is it true? Did he say that? Lying like that to me when you give the false impression to a whole group of Americans who never then got out, that's very, very serious.

Second, just let me ask because I will run out of time, how many Americans were left behind? And again, I thank you that you did everything you could make this policy work. But you were given a policy that was egregiously flawed.

But how many Americans were left behind? How many of our allies? And what has happened to them? Have them been beaten, killed, tortured?

And second about all the weapons that were left behind, there are reports that some of it has found its way to Hamas. I do not know if that's true. I know you did everything you could on the way out to destroy them. But many were intact and left in the hands of the Taliban.

General MILLEY. I cannot speak to the phone call. I do not have any personal knowledge of that. A number of Americans, this was

always an issue. The number of Americans as General McKenzie, the F-77 report is supposed—every Ambassador in every country of the world keeps an F-77 report. And it's supposed to track the Americans, where they're at, the phone numbers, address, et cetera, in the country.

That was always a difficult number for us and the Department of Defense to get a hold of. And I think it's true at the tactical level and operation level as well. And I'll be candid.

I do not know the exact number of Americans that were left behind because the starting number was never clear. Same is true of at-risk Afghans, SIVs, the commandos, other Afghans that served with us. Those numbers varied so widely that they were quite inaccurate is best I could tell at the time. So I would just say I'm not sure even today about the accuracy of all those numbers.

Mr. SMITH. Are they in jail, dead some of them?

General MILLEY. I think some were killed, Afghans. I do not know about the Americans. I do not think the Americans were. But I think some of the Afghans were tracked down that worked with us, and I think some of them were killed. And I'm pretty certain some of them in pretty brutal ways. Some managed to escape through various means. Others just laid low and keeping their heads down.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time is expired. Chair recognizes Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I wish we were having a hearing with these excellent witnesses on what's on people's mind which is what's going on in Gaza where we could discuss the incredible difficulties of urban warfare and how the top expert on urban warfare at West Point has said that Israel has done at least as good a job as any other military in minimizing civilian casualties given the incredible difficulties of urban warfare. Instead we have what appears a highly politicized hearing trying to blame Biden.

And this hearing began with the title Biden's strategic failure. It's my understanding that our witnesses refused to testify with that title. In any case, they should have.

We now re-titled it the hearing, but we haven't re-purposed it. It continues to be politicized. But a highly partisan hearing shouldn't be held if you're in the party that made most of the mistakes.

Let's put this in context. We had a real dispute as to whether we should leave 2,500 or so American servicemen there for perhaps this decade and the following decade. The dissent cable argued for that.

A lot of the foreign policy establishment argued for that. But Trump promised the American people every single American soldier would be out. And from that point, we had no bargaining position.

That's why the chief negotiator said that it was well known by 2018—by the end of 2018 that we are hellbent to get every person out. And so what kind of agreement did we enter into in Doha? Supposedly by the best negotiator in the world, then President Trump.

It is an agreement that says it's OK for the Taliban to treat 12-year-old girls like sex slaves. No provision prohibits that. Nothing prohibits the Taliban from killing people because they're part of the LGBT community.

Nothing prohibits them from killing someone because they convert from Islam to Christianity. All they're required to do is talk to the Afghan government. They talked perhaps and then they assumed total power.

And we could do nothing about it because we had promised the American people that absolutely every soldier would be out. And of course, right before the election, Trump promised to have them all back by Christmas of 2020. The Trump Administration lost 59 of servicemen, 152 of contractors, accomplishing absolutely nothing.

We surrendered in 2020. We could've surrendered in 2017. But perhaps the most extreme partisanship has arisen when so many members of this committee have attacked President Biden supposedly for not bringing back the, quote, "85 billion"—I think it's closer to 8 billion dollars—of equipment that we left behind.

Now this equipment was in the hands of Afghans who had plenty of use for it. They could keep it for their own defense. They could sell it to the Taliban. They did not choose to bring it back to us and return it.

So I'll ask General Milley, had we—was there a way for us to go all around Afghanistan and demand the return of our equipment? This is assuming—I realize that at the time we hoped the Afghan armed forces would use that to resist the Taliban. But if we had realized that they were going to cave immediately, could we have taken that equipment away from all these Afghans with no casualties?

General MILLEY. No, of course not.

Mr. SHERMAN. So we would've incurred very substantial casualties if we had done what so many on the other side on the aisle have suggestion and that somehow get back our equipment. Now how does our withdrawal from Afghanistan compare to our withdrawal from—well, actually have another question. Biden came in on January 2021. Was there a comprehensive plan at that time to both withdraw absolutely every one of our servicemen because that was the promise had made to the American people while withdrawing in an organized way with no American casualties? Was there a complete plan ready to go at that time?

General MILLEY. So two points, I'll go back to the equipment just very quickly. As I recall and I think it's laid out in the SIGAR's report, the Special IG for Afghanistan. It's 80-some-odd billion dollars' worth of military aid total.

That's everything from food and building barracks and uniforms and boots to include equipment over 20 years. And then he cites I think it's 7.2 billion of military equipment, U.S. manufactured military equipment that is with the Afghan Security Forces. That's Afghan owned equipment, not American equipment.

Every piece of American equipment that the American military owned came out with us with Scott Miller or he destroyed onsite. And that's a fact. So the idea that the American—

Mr. SHERMAN. So this attack on Biden—

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time expired.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. For not taking the equipment is total bunk?

Chairman MCCAUL. Chair recognizes Mr. Wilson, South Carolina.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I ask for unanimous consent to submit two reports from the George W. Bush Institute of February 2024, the captured State on human costs on corruption.

Chairman MCCAUL. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And indeed, Generals, we appreciate your service. But we just have to learn from what's occurred, the appeasement in Afghanistan.

The Biden decision to peace is the worst foreign policy national security decision I believe in the history of the United States. It led directly to the encouragement of dictators who are ruling by gun to invade the democracies rule of law. We saw that on February 22, 2022 when war criminal Putin invaded Ukraine.

We saw that on October 7, 2023 when the regime in Tehran through their puppets of Hamas invaded Israel. We see it today as the world's largest military buildup is being conducted by the Chinese Communist Party to threaten Taiwan. The global war on terrorism continues and indeed with open borders. And the American families have never been at greater risk of attack.

And I especially appreciate the military families who are here today. As a 31-year veteran of the 218th Infantry Brigade, I visited four times with our personnel with the Adjutant General Bob Livingston and our troops serving in Afghanistan. And I saw them serve with their Afghan brothers just as you did.

And due to encouragement by my wife, I'm particularly grateful of my oldest son, Alan, who received a CAB in Iraq, my second son, a doctor at Baghdad International Airport. My third served at the southern border and also served in Egypt. And my youngest son served under your command a year in Afghanistan.

And to me, the Biden decision that led to the 13 deaths of the persons at Abbey Gate, the service members, it's just inexcusable. And I actually felt assured, Generals, knowing that your competence and capability, particularly a Citadel graduate. But I am very concerned that you were blamed on August the 26th, 2021 by Mr. Biden.

He specifically said that the 13 murdered, the withdrawal of forces was a decision as determined by the military. And he said he had letters that indicated that you had said there should be an immediate appeasement. I sent a letter that day to the President asking for copies of the letters.

And every couple of months, I will send another request. It has not been provided. And so there are no letters. And it's the responsibility of the President of United States, his decision that resulted in what occurred putting American families at risk.

With that, indeed the Doha agreement, each of you, was there a violation? It was conditions based. And were there violations by the Taliban of the agreement?

General MILLEY. I'll let General McKenzie give you the specifics. But yes, the Taliban violated every condition of the agreement ex-

cept lethal attacks on U.S. forces from the time they signed the agreement all the way to the end. So yes, they were in violation.

They did not renounce Al Qaeda. They did not do Afghan to Afghan negotiations. They did not—there's a whole series of conditions in the Doha agreement that they did not do.

General MCKENZIE. That's correct. Every condition except the narrow conditions about attacks on U.S. and coalition forces. And in particular, actually, they stepped up intentional attacks on Afghan forces during this period because we had agreed to withdraw substantive air combat support from the Afghan military during this period of time. And they took advantage of that opportunity.

Mr. WILSON. And I appreciate that President Donald Trump has indicated it was conditions based. The conditions were violated. And that would've led to his view of maintaining the Bagram base. What is your position?

General MCKENZIE. So my position on Bagram was linked to my recommendation, my position then and now, that we should've held at 2,500. At 2,500 U.S. forces if you also assume that will allow the Afghans to stay in the fight, you can maintain a viable base at Bagram.

Mr. WILSON. And indeed Bagram would be——

General MCKENZIE. And I consider Bagram critical.

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. Protecting American families. And hey, as we conclude, we still have a President making bad decisions and that is that we had 7 weeks ago three young Americans killed, Army Reservist from Georgia. And this was the decision of the President, Mr. Biden, who did not follow through on trying to stop these attacks on our troops by the puppets of Iran. And we lost three servicemembers, over 40 injured. And the President needs to take this seriously. We're in a conflict existential of our country. Thank you.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair recognizes Mr. Crow.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Chairman Milley and General McKenzie, for your service then and for coming voluntarily to testify and provide really important information to the committee and to the Gold Star families. And I join you in extending my condolences to the Gold Star families for making the ultimate sacrifice that certainly we can never repay.

But we are trying the best to get answers for you. And I also want to extend my condolences to the over 2,400 other Gold Star families who weren't able to join us here today whose families also made the ultimately sacrifice over the 20 years of this war. My criticisms of the withdrawal, and the missteps and the problems are well documented.

There were certainly issues that have to be addressed, and I've been very clear about that. And I've endeavored to get answers with my colleagues. But I also want to provide some really important context and that is ending wars is never easy and ending wars is never clean.

And in fact, as you all know better than me, retrograde operations, withdrawal operations are some of the hardest and most dangerous things that we ask our military to do. So I want to provide some of that context. Chairman Milley, you said in your open-

ing 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?

General 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 did not withdraw 100 percent, then we would’ve been back at war with the Taliban. That’s right.

Mr. CROW. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I generally agree with what General Milley said. But we always thought about staying—keeping 2,500 needed to be coupled with an aggressive negotiation program with the Taliban, one that perhaps had a few more sticks and not all carrots.

I think you needed to change your approach to negotiation if you decided to stay. We’ll never know. You’ll never know. I think, it’s very possible that we could’ve been fighting the Taliban. But that’s just a counterfactual that we will not know the answer to.

Mr. CROW. . Thank you. On the issue of a NEO, I actually was one of those voices that joined you and called for an earlier NEO. And it was something that I thought would’ve been better and could’ve led to a smoother evacuation but not a perfectly clean one because NEOs are hard.

And one thing I want to talk about is this issue of who we evacuate, right? You talked about getting accounts on U.S. citizens. But the simple fact of the matter is the United States nowhere ever requires its citizens to register at the State Department. So in no instance do we ever fully know what Americans are on the ground in any situation. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. I think that’s 100 percent correct. And you’ll see it playing out today in Haiti. You saw it in the Sudan. You saw it in Ukraine. You saw it many other places.

Very, very difficult. It’s a voluntary thing. People are encouraged to register with the embassy. But I do not know of any compulsory requirement to do that.

Mr. CROW. And also when we evacuate American citizens in Afghanistan, many of those were, in fact, dual citizens. Is that accurate, General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. That’s correct, yes.

Mr. CROW. And many of those folks actually had non-American citizen family members. Is that right?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct.

Mr. CROW. So many of them not until the last moment wanted to evacuate until they knew that there was a crisis because they did not leave their family. Is that accurate?

General MCKENZIE. I think you're absolutely correct.

Mr. CROW. So even if we had started a NEO earlier, that does not mean at the end of the day there would not have been a rush and a crisis as the Afghan government and security forces collapsed because people finally realize they needed to get out. That probably would not have changed even if we had started the NEO earlier?

General MCKENZIE. Hard to know. But that's certainly a possibility.

Mr. CROW. Last piece is the part of the story that is not yet written and that is our partners, our friends, our Afghan allies who are still there, we have an obligation to get them out. There's a bill called the Afghan Allies Protection Act, a bipartisan bill. I want to thank Mr. Baird over here who's a co-sponsor of that. And I would encourage all my colleagues who are here who are not yet co-sponsors of that bill to sign on because we can still do right and save lives by passing this bill and providing a pathway for our friends to get out. With that, I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair recognizes Mr. Perry from Pennsylvania.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentleman, I thank you for your service and we honor the Gold Star families and the servicemembers here today. General Milley, General McKenzie, were the rules of engagement at the time of the Abbey Gate incident sufficient for servicemembers like Tyler Vargas to protect themselves?

General MCKENZIE. So it's my judgment they were. And we went in with what we call the standard Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff ROE with supplements for Afghanistan. There's three main components to it.

First of all, the inherent right of self-defense. A U.S. servicemember anywhere in the world at any time has the right to defend him or herself against a threat. It does not have to be an action that you're defending against. It can be intent interpreted.

So we're under that—we're operating under that threat, under that ROE at the same time. We had extended what we call collective self-defense to our friends, partners, and allies that are there. So you could take actions to defend the Brits. You could take actions to defend our Afghan partners.

The third component of that was we used what we call direct action authorities which allowed you to strike people that were not in direct contact with you, particularly in relationship to Kabul if they posed a self-defense threat. So the last point I would say is we exercise self-defense with lethal effect three times during the defense of Kabul on 16 and I believe 22 and 26 August.

Mr. PERRY. OK. So sticking with the Abbey Gate incident, General McKenzie, you said there was no specific attacker intelligence or no specific intelligence existed and that there was nobody on the BOLO that fit that description. Does that remain true today?

General MCKENZIE. It does.

Mr. PERRY. So were you aware—after the Abbey Gate attack, were you aware that service members at the gate had requested the ability to service the target, so to speak? Were you aware of that?

General MCKENZIE. No, I would not be aware of that.

Mr. PERRY. And it's understandable that a combatant commander might not be aware of what servicemembers right on the line are aware of? But post-that circumstance, were you concerned about the intelligence you were getting regarding the action you were about to take on the would be attackers and that network?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. On or about the 26th, we were tracking four broad, very active, very concerning threat streams. We were looking at the threat of a vehicle borne IED, a person borne IED which actually was the modality of the abdicated attack.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

General MCKENZIE. We were looking at indirect fire rocket attacks—

Mr. PERRY. Right.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Orders. And we were looking at an insider attack. Somebody gets in and blows themselves up in the turmoil.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

General MCKENZIE. So we had dozens of—

Mr. PERRY. But you had nothing fitting the description of what your servicemembers on the gate, on the line had—

General MCKENZIE. We have a lot of descriptions of men and—

Mr. PERRY. So when the servicemember on the line is looking at the attacker based on the description and he's got the rules of engagement. But the rules of engagement at that point require him to check with his commander, go up the line and he does not get approval, that's exceptionally concerning. I understand the fog of war. I get the circumstance you're in.

But there's a man sitting here that's been blown up because he could not get the answer that needed. So on Thursday, August 26th, the Abbey Gate attack happens. Three days later of August 29th, the drone strike occurs. Now you said that we had up to six Reapers following this car around for 8 hours. And I think up to 60 pieces of intelligence that proved that these were the people that had just attacked the Abbey Gate.

General MCKENZIE. No, sir. That's not correct.

Mr. PERRY. Well, that's what I got here for open source reporting. OK. Maybe some of that is not correct. But regardless of the fact on the 29th, the drone strike occurs, kills ten, seven of them children. Five days later, the Pentagon admits there was a mistake, 5 days later. General Milley, when did you know that the drone strike was a failure?

General MILLEY. When did I know that the drone—

Mr. PERRY. Drone strike on—

General MILLEY [continuing]. Was a mistake?

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. The civilian taking water to his family was a failure.

General MILLEY. Yes, no, I remember. When did I know? I probably—

Mr. PERRY. It was 5 days before the Pentagon said it was a mistake. When did you know?

General MILLEY. Probably Day 4, Day 5, in that range. I did not know right away if that's what your question is.

Mr. PERRY. And who did you tell when you knew?

General MILLEY. Well, I think it came up through me to the Secretary of Defense. I do not remember the exact—

Mr. PERRY. And it went from you to the SECDEF.

General MILLEY. Well, it would've come from—General McKenzie would've called me. I do not remember the specifics, but General McKenzie would've called me and said we have an incident—

Mr. PERRY. Does anybody else in the Biden Administration know at that point that it's a failure?

General MILLEY. I honestly do not know.

Mr. PERRY. Because the whole time they're telling us secondary explosions. We go the target and lying to the American people not having a clue. Why did you tell?

General MILLEY. I told the Secretary of Defense. And of course, if we're having a principle's meeting, we go through the details of the strike. But I guess I'm trying to—if you're saying did I tell the President of the United States or whomever other than the Secretary of the Defense that there was a mistake, I think—and I'm doing this from memory.

I think Frank McKenzie—General McKenzie would've called me. And I would've informed the Secretary of Defense. Or he would've called the Secretary of Defense which is his chain of command, and I might've been in there at the time.

I do not recall the actual day time nor the individual that I mentioned to you. But for several days, it was my impression that the procedures were executed correctly and that we struck a target that we thought was an enemy. There was a mistake made. It's a tragic mistake—

Mr. PERRY. It's huge.

General MILLEY [continuing]. Of war.

Mr. PERRY. And you lied to the American people for 5 days and all these families—

General MILLEY. We weren't lying, though, Congressman. Lying implies we were intentionally trying to deceive. That is not what—I know that's not what I was doing.

Mr. PERRY. It's a pretty big mistake, sir. I yield the balance.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. I ask unanimous consent to allow Representative Miller-Meeks of Iowa to sit on the dais and participate in today's hearing without objection. So the chair now recognizes Mr. Schneider.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and General Milley, General McKenzie. Like my colleagues here, I want to thank you for your distinguished service to our Nation. We're very grateful.

I personally share your compassion and gratitude and extend my condolences to the Gold Star families here and all those who lost loved ones, the more than 2,400 who made the ultimate sacrifice over nearly 20 years of action in Afghanistan, as well as the thousands wounded, both with injuries that are visible and those that are not.

I'm paraphrasing some of the things that I've heard today. No single factor determined the outcomes, I think is something you said. Twenty years of decisions, actions, successes, and failures all contributed to what ultimately happened in Afghanistan. You said there was a whole series of lessons along the way. And if I come to something, General Milley, I think—if I got it right when you were talking with my colleague, Ranking Member Meeks, that the start of the end was the Doha agreement in 2020. Is that fair?

General MILLEY. I think that's a way that a historian could look at it. You could also start it in 2011 when the decision to begin the drawdown. It's a 10-year process of drawdown. The end game itself, I probably peg it at Doha because it's a continuum of unbroken cause and effects from that moment to toward the end.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I think that's fair. It's hard to put one point. But what were your thoughts at the time of the signing of the Doha agreement in 2020?

General MILLEY. Well, the military was not consulted on the Doha agreement, nor would I necessarily expect to be. But that was a State Department operation that was done under Secretary of State Pompeo with Zai Khalilzad as the Ambassador during negotiations. I was not consulted.

It was an 18-month process. So it actually begins before I became a chairman. It begins under General Dunford. So that process goes on.

I do not know what General Dunford knew, but I do not think he knew much about it. We knew there was a negotiation going on, the specifics of which we did not know the terms of the negotiation. I found out about that from Secretary Esper after the fact.

And then it was then. And then a week or two later, we found the—we were given the classified annex to the Doha agreement. But no, we did not participate in the development of the terms nor the negotiations.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And when the decision was made to drawdown to 2,500 troops by I think you said inauguration day, did you see that as something that was sustainable, get to the ultimate goal? Or did that put U.S. forces at undo risk?

General MILLEY. My assessment at the time was that 2,500 U.S. troops—and again, these are high end Special Forces troops—2,500 U.S. troops with the contractors with NATO was the min force necessary in order to buy the time to ensure the conditions were going to get met and result in a satisfactory negotiated settlement with the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Obviously, that did not happen.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. At any time between the Doha agreement and January 21 when 2,500 or even April and ongoing was the government involved in the negotiations, was there evidence of progress being made in negotiations between the Taliban and the government that would give confidence that we could achieve the conditions that were laid out in the Doha agreement?

General MILLEY. I do not actually know that. I think that's probably a question for the State Department because they probably have better visibility. I do not think—I'm almost positive that there were no substantive negotiations between the government of Afghanistan, the government of President Ghani and the Taliban.

Now there may have been some back channel stuff. There might've been some stuff that I'm not aware of. But I am not aware of substantive negotiation between the government of Afghanistan. And, in fact, the Doha agreement, that's one of the requirements.

One of the conditions is a reduction in violence for a specified period of time. I think it was 90 days if I remember. And then that was supposed to lead to a permanent countrywide cease-fire.

And then that would lead to a negotiated settlement between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Obviously, the Taliban did not adhere to those conditions. They blew through those.

But that was part of the Doha agreement. And that I think—and I know you had Dr. Khalilzad here before. I think that's kind of what he was trying to make happen, but it never happened.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I understand. I'm almost out of time. But the goal was to have that negotiated agreement. The Taliban quickly, I think, recognized that they did not need to negotiate with the government. The government was weak and they could achieve their goals by other means. At what point, if any, and this is to both of you, would you mark the tipping point where the outcome was all but certain? It was probably long before August 2021, I imagine.

General MILLEY. I would say two points. One is the Doha Agreement, because it was negotiated by the government of United States and a State Department-designated terrorist organization, the Taliban. There was a bilateral agreement. That kind of pulled the rug out morale-wise from both the Afghan Security Forces and the government itself.

Because, at that point, they knew with certainty that there was a date-certain now, right? So I think that probably had a significant effect. Historians are going to have to figure out exactly what that effect is. The actual observable tipping point of the collapse of the Afghan military, et cetera, that clearly is in July.

As you start looking at when provincial capitals start falling. The first provincial capital falls, I think it's 6 August. And then in the next 10 days, the rest of them start falling all the way to the capture of Kabul. But it's at the end of July sort of right at the beginning of August, it becomes evident that the Afghan Security Forces are crumbling. And that's where the whole NEO thing comes up.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

General MILLEY. But that's about the timing.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. All right. Chairman, I apologize for the extra time. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired. Chair recognizes Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I thank our witnesses for their time and their service to our country, recognizing certainly our Gold Star families that have joined us and those that have not today. One of the 13 lost at Abbey Gate was from my community in Missouri, Lance Corporal Jared Schmitz.

I also want to remind our viewers and our colleagues here today that the title of this hearing, of this particular hearing is an Assessment of the Biden Administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals. Even today, two and a half years after the Biden Administration's botched withdrawal after countless

hearings, roundtables, and briefings, the incompetence that led to the abandonment of Afghanistan absolutely astounds me. The Administration ignored the advice of allies, experts, and military leaders, blowing past warning sign after warning sign as it allowed Afghanistan to collapse.

The total betrayal of our U.S. military servicemen and women, of our allies, of Afghanistan, and the subsequent chaotic, shameful withdrawal has seriously damaged our credibility as an ally and a leader. And because of the Biden Administration's actions, American communities are less safe. And the world is much more dangerous and unstable.

We are paying the price now with conflicts roiling every corner of the globe. And yes, General Milley, those responsible must provide answers as you've said over and over. But also, they must be held to account. General Milley, General McKenzie, I ask the following questions not just as a Member of Congress but also as a mother of an Army Ranger who served under command in combat, in Afghanistan. So let me ask both of you, General Milley, General McKenzie, did you engage with our NATO allies and other allied nations about the withdrawal plan before President Biden announced his decision to go to zero in April 2021?

General MILLEY. Absolutely, sure. That was fundamental. And the NATO slogan at the time was in together, out together. So we coordinated multiple times with our NATO allies.

Mrs. WAGNER. Did our allies with troops in Afghanistan, recommend not going to zero prior to or after President Biden's April 2021 withdrawal announcement? General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, they did. And it was my actual belief that had we stayed at 2,500, we would've had probably 5,000—

Mrs. WAGNER. Yours and everyone else's.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. And maybe more than that.

Mrs. WAGNER. Clearly the Trump Administration. Did our allies with troops in Afghanistan inform you that they would withdraw if the U.S. went to zero? General Milley?

General MILLEY. Yes, they said we'll be aligned with you. In together, out together, we'll be aligned with you and that they would follow our lead.

Mrs. WAGNER. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, because the unique capabilities that the United States brings, they could not have stayed without our presence.

Mrs. WAGNER. General Milley and General McKenzie, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan was nearly complete by mid-July, more than a month ahead of the August deadline. Why was the drawdown executed so quickly? And did you at any point believe the process was moving too fast?

General MCKENZIE. I'll take that. It was by design. From the very beginning, we wanted to get out as quickly as we could because we believed speed brought safety. And it would also give us a cushion in case unanticipated problems arose.

Mrs. WAGNER. What objectives, threat assessments, or orders were driving the speed?

General MCKENZIE. Concerns about the Taliban attacking us. Concerns about ISIS being able to carry out attacks. But also a de-

sire to have room at the back end, in case we had trouble. We had weather problems. We had aircraft problems that slowed us down. And in case that did not happen——

Mrs. WAGNER. It's not clear, sir, that the Afghan military and some of allies for that matter were not ready for how quickly the U.S. withdrawal occurred. Did you ever consider or advise that the pace of the drawdown slowed to ensure the Afghan military was able to successfully transition? So why was such action not taken?

General MCKENZIE. The Afghan military was read in from the beginning about the pace of the withdrawal. And frankly, ma'am, I do not believe that waiting another 30 days would've had any material impact at all——

Mrs. WAGNER. One quick other question, and I thank you so much. General Milley, General McKenzie, has the Taliban been carrying out a campaign of retribution, reprisals, and revenge killing against the Afghan allies that we left behind?

General MILLEY. I believe yes.

General MCKENZIE. Absolutely, systematically.

Mrs. WAGNER. Systematically. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentlelady yields. The chair recognizes Mr. Phillips.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Milley, General McKenzie, thank you for your sacrifices. To my colleagues on both sides of the aisle who have served in uniform, thank you for yours. To all of you in this room who might've served, I am grateful.

And particularly to the Gold Star families in the room, if you might just raise your hands, those of you here are representing loved ones. I'm one of you, and thank you for holding that up. I'm one of you, and I know how you feel.

I've been looking for answers my whole life after having lost my father in Vietnam. You can imagine the questions I have to this very day. With the help of Chairman Milley's office and the chairman himself, I was able to go back to Vietnam for the first time in my life in March of last year.

I went to the very dirt where my father took his last breath. And I can tell you from that experience it is where I took my first. And when I came home, I recognized two things.

First of all, one of the answers is this little piece of plastic, the voting card that we use in the House chamber in the Capitol. It's where we make decisions that can make life and also take life. It's true in the White House. It's true with our generals. It's true with our armed services.

And the weight of that is something that changed me forever. But what I also recognized is how remarkable the hospitality of the Vietnamese were when I was there. The People's Army, our own people in Vietnam, how gracious, how hospitable, how kind, how caring, and how meaningful they saw my return.

And my question to you, both generals, is this. What do we need to start doing today in Afghanistan to ensure that families here and families of the 2,400 others that lost their lives can 1 day return to Afghanistan and have that same blessing that I had to visit the dirt where my father was killed?

General MILLEY. I'll be candid, Congressman. I do not think there's anything immediate. It will take years upon years upon years. In my view, this is my personal view, I believe the Taliban is still a terrorist organization.

I still believe that they conduct incredible, horrific retribution inside their own country. And I would not recommend to any family member at this time to return. There is probably some diplomatic initiatives that could be done in the years ahead. But the Taliban—

Mr. PHILLIPS. And that's my question, sir, is my return was 54 years later. What do we need to do now—

General MILLEY. It's going to be many years.

Mr. PHILLIPS. —10, 20, 30 years to plant the seed so that people can return?

General MILLEY. I've served several tours in Afghanistan. Lost a lot of people to include these 13. And I have a problem reconciling with the Taliban. My father had a problem reconciling with the Japanese.

Wars are horrible, terrible things. And I'm carrying that with me, and I'll probably go to the grave with it. So I do not know how many years it's going to take. But it's going to take a long time.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I appreciate it. General McKenzie, any thoughts on what we need to do, this institution, Members of Congress, the White House? What do we need to do now—

General MCKENZIE. Well, I think—

Mr. PHILLIPS [continuing]. Where 50 years from now others can go back?

General MCKENZIE. Frankly, our principle concern with Afghanistan right now should be the fact that Al Qaeda and ISIS have the opportunity to gather strength in ungoverned spaces with clear desire to attack our homeland. So I think we should begin with concern about that. And I—

Mr. PHILLIPS. Let's talk about that. On that account, it's more difficult now than it was before obviously. What should we be doing now?

General MCKENZIE. So I think we need to continue to resource U.S. Central Command so they have the opportunity to do surveillance into Afghanistan. I'm out of that picture now. I do not know what they do. But I think we need to keep an eye on it. I think that's very important.

In the long term, I believe it is decades away before there's going to be any rapprochement with Afghanistan, particularly given their unusually and specifically horrific treatment of women, children, human rights issues. And they seem to embrace that. I agree with the chairman that the Taliban is a terrorist organization.

They themselves do not have a desire to attack us in our homeland. But they do harbor entities and organizations that do have a desire to do that. And I think right now it's hard for me to get beyond that relentless focus.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I understand. But I have about 50 seconds left. The U.S. has a history of making war, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. We also have a tradition of making peace, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. But looking to success and prospectively, we made a lot of our former enemies our dear friends

and allies. Are there things that we should be thinking about right now as it relates to making former enemies our friends?

General MCKENZIE. In the case of Afghanistan, it's hard to find common ground with them right now.

Mr. PHILLIPS. Understood. That seems to be the theme, and I respect that.

General MCKENZIE. It's difficult for me to—I'm probably not the right person to ask. You might ask someone from the Department of State—

Mr. PHILLIPS. I understand.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. To come in and talk to you more about that or USAID because there are some opportunities there. But from my perspective, I tend to focus on the security issues. And frankly, sir, the security issues are profound.

Mr. PHILLIPS. I get it. Gentlemen, thank you. And to the Gold Star families, rest assured my mission now is to ensure some day you can go back because there's nothing more meaningful and powerful. God bless you all. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair now recognizes a veteran of Afghanistan who made dear sacrifices to his nation and to Afghanistan as well, Mr. Mast.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Generals, for your attendance and for your answers today and for putting on a uniform in defense of this country. I think any of us that put on a uniform want the next generation to wake up every day and be able to say this country is still worth it. America is worth the fight.

And it's one of the most important reasons that we have these hearings and that we do these oversights so that everybody can wake up and say yes, this is a place that's worth it. I want to ask some questions about targeting. I've watched your all's interviews from in uniform to leaving uniform. As you can imagine, it's of great personal interest to me and of course to the Gold Star families as well throughout the war.

We left on August 30th, 2021. We lost 13 servicemembers on the 26th of 2021. And moving behind those dates, can you recall when the last time it was that America targeted somebody specifically for the purpose of termination on the 25th, on the 24th, on the 23d, wherever, whether it be ISIS-K, whether it be Taliban, whether it be Al Qaeda?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. On the night of 27–28 August, we targeted an ISIS-K bomb maker in Nangarhar Province.

Mr. MAST. Prior to the 26th, General.

General MCKENZIE. Prior to the 26th—

Mr. MAST. I know that we made a mistake in target.

General MCKENZIE. That was the 29th. That was 2 days later.

Mr. MAST. Prior to the 26th, prior to the Abbey Gate?

General MCKENZIE. It had been quite a while before we had actually struck any deep targets. It'd been a lengthy period of time. I could not give the exact date, but it was probably a matter of many weeks since we had struck a target that you would develop and strike as a personality target or a deep strike target.

Our strikes were during the period particularly after the Doha agreement. We were more in direct self-defense of Afghan forces.

And that became increasingly difficult to deliver as our aircraft were repositioned out of Afghanistan as we drew down.

So our strikes became increasingly limited. Now the Afghans struck, and they struck not only close-to-fence targets but deep targets. But we had very limited visibility on those targets. And I do not believe they were necessarily effective in those strikes.

Mr. MAST. And I want to get to that a little bit, General McKenzie. In one of your interviews was with Fox. And you said this specifically. There were a wide variety of targets the U.S. military told the Taliban to look at.

And it's not that I really want to get specifically to. When did that envelope change for America? And what did it look like? Which targets were we choosing to give to the Taliban to target and which targets were we keeping for ourselves? What met that threshold of saying, the U.S. is going to hit this, but we're going to give this off to the Talibs?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. I prefer to talk a little bit more about this in the closed session. But we passed the Taliban information on targets that were in close proximity to KIA, places where we thought ISIS-K was gathering, ISIS-K might be preparing to strike. And there were about 18 of those targets that we passed.

And they took action on some of them. I cannot tell you if they took action on all of them because we did not have visibility on them. Now when I say they actioned them, they did not strike them with a drone obviously.

They drove out and looked at the location. May or may not have taken action. But I can tell you that we did that, I believe, 18 times during this period of time. And by that, I mean after 15 August until we left the country.

Mr. MAST. After 15 August? You said it was several weeks before we had—since we had targeted somebody prior to the Abbey Gate.

General MCKENZIE. Correct. And we were not targeting before 15 August at any number in Afghanistan. But specifically, I was answering your question about the Taliban because the relationship with the Taliban was a direct, highly transactional relationship based on our withdrawal between 15 August and 30 August.

Mr. MAST. And here's the reason that that timeline, that looking at that is important to me. As I've said, I've looked at your all's comments, your interviews, things that you've said. And speaking on a different subject, you were speaking about Iran, the failure of the Biden Administration in talking Iran off the target list, not that we should drop ordinance on them tomorrow, but that they should be on the list just so that there is deterrence, just so that they know they cannot act and not have a response by the United States of America and that is a failure.

And you use specifically the terminology that to take Iran off the target list was to give Iran aid and comfort were the exact words. And it is my opinion that if we are ceasing to target Al Qaeda, ISIS-K, or the Taliban in those days leading up to August 26th, then just as you looked at a lack of targeting Iran as giving the enemy aid and comfort, I would look at giving that enemy, I would look at those lack of actions as giving that enemy aid and comfort. And in that, General, my time has expired.

Chairman McCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair recognizes Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And welcome to both of our witnesses. General Milley, just as an American, I want to thank you for your service and for how you've conducted yourself in that service. America owes you a debt.

You come from my hometown of Boston, just outside Boston if I understand it correctly. Your father fought in World War II in the 4th Marine Division in the Pacific. Is that correct? And your mother was a nurse who served in the U.S. Naval Reserve during that same war. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. She worked at a hospital out in Seattle, took care of the wounded. That's correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And yet an uncle who served in the Korean War?

General MILLEY. I had two uncles that were also in World War II, one in the Philippines and one was landing at Normandy while my dad was at Saipan and another uncle that was in the Korean War.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So it'd be fair to say your family really answered a call to serve its country including bearing arms to protect this country and to deter its adversaries and enemies. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That's correct, and two uncles in World War I and cousins in Vietnam.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Oh, even going further. And then you, yourself, deployed in Somalia, Panama, Haiti, and multiple times as brigade commander to Iraq and Afghanistan. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. You proud of that service?

General MILLEY. Forty-four years, proud.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Are you proud of that service?

General MILLEY. Absolutely, 100 percent.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And then a retired colonel Ross Davison who served under you in Baghdad recounted one incident where you ran across a booby-trapped bridge at night in order to prevent a pair of U.S. tanks from blowing up and thus save lives. Is that incident accurate?

General MILLEY. It's correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. General Milley, on a Truth Social post on September 22d of last year, Donald J. Trump said talking about you, quote, "This guys turned out to be a woke train wreck who if the fake news reporting is correct was actually dealing with China to give them a head's up on the thinking of the President of the United States. This is an act so egregious that, in times gone by, the punishment would've been death," unquote. And a member of the other side of the aisle on this very committee called you a traitor and said, I quote, "In a better society, quislings," referring to the leader of Norway during World War II who collaborated with the Nazis, "like the strange," I will not use the words used by our colleague, "General Milley would be hung," unquote.

General Milley, what's your reaction to those statements about you, especially given you and your family's long service, distinguished service to the United States of America as we're discussing patriotism and protecting troops? I wonder how you respond to the

kind of slander I've just read attributed to two prominent political figures?

General MILLEY. Well, let me just say——

Mr. CONNOLLY. And if you could move the mic closer so we can hear you.

General MILLEY. So obviously, I do not agree with the comments. But it's a free country and people can say what they want. But with all due respect, Congressman, I'm here for the families of Abbey Gate and I'm here for the families of those that served in Afghanistan.

And I'll leave those comments. As much as I do not care for those comments, I do not agree with them, they have a right to say them. But I'd like to stay focused on these families with respect.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I think that's very much in keeping with the honorable tradition you've set in your own career and your own good name. But as a member of this body, I want to let you know I find those comments inconsistent with the honor we're trying to bestow on those who lost loved ones, who have served and served nobly their country. You deserve that honor and respect too.

And those kinds of comments are dangerous and unbefitting anybody from my point of view who serves or seeks to serve public office. And as a member of this committee, I want you to know I renounce them and I have a very different view of your service. Thank you for serving the American people. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair recognizes Mr. Barr.

Mr. BARR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Milley, General McKenzie, thank you all for your service. On July 2d, 2021, the United States left Bagram Air Base in the dead of night without notifying the base's new Afghan commander who discovered the U.S. departure more than 2 hours after the military had left. General Milley, was your assessment at the time that Bagram Air Base was the most strategically important base in Afghanistan and across the region?

General MILLEY. I think it was a strategically important air base. However, at that point, the troops had been drawn down to a degree that it was not defensible by U.S. forces. So there was no question of closing it.

As far as the specific information of the Afghan command, I read that in the media. I do not know. I'd ask Frank to comment on whether he knew or did not know.

Mr. BARR. Sir, was Bagram a key component of U.S. air capabilities to strike ISIS-K and Al Qaeda and to stop Taliban advances?

General MILLEY. Sure, and had been for 20 years.

Mr. BARR. And is Bagram Air Base or was Bagram Air Base the only U.S. air base in a country with a physical border with China?

General MILLEY. Well, we had several previously. But at that point in time, that was the only one remaining.

Mr. BARR. Who, General Milley, made the—gave the order to abandon Bagram?

General MILLEY. Well, the President makes a decision, announces it on the 14th of April. And the decision very simply was withdraw U.S. forces and keep a diplomatic presence. The embassy is going to remain in Kabul. And if you're ever going to have to do

a NEO, they're going to have to use the Kabul International Airport as the evacuation air field.

Mr. BARR. Would a NEO—could a NEO—

General MILLEY. When you drawdown—

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

General MILLEY. Sure. But you do not have the forces to defend. It's a question that—it's a non-question in the sense that you do not 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. If the Afghans are there with you, then you probably could've defended it with 1,800, maybe 2,000, something like that. So, once you make the decision, Congressman, to go to—to remove U.S. forces, you do not have the option of keeping Bagram.

Mr. BARR. Right. So—

General MILLEY. It's no longer there.

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

General MILLEY. Well, it was General Miller's recommendation that if he's going to withdraw U.S. forces, I cannot keep Bagram and HKIA and defend. It's was 750 guys. It's not even feasible.

Mr. BARR. So—

General MILLEY. That's his recommendation. The plan is brought up through the chain of command.

Mr. BARR. Was there—

General MILLEY. And the plan is approved.

Mr. BARR [continuing]. Dissent within the military? Was the order given against military advice?

General MILLEY. To close Bagram?

Mr. BARR. Yes.

General MILLEY. No, and that's because the previous decision is a strategic decision—

Mr. BARR. Right.

General MILLEY [continuing]. To withdraw U.S. forces.

Mr. BARR. 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?

General MCKENZIE. The key point the Chairman made is this, sir. It's once you go below 2.5k for U.S. forces, you cannot hold Bagram. At 2.5k, I was enthusiastic about holding Bagram. Scott Miller was enthusiastic about holding Bagram.

Mr. BARR. Understand. But neither one of you recommended to go below—

General MCKENZIE. My position then and now was to stay at 2.5k.

General MILLEY. And that's right, once the decision is made.

Mr. BARR. Understand, understand.

General MILLEY. Presidents make decisions. And once that decision is made, we execute.

Mr. BARR. But the point here that I'm trying to make is that the refusal to abide by the recommendations that both of you made

would have preserved the option to maintain Bagram and execute the NEO from Bagram. My question is would Bagram have been a preferable strategic exit versus HKIA?

General MCKENZIE. So there are problems with Bagram. It's 30 miles away from Kabul. All things being equal, you prefer to have Bagram at 2.5k.

There's a lot of reasons why you'd want that second air base. And yes, it would've helped the NEO had you been doing it at the force level that would allow you to man it.

Mr. BARR. Yes. So it was really the fact that the resources weren't there. The troop levels were not there to actually carry out a successful NEO. General McKenzie, did you ever make a request to re-seize Bagram either before or after August 15th?

General MCKENZIE. We had plans. And I prefer to talk about them in a closed session. But we had plans to do a variety of things.

Mr. BARR. My time has expired. I think your advice to the political leadership was the correct advice primarily because we lost a key strategic asset in the counter terrorism fight. And now in retrospect looking at the fact that we have competition with China and we do not have an air base there, a huge, huge strategic blunder in my judgment. With that, I yield.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields. Chair recognizes Mr. Dean—Ms. Dean. That's the second time I've done that.

Ms. DEAN. Thank you, Chairwoman.

[Laughter.]

Chairman MCCAUL. Touche.

Ms. DEAN. We need a laugh here today.

Thank you, Chairman McCaul; thank you, Ranking Member Meeks, for holding this hearing.

Thank you, General Milley; thank you, General McKenzie, for your extraordinary careers of service to this country and the sacrifice that both you and your families have made for the service of our country.

I also recognize the very faithful service members of all of our military, some of whom are here today, but over the 20 years of the conflict in Afghanistan, the more than 2400 who gave their lives for this country, for this democracy, for the rights that we prize here.

I also recognize the Gold Star Families who are in the room. You know I care desperately that you get the answers that you need.

And I appreciate that both of our testifiers here today have talked about that it is a comprehensive look that you deserve. It is not about a single day or a single month. You deserve the answers to what went right with this war and what went wrong.

To the Abbey Gate veterans and families—and I see Veteran Sergeant Vargas-Andrews and your family. Thank you for being here yet again.

I wanted to start quickly with the testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in September 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?

General MCKENZIE. Operationally, the collapse meant that at HKIA we depended upon Afghan support to hold the perimeter. They melted away. And that was probably the most significant immediate operational effect of the collapse of the Afghan government and the attendant collapse of the Afghan military.

Now, we had a plan for that, we saw it as a possibility. But that’s why we had to put in 6,000, almost 6,000 U.S. forces, to replace those Afghans that had melted away. We would have been able to hold HKIA with a far smaller number of U.S. forces, had the Afghans remained. But when the government collapsed, they went away. So, that had a profound and immediate effect on everything else that followed.

Ms. DEAN. General Milley?

General MILLEY. Yes, 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.

Having said that, though, I think that we certainly were advocating for the parallel withdrawal of the embassy personnel and the American citizens with the military prior to the events of August.

Ms. DEAN. And what role did President Ghani’s leaving town—

General MILLEY. I think that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I think it was collapsing anyway, but at that point in time—you know, I do not want to make comparisons, I suppose, but, you know, you have Ghani and Zelensky, right? Zelensky stays and his military stays in Kyiv, and they are a nation at war and they’re fighting tooth and nail.

And then, in this particular case, President Ghani and his entire cabinet less one—one went up into the Panjshir Valley; the rest of them got on airplanes and took off out of the country. As soon as the ANSF saw that, they literally took their uniforms off, put their weapons down, and it collapsed. It was very, very quick, once that event happened.

Ms. DEAN. As to the drawdown, if I could ask you both—and maybe it’s more appropriate to General Milley, but I might be wrong—under the Doha Agreement, the drawdown to 8600 troops by June 2022 was required. But my understanding is, subsequent withdrawals were at President Trump’s discretion—4500 by No-

vember 2020; 2500 by January 2021, as a new Administration is about to take place.

It did not seem ideal by defense officials. On what basis did President Trump order the troop withdrawal to 2500 in January 2021?

General MILLEY. Well, to back up, the requirement to go to 8600 was 135 days after the signing of the Doha Agreement. And that was executed. Secretary Esper was the Secretary of Defense.

Then, Secretary Esper submitted a recommendation, and I concurred with it, to withdraw to 4500 and hold at 4500 until all the conditions were being met. Secretary Esper was removed from office on the 9th of November.

On the 11th or 12th of November, I was handed a piece of paper with the President's signature on it, which had two sentences. One was withdrawal of our forces from Somalia by the 15th of December, and then, withdrawal of our forces out of Afghanistan by the 15th of January.

We went, the Acting Secretary of Defense Miller and I, and others, went over to the White House to confirm that order, because we had not been consulted on that. So, we did, and that order was, then, subsequently rescinded. And on the 17th of December, or November, another order was received signed by Robert O'Brien, the National Security Advisor to the President, which directed at that point to come down to 2500. Twenty-five hundred was always given as the min force required by the military as a recommendation to two consecutive Presidents.

Ms. DEAN. And yet, momentarily, the President, the former President, placed an order to withdraw everybody.

General MILLEY. Well, it was a drawdown to zero, and then, you may recall—I think somebody had mentioned it—that there was kind of a—there was some discussion of everybody's home by Christmas, that kind of thing.

But the actual formal orders is what I just discussed.

Ms. DEAN. Again, I thank you for your service, and I thank all the military families.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentlelady's time has expired.

The chair now recognizes Mrs. Young Kim.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Thank you, Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Meeks, for holding today's hearing.

I want to thank General Milley and General McKenzie for coming before our committee with your testimonies.

And I do, also, want to welcome the Gold Star Families and veterans. Thank you for your service.

Following the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Biden stated that he owes no apologies for how the withdrawal was conducted. I disagree. To this date, we're still unclear on how many Americans were left behind in Afghanistan and remain there, not to mention Afghan allies that helped our service members with translation services and intelligence gathering. That could have been prevented if the withdrawal was not carried out in a way that was dismissive of advice coming from the DOD's top leadership.

President Biden also promised in an ABC News interview just a few days after the Taliban takeover of Kabul that, if there are

American citizens left, we're going to stay until we get them all out. Well, that's not happened.

So, General Milley and General McKenzie, did you consider this promise an order from the President?

General MILLEY. No. The ABC interview, I would not consider that an order. We receive orders from the White House in formal ways. It has been like this for decades. Typically, they are signed by, typically, the National Security Advisor to the President, and then, that's transmitted to the Secretary of Defense chain of command. And then, the Joint Staff and the Chairman will take those orders, turn them into military orders to transmit to the combatant commanders.

So, I would not consider an ABC interview or any other means of a media communication as, quote-unquote, "an order."

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I think General Milley described it exactly correct.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Was there any contingency planning with the State Department to ensure that no citizens would be left behind?

General MCKENZIE. After we departed at the end of August—

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. I'm asking prior to the withdrawal, was there contingency planning with the State Department?

General MCKENZIE. We always plan for capacities. For example, from the very beginning, CENTCOM worked with a number of about 150,000. That's how many people we thought—that goes back to June 2020—that was the number that we thought would have to come out.

The Department of Defense's responsibility there is to make sure you've got the airplanes to move them; you can process them. But it's up to the Department of State to say who's coming out; how you're going to categorize those people; how you're going to sort them, and how you're going to get them there.

And that's when I would talk about the velocities, the different velocities of the two departments. You know, we are pretty straightforward with our ability to do that, but we're dependent on the Department of State actually to make those decisions that turn our ability into actual movement of human beings.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Sure.

So, we talked about how the President promised that during that ABC News interview, but when did you realize that President Biden's promise would be broken?

General MCKENZIE. I'm sorry, just help me with that.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. When did you realize that the President's promise of getting every one of the American citizens left in the Taliban will be left—I mean, will be, we'll get them out? When did you—

General MCKENZIE. I would say by mid-July 2021 I was concerned, given events in Afghanistan, about the State of the Department of State's planning and their ability to execute on the—now, I never thought we'd get everybody out. I always thought there would be some—you've never going to obtain perfection there, but you would want to get that number as small as possible. So, I was—I knew there would be people left behind. We weren't going

to get everybody out, but you want to get as close to zero as you can.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Were you told by that same Administration just days later to leave Americans behind if it meant getting out by August 31st?

General MCKENZIE. No, I was never told that. But I would share with you my advice in late August was we needed to get out by the 31st. If we did not leave by the 31st, it was clear to me, from our intelligence reporting and a number of other sources, we would have been fighting the Taliban. So, I thought you want to get out by the 31st, and then, resort to diplomatic means to bring our citizens that do not get out by the 31st out. Otherwise, you're going to have to pour thousands more forces into Afghanistan just to stay there, and permanently impair your opportunity to get citizens out, not to mention the tens of thousands of at-risk Afghans that you would like to get out, that are actually, of course, at much higher risk.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Let me ask General Milley my last question. You previously testified that, during the NEO, you and General McKenzie both recommended against keeping U.S. forces in Afghanistan past August 31st. So, why would you recommend this, even with hundreds of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan allies left behind?

General MILLEY. Well, for the very same reasons that General McKenzie just outlined. I think to keep them past the 31st—you're already at a very small number—you would have had to increase that number by tens of thousands in order to have stayed there and continued fighting now what would be the Taliban.

As far as the American citizens, it wasn't clear then, and it's still not clear to me, what those numbers are, and that was never clarified by anyone in the State Department, exactly how many were there; who they are. Are they out in Herat? Are they down in Kandahar?

We cannot, unless you put tens of thousands of troops in there, we cannot be bouncing around a country that's at war and trying to look for this person and that person. It's just not realistic. It's not a feasible course of action. And by the end of August, especially after the 26th Abbey Gate, absolutely not feasible.

So, at that point in time, your choices are extend well into September, October. You could look forever, because you do not even know what number you're looking for. And you do not even know where they're at.

So, those weren't feasible or acceptable courses of action at the time, although I do understand the human desire, but did not know numbers, did not know necessarily where they were, and so on and so forth. So, not a realistic option.

Mrs. KIM OF CALIFORNIA. Got it.

Well, thank you very much. My time is up.

Chairman McCAUL. The gentlelady's time is expired.

The chair recognizes Mr. Moskowitz.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Generals, for your service to the country.

And echoing comments of my colleagues, I want to, obviously, extend my condolences to the Gold Star Families here, and that were here earlier, and paying the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

I also want to recognize the sacrifice of our colleague Brian Mast for his service in Afghanistan.

A lot of people on this committee do a lot of great things in service to the country. I want to thank our colleague Cory Mills, who just over the weekend was helping getting people out of Haiti. And I hope, Mr. Chairman, we can soon get a classified briefing on the situation going on there.

This, obviously, is a very important topic today on what happened with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, why it did not go according to what the experts in the Pentagon and in our intel community believed.

I think we need to know what gaps existed. I think we need to know how that happened. We need to know the lessons that were learned, and most importantly, how we prevent something like this from happening in the future.

You know, we had soldiers die over the 20 years of war and we had soldiers die on the withdrawal. And I think multiple things can be true. A lot of times in this town, it's an "and/or" kind of deal, right? It's either Trump was responsible or Biden was responsible, right? I actually think in Afghanistan it's an "and/and," quite frankly.

I think there were mistakes made in the withdrawal. I think the American people think there were mistakes made in the withdrawal. And I think it's OK to admit that. I mean, what's the opposite of that? That the withdrawal was perfect; everything went according to plan?

General Milley, do you think mistakes were made in either the planning phases, things that we thought were going to happen that did not happen, or things on the ground that unfolded that we did not prepare for? Do you think mistakes were made in all of that thought process?

General MILLEY. There's zero doubt in my mind there were mistakes made, and that's the point of the after-action reviews: identify those mistakes and develop solutions to implement them in the future.

And I think the fundamental mistake, the fundamental flaw, was the timing of the State Department call of the NEO. I think that was too slow and too late. And that, then, caused a series of events that resulted in the very last couple of days.

There was a lot of other mistakes that are made along the way. I tried to cover them in the written statement to submit to you guys. But I think that was, you know, germane to this particular hearing, I think that was key. I think that was fundamental.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Yes, and reading the dissent cable, which I will not discuss here, but, I mean, do you think some of the intelligence that you all used, our military leaders used—

General MILLEY. Sure. I think, for the intel, for the intelligence, we pulled off in the summer of 2020—so, when we went to 8600, in accordance with the Doha Agreement, and then, you drop from 86 to 45, you're pulling advisors off the so-called kandaks, the battalions, the Afghan battalions.

What that, then, means is we do not have a fingertip touch for what's going on in the Afghan Security Forces. We could not see. We blinded ourselves when you pull those advisors off.

So, we relied on electronic means or technological means in order to be able to see what's happening with the Afghan Security Forces. But technology cannot read a person's heart. They cannot see the negotiation that's going on locally between the Taliban and the local Afghan.

So, we lost our ability to really sense that environment with a degree of granularity that could make better predictions than what was turned out. And I think that's true of the intelligence community and the military writ large, et cetera.

So, I think that was a major gap, was our ability to see into what was happening on the ground, because we pulled our advisors out. And that's going to happen when you pull advisors out.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. And there's no doubt that mistakes were made by multiple Administrations over 20 years that I'm sure we can point to when the full after-action review is completed.

Do you think it was a mistake by the previous President to invite the Taliban, what you call a terrorist organization, to Camp David?

General MILLEY. I will not comment on that. That's a political act and I'll stay out of that.

But on mistakes, I think one of the key ones, to be very candid with you, is the development of the ANSF writ large, which begins, of course, in the early 2000's. And I was part of that. Frank was part of that. Many of us were part of that.

The number of security forces were too small. We had estimated, we, the military, estimated that we needed 6 to 7 hundred thousand. Decisions were made by the Bonn Agreement to field them at 350,000. Half of those were police and they were completely not designed well for a counter-insurgency. So, you're looking at about 175,000 army, and the Taliban fielded about 100,000 Taliban. So, your force ratio is your correlation of forces between the insurgent and the regime forces. It was always balanced more in favor of the Taliban. And then, they had a sanctuary over in Pakistan.

These were decisions from 1904, 1905, and 1903, that kind of thing. But they have second-and third-and fourth-order consequences to the outcome of this war. So, by the end of the day, the Taliban, or the ANSF, there was mirror-imaging going on. We tried to build a conventional army. We did not build the commandos and special forces until late. There's a whole series of these that go way back in time that, ultimately, end up in a collapse of the Afghan Security Forces under intense pressure by the Taliban in the summer of 1921.

Mr. MOSKOWITZ. Thank you, General. My time has expired.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired.

The chair recognizes Mr. Huizenga.

Mr. HUIZENGA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Generals.

I'm going to share a couple of quick stories. And one of those was related to those Gold Star Families that are here.

I had a constituent who did not lose his life, but was severely, severely injured in the blast. I do not use his real name. I call him Jose. He was a marine. He was a 240-pound machine gunner that,

when I first met him, was about 175 pounds after his recovery from his injuries.

This young man, though, is so dedicated to his country, he re-opted. Unfortunately for the Marines, they did not take him back, but he's now a Navy Corpsman and has still continued to try to serve his country.

What I'm frustrated about is what seems like the subservient behavior of the State Department and DOD, frankly. To a lot of us, it seems that some individuals within the departments chose to save face for the Administration, rather than acting and possibly bringing home an already—I'm sorry, rather than bringing some shame to a foreign policy that was a disaster. And this could have saved both American and Afghan lives.

General Milley, you talked about the number of citizens, how it was impossible to know who was there.

I found myself screaming at the television when I was watching a DOD brief—I'm sorry—Secretary Blinken and others within the State Department briefing, saying that their estimate was about 200 U.S. citizens, most of whom chose to stay in Afghanistan. That was total BS, and I would like to say the actual words, but I'm trying to not; I'm restraining myself.

My office alone had nearly 200 open cases—200 cases—not 200 people; 200 cases in my congressional District alone. And as I talk to my constituents—or I'm sorry—my colleagues, they were having similar numbers. So, this fantasy that we did not know that there was U.S. citizens over there, or where they were or what they were doing, is a complete fallacy. The State Department should have been talking to us, and they were not.

The other story I have on that is about one of those citizens. He was an interpreter with the Army. He was able to escape Afghanistan. He's a U.S. citizen now. He is here in the states. His wife was not as fortunate. Her first two attempts at entering HKIA, she was beaten almost to death by the Taliban.

Now, there was a little problem. The U.S. Embassy had her passport and had all of her information. Guess what they did? They destroyed it all. They destroyed it all on the retrograde.

So, they printed off—she had to print off a letter that she could then show. Guess what that letter proved to the Taliban? Where she was going.

And so, after the second beating, she left. We were getting, literally, phone calls into the office. Beatrice in my office was, literally, talking to her in the middle of the night.

The third time she went was when the explosion at Abbey Gate happened. Fortunately for her, she was not one of those 170 Afghans that were killed. And fortunately for my constituent Jose, he wasn't one of the 13 Americans who was killed.

We welcomed her home to the United States this past weekend—finally. If that is not an indication of a broken, broken policy and broken system, I do not know what it is. I know she's dealing with literal physical and psychological scars that this government has put on her.

Very quickly, General McKenzie, what information about American citizens did the United States pass to the Taliban?

General MCKENZIE. Very limited information, and you would really need to talk to State because they were the agency that did it. But it was designed to get them through, typically, in convoys into the compound. But you would need to go to the Department of State to get a good understanding—

Mr. HUIZENG. Are you aware of those claims, even by some State Department employees, that the Taliban was beating up American citizens and others like my constituent and his wife who were green card holders?

General MCKENZIE. I'm aware of those claims.

Mr. HUIZENG. Are you aware of the claims that the Taliban beat up or even killed Afghan allies outside the gates of HKIA?

General MCKENZIE. Yes. I am.

Mr. HUIZENG. Mr. Chairman, we had the sniper who had the bomber in his sights here in front of our committee before, and that was run up the chain of command. And he was denied the ability to take that sniper out. That's a breakdown. And I believe that the security control of Kabul contributed to this violence.

I know my time is up, and I've got a few other questions that I'm going to put in writing through the chairman.

Mr. HUIZENG. But, at the end of the day, this is a shameful situation all the way around.

I appreciate your willingness to work with these families and meet and talk with them now, but we must have accountability. We must.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chairman McCAUL. The gentleman yields.

The chair recognizes Mr. Keating.

Mr. KEATING. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And Gold Star Families here, as a Gold Star Family—my uncle being killed in action—thank you for being here. Condolences on your loss and gratitude, eternal gratitude, for the great sacrifice and courage of those we loved.

When I was first elected, I visited our troops right away in Iraq, then, in Iraq. And I came upon a marine and I asked him, you know, in conversation, what his opinion was of the war at that stage. And he looked at me and told me one of the most important lessons I learned. He said, "Well, sir, I'm here to serve. Those kind of decisions and those questions you're asking, well, those are yours. Those are political decisions."

And I think what we have this morning, in effect, is a little bit of the replay of that conversation. We're asking two generals, that I deeply respect and thank for their service, to comment on political decisions thrust on them. And much of what we have should be turned around. We should be out there and maybe they should be up here asking the questions. But, nevertheless, it's where we are.

I just want to comment on one title of this hearing. And that's the fact that the last section of that is the Taliban takeover. This is like a sequence that's there that I just want to correct.

Not one decision led to the Taliban takeover. And many of the decisions we had here, clearly, would not have resulted in the Taliban not taking over. Is that correct, General Milley?

General MILLEY. I think, as I mentioned several times already, there's a series of strategic decisions that set the conditions, and those decisions are made over the course, frankly, of 20 years. And then, of course, those series of decisions at the end that impacted this very specific withdrawal and NEO, yes, it's the cumulative effect of multiple decisions.

Mr. KEATING. I could not agree more and that's the way we should view this, although I think there was a linchpin to today's testimony that helped underscore something, too, as we're looking at things. And that's when General McKenzie was talking about the fact that keeping 2500 more troops at Bagram Air Force Base could have been helpful, assuming—assuming—the Afghans stay in the fight.

And one of those key decisions, frankly, that got us to where we were at the end of this was the decisions that surrounded the Doha Agreement in that sense.

Now, General Milley, I mean, I think one of the critical things was excluding the Afghans from those discussions. Could you comment on that?

General MILLEY. Well, I mean, it's a historical fact that the Doha Agreement was made between the United States and the Taliban. It was a bilateral agreement. The intent was—and you would get a better answer out of Ambassador Khalilzad or Secretary of State Pompeo—but I think the intent there was for that to occur, the U.S.-Taliban negotiation, in order to set the framework for an Afghan-to-Afghan negotiation. And the Afghan-to-Afghan negotiation never happened. And there was supposed to be a reduction in violence, and then, a cease-fire, and then, an Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations.

Mr. KEATING. And former Ambassador John Bass said our main policy efforts did not reinforce each other. They were contradictory. There were contradictory signals amplified by President Trump's periodic statements supporting rapid force reductions. And taken all together, they undermined the Afghans' confidence in the U.S. security. I mean, that was a critical point as well.

But we could point to so many critical points in this whole process. This is 20-year lookback, which we should. We're looking back to learn lessons. This is a 20-year lookback, you know, four different Administrations, two Republican, two Democrat, two decades.

These are decisions that culminated in the final occurrences that occurred, and that's the way they should be viewed. We can dissect them. We can go back in classified after this and learn more in detail. But we're going to learn this: that we're working for the one thing I think any family member would want, so that no other American family has to go through what they went through. It's important to look back at the past, but it's important to look for the present.

Here's my final point: I cannot sit here on March 19th knowing what's going on in Ukraine now, knowing that we have an Article 5 responsibility, and that Putin has put in his sights NATO countries as the next target after he gets through with Afghanistan—with Ukraine, rather.

So, I just ask everyone here on this side, the political side, when we have the supplemental ready to give support to the Ukraine government, we must act on it now because failure to do that will jeopardize in the future the lives of other brave American men and women who are there under a treaty of Article 5 to defend our word in this world and defend democracy in Europe, the same democracy that my uncle died for.

So, I hope and just implore everyone here, put the bill on the floor for a vote. The present is important; the future is important, and saving the lives of courageous young American men and women is important.

I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. I agree with that assessment.

The chair recognizes Mrs. Radewagen.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley and/or General McKenzie, in April 2021, President Biden announced his decision to draw troops down to zero. What was your assessment of the threat environment in Afghanistan at that time?

General MCKENZIE. My opinion then, and my opinion now, was that, if we go down to zero, you're going to see a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan military. It would be difficult for them to sustain themselves because they were not prepared to stand alone.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Did you advise against any part of the withdrawal as announced? And if so, what concerns did you have and to whom did you raise them?

General MCKENZIE. Ultimately, I participated in meetings at the very highest level where I expressed the opinion I've just stated to you and it was heard. So, I do not want to go into specific discussions with the President, but I had the opportunity to express my opinion at length, and I did so.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. In September 2021, you testified before the House Armed Services Committee that going below 2500 was the other sort of "nail in the coffin." Did you hold this belief in April 2021 and did you provide this assessment to the President or anyone else in the Administration?

General MCKENZIE. So, my assessments are, typically, provided to the Secretary of Defense, and he forwards them on as he wishes. And I've had the opportunity to be in higher-level meetings and I've expressed my opinions in those meetings. But, generally speaking, my assessments go up through the Secretary, and he's the agent that carries them over to the interagency process.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Did your military leaders on the ground in Afghanistan raise any concerns to you about the withdrawal? If so, what were their concerns?

General MCKENZIE. Well, sure. General Miller, a four-star commander in Afghanistan, his position on this issue mirrored mine, and the concerns that I've just articulated to you were those that were completely shared by Scott Miller. And, in fact, many of my positions were developed from his initial analysis because he was the commander on the ground.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. What was your assessment of the strength and movements of the Taliban at the time?

General MCKENZIE. So, I think the Taliban, after Doha, the Taliban benefited from the fact that we were striking them much less frequency 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 considerably, 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 did not get the word.

On the other hand, their attacks against Afghan forces increased in ferocity and did not 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.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Do you believe the State Department was on the same page as the U.S. military in April 2021?

General MCKENZIE. I'm just trying to—let me think about that for a minute.

And I would say, I think that the intent of the Department of State was to maintain a diplomatic platform in Afghanistan, even after we withdrew our military forces. I did not believe that was a feasible action, in that I did not think that the government of Afghanistan would be around to be the partner for our diplomats, once we removed our military capability. It was a divergence of opinion, and that divergence of opinion lasted until August, when we actually began to withdraw our embassy.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Well, what was your assessment of the State Department's planning during the retrograde and in the lead-up to the noncombatant evacuation operation?

General MCKENZIE. So, I felt they were moving at a slower pace compared to us. We felt the immediacy of the problem. I felt that State was, just for a variety of reasons, not moving quickly. And I felt strongly enough, so that mid-July I took my concerns formally to the Secretary of Defense and outlined them.

And I felt it ranged everything from the number of potential consular officers that we could use to process visas to what we might or might not do for "lily pads" across the region, if we had to pull people out, to detailed plans from the embassy itself—a variety of things that concerned me, and also, particularly, the requirement for closer collaboration with the embassy and our State Department partners, as the situation on the ground began to get worse and began, in fact, to accelerate.

Mrs. RADEWAGEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields—or the gentlelady yields.

The chair recognizes Mr. Davidson.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Thank you, Chairman.

I thank you, Generals, for your presence here today. Hopefully, it provides us guidance in how to take as many lessons learned as we can from this horrible and largely preventable disaster in Afghanistan.

So far, this Administration, the Biden Administration, has presided over the evacuation of an 11 embassies. I think that is a record.

General McKenzie, you highlighted that the State Department makes the decision on when we need a noncombatant evacuation operation. So, there is a civil-military interaction there. The State Department makes the call; it's their decision, but where does the responsibility for execution become the military's?

General MCKENZIE. Well, ultimately, in a NEO, the Ambassador in country is the ultimate representative of the Government of the United States for the execution of the NEO. That's policy. That's actually what we follow.

Now, we support them. It's our responsibility to get the aircraft together, get the security together, do all the things that have to happen. But the ultimate decisionmaking authority on when we come out and who comes out, and how we come out, even to some degree, is a Department of State responsibility.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Yes. So, a long time ago when I served in the Ranger Regiment, we trained noncombatant evacuation and never had the experience of executing one of those. And it seemed inconceivable to me that the State Department would ever make the decision that let's get the military out, and then, count on some path afterwards for some of the civilians to get out. How did that decision evolve, that we were going to get the military out, knowing that there were still American citizens behind?

General MCKENZIE. So, it was my opinion then, and my opinion now, that that particular decision was the fatal flaw that created what happened in August. The alternative was, of course, as we began to draw down in mid-April, to begin to bring our embassy, our citizens out—

Mr. DAVIDSON. Even in August, when the decision was unwinding and Joe Biden had foolishly picked a date—certain, instead of a condition certain on the ground, no matter what, hell or high water, we're getting out on August 31st, you knew that you were going to leave American citizens behind. But, as that date approached, was it really still the State Department that said, "No, we're going to stay here. We're going to get the civilians out some other way, but the military has got to go."?

General MCKENZIE. Absolutely.

Mr. DAVIDSON. So, that's the State Department's decision. So, that's a Foreign Affairs decision here in Congress. So, we need to provide some accountability for them. And that's part of the goal of this hearing.

One of the other problems that the State Department had for the whole execution on this war on terror has been rules of engagement. So, could you explain the role of the State Department in working with the Department of Defense on rules of engagement?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. At my level, the combatant commander level, I had no input from the Department of State on my rules of engagement. My rules of engagement came from the Chairman, the standard CJCS ROE, and existed solely within the Department of Defense. So, there was never a crimp or a pressure on the rules of engagement that we gave the force in Afghanistan or Iraq, or any-

where else in the Central Command theater, as a result of the Department of State.

Mr. DAVIDSON. So, that wasn't the State Department then?

General MCKENZIE. It was not.

Mr. DAVIDSON. So, how did it break down—

General MCKENZIE. It was—

Mr. DAVIDSON. How did it break down? So, between the time the rules of engagement that, apparently, you all felt no need to change, must be working well, how did it break down that Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews could not get a commander to make a decision? I mean, frankly, it seems like the sniper should have been trusted with the decision, maybe a call to a two-leader company commander. But even up at the battalion commander, he could not get somebody to make a decision. What was broken?

General MCKENZIE. That's a tactical question at a very low level. I do not know the exact details of that, but I can tell you this: the first principle of any rules of engagement is, if you see or if you feel a threat, if it's intent or in action, you always have the right to defend yourself.

Mr. DAVIDSON. Over the years, the big problem was that you held the junior enlisted guys accountable for a lot, and the officers and civilians accountable for almost nothing. Now, I admit, every now and then, a general got fired and they put a different one in, but they did not go to jail. They did not lose everything. They just left Afghanistan. That's not how the junior enlisted guys were treated. So, do you really think that they felt empowered to make those decisions?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I can only say that, in the defense of HKIA, we employed these rules of engagement three times with lethal effect under conditions exactly as we're discussing. So, yes, I—

Mr. DAVIDSON. A lot of that sounds like you're blaming the guys on the ground for not making a decision. I really do not think that's what happened. Personally, now I wasn't there, but I do think that crosses over into HASC, and we've got our divisions here in Congress on that.

But when I look at the civilian side, when I look at the Foreign Affairs, the public policy side, the side that, frankly, a lot of people here in this body are supposed to make, Congress is supposed to declare our wars under our Constitution. They do not, generally, get around to doing that.

But they also set a mission. They work with the National Command Authority to set missions. And for a long time in Afghanistan, we had something along the lines of as much as it takes, as long as it takes.

We had a previous witness that came in and he had written op-eds going all the way back to 2004, overseeing operations in Afghanistan.

General Milley, is that an acceptable mission statement for anyone wearing a uniform?

General MILLEY. No, of course no. There should be a defined end State and you should have the ways and means to achieve that end State. And you should understand the purpose of what you're

doing; the constraints and restraints, and should understand that end State.

And the end State in Afghanistan, starting in about 2011-ish, 2012, became a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban in a power-sharing agreement. That's how they—that's how the policy was.

Mr. DAVIDSON. And at the time, the question there, my application of that is to say that, when we decide that, I think we should expect a better mission statement. And we could serve everyone from—

General MILLEY. Well, I can say—

Mr. DAVIDSON [continuing]. The combatant commanders all the way down to Sergeant Vargas-Andrews on the ground—

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. DAVIDSON [continuing]. By providing clearly defined success. And that applies across the board, whether you are talking Afghanistan or Ukraine, or anywhere else.

I wish I had longer to talk with you all, and I look forward to reading your additional submissions and would be happy to collaborate in any way.

General MILLEY. If I could, Chairman, our mission is—and you know this well from being a Ranger, and I know many others in the room as well—our mission, the U.S. military mission statement was to prevent an attack on the United States of America from the territory of Afghanistan. That mission was accomplished for 20 consecutive years.

You accomplished your mission. Every soldier, sailor, airman, and marine accomplished their mission. This country was defended for two decades.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields.

The chair recognizes our Vietnam veteran, Mr. Baird.

Mr. BAIRD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate you holding this session.

And, you know, I want to add my condolences to the Gold Star Families. As the chairman mentioned, I did my time in Vietnam, and I can appreciate the sacrifice that those families and those soldiers made during that war.

And I also appreciate the Generals, General Milley and General McKenzie, for both of you being here and willing to talk to us and see if we can find some answers to help these Gold Star Families. And so, I really do appreciate that.

And, you know, I guess I want to go to the point of also mentioning that one of the 13 service members that were killed during that evacuation came from my district. And that was Corporal Sanchez. And so, I express my condolences to that family as well. In fact, I attended the funeral, and it's always unfortunate when we lose service members.

But I guess, more in that same vein, I want to change my focus a little bit to the fact that we left about \$7 billion worth of military equipment and weapons that was intended for the Afghan military. However, it was abundantly clear that, prior to the shutting down of Bagram Air Base, that the Administration knew that the Afghan army was destabilized and demoralized, and it was just a matter

of time until Afghans would fall, leaving these weapons in the hands of the Taliban.

So, last year, these weapons started to pop up in other conflicts, including the Kashmir region. And this was left, a war chest of weapons in the hands of a Pakistani-based military group that are designated by the United States as FTOs, Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

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?

General 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.

How much of that, those weapons, were throughout the whole country, I mean they were spread out all over the place. So, there was no specific indicator that I can recall that said this group of weapons is going to go over to the Taliban or anything.

We knew that the Afghan military had those weapons. Those were out there. These are weapons. These are night vision devices. These are wheeled vehicles, et cetera.

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.

So, when we gave in Vietnam, the war you fought in, when we gave equipment to the South Vietnamese Army, the ARVN, and the North Vietnamese overran South Vietnam, the Americans did not give that equipment to the North Vietnamese Army. That's the ARVN; that's the South Vietnamese Army doing that.

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.

And I do believe I think there's probably some reporting out there that indicates some of that equipment has been sold on black markets, et cetera. And I have zero doubt that some of that is in the hands of people who have nefarious objectives toward the United States.

Mr. BAIRD. I thank you, and my time is expired. So, I yield back. Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields.

The chair recognizes Mr. Waltz.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you for the witnesses for coming in.

I've got to tell you, Mr. Chairman, the more I listen to this hearing, the more infuriated I get. And I know the Gold Star Families sitting here have to feel the same way. I know every veteran watching today has to feel the same way—because it's not about us; it's about them.

And I think what upsets them most, General Milley and General McKenzie, are some of the statements from the President during this evacuation, including an interview that the President gave on national television during the withdrawal on August 18th saying, "The generals never advised me to leave 2500" and the only air base, Bagram Air Base, in the world sandwiched between China, Russia, Iran, and a platform to stay after counterterrorism.

General Milley, is that an accurate statement, that the generals never advised him to leave a stay-behind force to keep a lid on half the world's terrorist organizations?

General MILLEY. I will tell you what my thoughts were at the time, my assessment at the time—

Mr. WALTZ. Well, let me just—you testified today, you both testified repeatedly—

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. WALTZ [continuing]. That you advised the National Command Authority we should leave—

General MILLEY. Twenty-five hundred.

Mr. WALTZ [continuing]. A stay-behind force, including the base.

General MILLEY. Twenty-five hundred, plus NATO, plus Bagram—

Mr. WALTZ. That's right.

General MILLEY [continuing]. That's correct.

Mr. WALTZ. Did President Trump leave that stay-behind force, despite his stated desire to get everybody out, because the Taliban did not meet the conditions?

General MILLEY. When the Administrations changed hands, there were 2500 soldiers and that was—

Mr. WALTZ. Did you, then—and you've stated today you did not advise Biden to pull everybody out. You advised him to stay.

General MILLEY. That's correct.

Mr. WALTZ. So, that's an inaccurate statement.

But let's go down the list here. Let's go back to July 2021. President Biden, there's a likelihood—"the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely."

Does that comport with your knowledge at the time? In fact, you, just a few weeks later, said Kabul would be surrounded in 30 to 60 days.

General MILLEY. That's right. My assessment at the time was, if we went to zero in U.S. military forces, then there was a high likelihood of a collapse of the government of Afghanistan and the ANSF, with the Taliban taking over. And—

Mr. WALTZ. Would collapse?

General MILLEY. But I thought it was going to be—I, personally, thought it was going to be in the fall, somewhere around Thanksgiving. The assessments vary widely.

Mr. WALTZ. We're talking within months?

General MILLEY. Within months of our withdrawal—

Mr. WALTZ. Right.

General MILLEY [continuing]. That's correct.

Mr. WALTZ. That's the one: "There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy," an embassy "of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable" with Saigon.

I think this picture proves that not to be the case; fair enough. Joe Biden, July 8th, 2021.

The next one: "Americans should understand we're going to try to get it done before August 31st." And if you're an American, "If there's American citizens left, we're going to stay until we get them all out."

Was that your understanding of the operational planning at the time, to stay beyond August 31st? Or were you planning to get out by August 31st?

General MILLEY. We planned to get out by August 31st.

Mr. WALTZ. Last, but perhaps the most egregious, "we believe about 100 to 200 Americans remain in Afghanistan with some intention to leave."

You both testified today, you just testified, General Milley, that it was impossible to know the number. In fact, is that accurate? It was very difficult to know the number?

General MILLEY. Very difficult, and I do not think the numbers were accurate.

Mr. WALTZ. Yet, the State Department has revised that number since to nearly a thousand Americans left behind.

Look, in July 2021, Bagram is closing; we're withdrawing our four-star commander, General Milley; Ghani is visiting President Biden, practically begging us to at least leave our contractors and some little bit of air support.

General McKenzie, you've testified that you were so concerned in July 2021 that you put up recommendations, including lily pads to get our allies out; putting pieces in place to process our SIVs faster; putting measures in place to get our American citizens out, to get our allies out, and to take care of what American military should do, which is protecting all Americans. You were so concerned in July 2021, you put those recommendations forward? That's what you've testified today.

General MCKENZIE. That's correct.

Mr. WALTZ. And, in fact, also, the diplomats on the ground, Mr. Chairman, sent a dissent cable—23 diplomats saying, "If you continue down this road, disaster will ensue." Was that dissent cable shared with either of you? This is a formal channel going to the Secretary of State himself. Was that shared with you, as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs? Was that shared with you, as the commander?

General MCKENZIE. I've never seen it.

General MILLEY. I did not see it at the time and I haven't seen it since. And I would like to see that dissent—

Mr. WALTZ. I think the American people would like to see that, gentlemen.

But here's my question for you: do you know where the Secretary of State was on August 13th—

General MCKENZIE. I—

Mr. WALTZ [continuing]. The day before Kabul fell? Do you know where the Secretary of State was, despite all of your concerns that the State Department wasn't planning fast enough; we weren't getting our people out? According to The Washington Post, he was in the Hamptons. He was in the Hamptons on vacation, Secretary of State Blinken. I do not know, I cannot even imagine how that makes our Gold Star Families feel.

Here's the bottom line, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for your indulgence. I'll close with this.

The State Department, to use a military term, "had its head up its rear." It wasn't planning. It, in fact, thought we could just have an embassy and the good Taliban terrorists will take care of the bad Taliban terrorists. I mean, that's, essentially, what happened.

And because of that, we did not get our people out; we did not get our citizens out. We did not have the force posture. We did not have the basing. We failed, and their loved ones are dead because of it.

I apologize to you, to my Gold Star Families. Your government failed you.

There is a difference, gentlemen—and I know you both know this—in taking responsibility and accountability. A lot of people have taken responsibility; no one has been held accountable. And they deserve better.

Your government failed you.

And I will give you an opportunity in my time remaining, Mr. Chairman, if there's anything you all would like to say publicly on the record.

Chairman MCCAUL. I will give the witnesses time to respond. But your time has expired.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentlemen, they have a right to respond.

General MILLEY. Well, I'd like to take you up on that offer. I've talked to these families.

Mr. WALTZ. And I thank you for that.

General MILLEY. I've met the other families. And I have committed to them—and I will do so again publicly to all of you—that I will work with them to get you the answers, to make sure that accountability and transparency is established. And I'm going to do that until the day I go in the grave. That's what a soldier does. And I'm not going to turn my back on these families or any other Gold Star Families.

There are other Gold Star Families in this room right now. Jane Horton is in this room. I've been working with her for years. There's many others, and they know who I am, and I will work with them forever.

Mr. WALTZ. They deserve accountability, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General Milley.

Chairman MCCAUL. I agree 100 percent.

The chair recognizes Mr. Kean.

Mr. KEAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank our witnesses for their service to our country and recognize the Gold Star Families who are joining us today.

General Milley and General McKenzie, you have mentioned today with some frequency about the impact and lack of coordina-

tion regarding the withdrawal of U.S. troops and its impact on U.S. contractors, advisors, and logistics. What impact did that have on the Afghan military?

General MCKENZIE. The pulling out of contractors and advisors had a profound effect on the Afghan military's ability to operate. General Milley has already talked about, when we came off the kandaks, to use a term of art, when we lost our ability to see down the combat formations back in the summer of 2020, that was a major blow.

But, then, when we made the decision to go from 2500 to zero, you're bringing out all your people that actually make sure the Afghan logistics systems work. Let me give you an example very briefly.

So, before we went below 2500, if a box of mortar rounds went into Afghanistan—you're dropping them around at HKIA or maybe Bagram—there would be a contractor there. You would tag it. You would have visibility on it as it went down through the Afghan system to get to the kandak it was going to.

Once you pull out that capability, you drop the mortar rounds off on the ramp and you have no idea where those things go—no idea at all. They could be going directly to the bazaar. They could be going to the Taliban. You just do not see it. So, that capability is gone.

But more perniciously perhaps is what it meant to Afghan aviation, the one sort of asymmetric advantage that they had. So, we wanted to keep our contractors in there as long as we could, but they had to come out. We tried desperately to come up with schemes to help them. We looked at long-distance tele-video maintenance, which has been tried by airlines in the United States—with indifferent success in a technically literate population. So, we knew we were swimming upstream with this.

It's difficult for me to overestimate the negative, synergistic, pernicious effect drawing down these capabilities had on the Afghan military.

Mr. KEAN. Yes, that was obvious for people to estimate in advance, and it was, obviously, what happened on the ground.

General MCKENZIE. And this was foreseeable. This was not a surprise.

Mr. KEAN. Yes. And so, did the United States ever come up with a plan to properly make up for the loss of these key capabilities?

General MCKENZIE. We tried what I call heroic measures. We had a forward, over-the-horizon, you know, security cooperation office in one of the Gulf countries. But it just does not work. You cannot—you have to be there. You've got to be with your partners. And the degree to which you're not with your partners, it does not mean you're fighting for them; you're not doing that. What you're helping them do is manage complex logistics systems and ensuring that graft and corruption isn't overwhelming.

Once you pull that all off and you lose that visibility, you lose the ability to help them as well. And so, that was—a significant factor in the collapse of the Afghan military in 2021.

Mr. KEAN. And was there any long-term planning for how the United States would be able to continue its work as long-time allies of the Afghan military at all?

General MCKENZIE. We did, but, again, you know, so you work under the conditions that you're given to operate——

Mr. KEAN. Yes.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Which is there's not going to be anybody on the ground. Ideally, in a perfect world, there would be 650 U.S. forces guarding the embassy and a handful of people in the embassy that might be able to do some limited, limited form of security cooperation, but nothing at the ministerial level even, and certainly nothing at the core or the formation levels that's there. So, it's really very hard to see a way forward.

Mr. KEAN. Was President Biden ever informed that the U.S. military hadn't yet figured out how to provide logistics and maintenance support for the Afghan military?

General MCKENZIE. That's a question I cannot answer. I just do not know the answer to that.

Mr. KEAN. General?

General MILLEY. Yes, I think there were plans presented. They certainly weren't optimal, as Frank just pointed out, but he was witting of the contractors coming down and the potential impacts, and the mitigations, the over-the-horizon mitigations and remote maintenance, et cetera. But I think everybody recognizes the general consensus that nothing is going to replace the contractors on the ground.

You're looking at about, if my numbers are correct from my head, I want to say about 20,000 or so over the summer of 2020. That comes down to about 10 maybe into 2021, and then, you start glide-pathing into maybe eight or nine. But there's still a significant contractor capability there until we come out in July, in the first or second weeks of July. And that's when it, basically, goes to zero.

And the contractors aren't going to stay unless there's American military forces to protect them. And these were DOD contractors, U.S. persons, right, and then, there's contractors from Europe, and then, there's contractors that are local. So, the number, the contracting piece is a really significant factor to the collapse of the ANSF, in my view.

Mr. KEAN. Given the amount of time that has passed since the American withdrawal, in retrospect, are there any actions that you wish that you would have taken that may have prevented this catastrophe?

General MILLEY. I think, for me, the biggest thing is to synchronize the withdrawal of the U.S. military with the State Department. And I'm an advisor, not a commander sort of thing, and it's to—I mean, we said it over and over and over again. There's probably other things, I guess, that could have been done. That's my biggest regret, as I go back through all these meetings, et cetera, on that whole issue of the State Department coming out with the military in July really. That's what we were looking at.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired.

The chair recognizes the gentleman——

Mr. KEAN. Thank you. I yield back my time.

Chairman MCCAUL [continuing]. From Texas, Mr. Self.

I apologize. Mr. McCormick from Georgia.

Mr. MCCORMICK. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Congratulations to both generals for your retirement. Hopefully, you're enjoying that somewhat.

And congratulations to Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews for his retirement. Hopefully, you're enjoying it as well. Thank you for being here today.

Listening very intently to your testimoneys today, gentlemen, when you and I were together last time at the HASC brief, we went back and we talked about some of the things that happened to create the collapse and kind of the predictability about it.

I thought it was interesting that General McKenzie talked about knowing that this was going to be a total collapse of the government pretty early on, when you could see how this, the withdrawal was working rapidly against us.

The interesting thing you talked about, we sustained the mission. You very clearly stated just a second ago it was to make sure that forces were not being trained and deployed from Afghanistan to harm Americans, and it was successful for 20 years.

I would agree. When I was there in 2016, there were very few American casualties. It was a relatively peaceful place. I mean, the Afghans were still paying the price. There as a lot of violence. But they weren't training bad guys.

But after spending \$2 trillion, 20 years, 2,462 lives, 20,700-plus casualties, plus the years away we all spent away from our families, we, then, lost it during the withdrawal. And now, how many billions of dollars were left behind for them during that withdrawal? How many billions, gentlemen? \$7.2 billion left behind for the enemies to use.

And how many training bases are over there now training enemy combatants against the United States? How many bases, approximately?

General MILLEY. That I do not know. It would be an intelligence question for the intelligence community.

Mr. MCCORMICK. So, the unclassified brief is 27. So, \$7.2 billion worth of military gear, some of it brand-new, and 27 bases to train enemy combatants now. So, I'd say we failed our mission.

And we had already paid the price. That's what irks me, is my friends that are no longer able to come home; my friends who have lost lives and limbs and time away from their family; the money that we spent; the time we invested—just to give it back to an enemy that now we're not fulfilling the mission we set out to do.

And we did fail—miserably, in my opinion, especially on that 1 day, the withdrawal. To hammer that home, the example that we had, which Sergeant Vargas-Andrews so succinctly said during his testimony, is that he testified before about the Kabul airport bombing. And in his testimony, he informed the committee that his team was tracking a suspected terrorist who aligned exactly with descriptions given by intel, who is believed to be the Abbey Gate bomber.

He further testified that, after being denied initial permission to engage the suspect, he elevated the issue to his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Brad Whited. According to Vargas-Andrews, when asked if they had permission to kill the suspect, the Lieutenant Colonel said, "I do not know." He's now a colonel.

I do not understand where we have gone wrong, that we do not have a mission statement that allows a lieutenant colonel in charge of very capable people to make decisions that would have saved lives and limbs, and then, they get promoted for it.

I do not understand where accountability went, not only in our mission, but our withdrawal, and even a mission statement for that very day. Can we speak to that, please? Because if we do not have accountability, then why are we here? Because if we did not learn our lessons from what we did wrong, why are we here? And if we're not answering to the people who lost lives and limbs, why are we here?

General MILLEY. I can speak to the rules of engagement piece. General McKenzie has already spoke to the standard rules of engagement that you're familiar with, and that Cory Mills is familiar with and former Colonel Self, and everyone, Colonel Waltz, et cetera.

It's positive ID, hostile act, hostile intent. You pull the trigger. You do not have to ask permission of anyone. Every single soldier, sailor, airman, marine, ship's captain, or fighter pilot has the right to self-defense.

And if you perceive, if it's your understanding in that moment in time—whether it's Afghanistan or anywhere else, by the way, except the continental United States—if you perceive those conditions to exist, then you are fully empowered by law to use lethal force, if necessary.

Now, having said that, I cannot speak—and I do not actually know the specifics—

Mr. MCCORMICK. Well, so you do not know, but here is a funny thing, sir, is that neither did the lieutenant colonel, "I do not know." And I will say that, if I was on—and I'll finish my piece, sir.

General MILLEY. Congressman, I know the rules of engagement.

Mr. MCCORMICK. So do I. I just—

General MILLEY. I do not know the specific incident that—

Mr. MCCORMICK. Well, let me tell you. I'm telling you what the testimony was.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mr. MCCORMICK. And here's what the problem is: in our litigious society, where I've seen soldiers and sailors and marines get in trouble for making the wrong decision.

General MILLEY. That's right.

Mr. MCCORMICK. When they ask their commander officer, they expect a clear answer, not "I do not know," that cost people lives and limbs.

And I'll yield with that. Thank you.

General MILLEY. But my guess is that Congressman Waltz, when he was there, my guess is that perhaps then-Sergeant Mills or others that are on this committee engaged the enemy with lethal force and were not asking permission.

I do not know the specifics of that particular case, but I know the rules of engagement are clear, and they're trained. And I would have to personally interact with Sergeant Vargas, which I have not done yet, and I want to, or Colonel Whited, I think his name is,

or the company commanders, et cetera, to find out what did break down. Obviously, something broke down.

If Sergeant Vargas had a positive ID on a known enemy target, and that enemy target was hostile act or hostile intent, the rules of engagement allowed it.

Chairman McCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Self is recognized.

Mr. SELF. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here and your testimony.

General McKenzie, before I go there, I was going to ask the question on the ROE. Because we've had several conversations, and I will still unsure as to who had the ultimate authority. Thank you for that answer.

One has to wonder, though, if he had taken the shot—in ROE, in my experience, my 25 years, deployments on four continents, it is absolutely crucial. If he had taken the shot in today's military, one has to wonder what would have happened to our young sergeant.

But, General McKenzie, my question to you: on August the 26th, you had a press briefing, and I'm trying to sort through the dates here, exactly what your intent was. You said that you had a common purpose with the Taliban in the evacuation. That was on the 26th.

Now, you've testified here today that you were also telling people that we had to get out by the 31st, or we were going to be fighting the Taliban. Can you just walk me through? That was 5 days later, you thought we would be fighting the Taliban. From a "common purpose" on the 26th to full-scale combat on the 31st, I'm trying to—what was your intent—

General MCKENZIE. Sure.

Mr. SELF [continuing]. Between those 5 days?

General MCKENZIE. Certainly. Let me just briefly talk to the ROE question for a moment. So, between 16 and 26 August, three teams did take lethal shots through this ROE. And nothing happened to the individuals that took the shots. So, let's be very clear when we talk about this.

Mr. SELF. Thank you.

General MCKENZIE. Three people applied the ROE with success and with lethal effect.

We had an agreement with the Taliban we were going to be gone by the 31st of August.

Mr. SELF. Mm-hmm.

General MCKENZIE. That was we negotiated that at a very high level. That was not a military decision, but it was, rather, a policy decision by the President we were going to be out of Afghanistan.

And it was clear, based on voluminous intelligence reports, that if we remained beyond the 31st, not only would we be fighting ISIS-K, but we would be fighting the Taliban as well. That was very clear in the intelligence reporting that we were seeing.

When I talked to the Taliban in Doha and in the days afterwards, it was clear they wanted us to leave. We wanted to leave. Those were the orders we had, to get out. So, we did have a common purpose and that common purpose was leaving Afghanistan.

The noncombatant evacuation operation, by definition, is an operation where you're leaving.

Yes, we shared a common purpose. But I do not trust the Taliban. I do not like the Taliban. It's a highly transactional agreement, but it was designed to let us get out.

And I will tell you that we certainly did not outsource our security to the Taliban, but I am confident that we would have had more Abbey Gate attacks, had we not negotiated these limited agreements with the Taliban for some of the external that they provided.

Mr. SELF. Yes, I was going to ask the two of you your assessment of the Taliban. Because most people just refer to it as "Doha," but I always want to bring to people's attention the formal name of what we refer to as "Doha": the 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. That's the formal name of this agreement. I have a copy here and I have been following your testimony closely, as you have done it.

I used the term "naive" with the Ambassador Khalilzad, when he testified before this committee just several weeks ago. I think the entire agreement was naive. I think it was poorly negotiated, and I think the two of you, along with General Miller and others, were put in a horrible position by that agreement.

I have heard the words here from the other side of the aisle "highly partisan hearing." I will tell you I agree with several of my colleagues here that have said we are still paying the price for that go-to-zero decision. We are still paying the price around the world.

Putin started moving troops within 2 months. We now see the Red Sea in its current condition; Gaza, Hezbollah standing ready.

I will tell you what I think, and I'm going to—I think what we engaged in, General Milley, was not so much defending our Nation—because I believe the mission of the United States military is to go and break things when our national interest requires it.

Twenty years there, we should have said, "We're leaving. If you do it again, we'll come whomp you again. We'll break things in the interest of the United States again."

And my last point is I'm glad that one of you mentioned the sanctuary, because that was our fatal mistake in Vietnam, the sanctuary across the border in Laos and Cambodia. And it proved a fatal error in Afghanistan and Iraq as well. There was a sanctuary, an across-the-border sanctuary.

Last question, real quickly, Qatar is now playing a part both in Afghanistan, getting our folks out of Afghanistan, and in Gaza. Was Qatar a part of any of your discussions before this? Did it play a part?

General MCKENZIE. It was principally where we went to negotiate with the Taliban. It's where they hosted them. They did not have a significant effect beyond that.

I will say, as we left, they began to flow—they flew people back into Afghanistan. Qatar does a number of things across the region, as you are aware.

Mr. SELF. Right.

General MCKENZIE. They walk a—they walk a very tight, thinly defined line between a number of competing interests. And they were certainly active in that at the very end of the Afghan engagement.

Mr. SELF. I do not think the line is as fine as you make it. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time is expired. The chair recognizes Mr. Hill.

Mr. HILL. Gentlemen, thank you for voluntarily coming before the committee, and we are grateful for your 86 years of combined service in uniform to this country, the country that you love.

And to our Gold Star Families, we are here for you. We are here to conduct oversight in your name to get to the bottom of this disastrous outcome, after two decades in Afghanistan.

And for me, it is a source of great disappointment because I do think our Nation is less safe the way we exited, because of the precedent that set and the signal it sends to our adversaries around the world. And I think it was a mistake by the President to exit in his method, also, as it relates to our ability to support our allies in that region.

General McKenzie, I was really struck with your opening comments. And this follows the lines of Congressman Sherman's questioning about playing a little bit of the game between the Trump Administration and the Biden Administration. But you made a very good point in your opening comments.

You said that you briefed President Trump in June 2020 and that there had been a—I took it to be a DOD and State comprehensive exit. So, military exit, State Department exit, our strategic Afghan partners' exit, and then, obviously, American citizens' exit. Is that true that that took place in June 2020?

General MCKENZIE. The plan I briefed on 3 June 2020 to President Trump accommodated the number of people that were at the embassy. It accommodated the number of citizens that we knew were in Afghanistan and projected number of Afghan at-risk people. It was not a plan that was coordinated with the Department of State.

Mr. HILL. Right.

General MCKENZIE. But it did reflect the capacity to bring those elements out.

Mr. HILL. So, that got me considering the numbers from DOD's perspective, what it would take to accomplish those four goals.

General MCKENZIE. Right.

Mr. HILL. Good. So, then, subsequent to that, between June 2020 and the inauguration of President Biden, did State and DOD work to finetune a joint approach to accomplishing the goals of the June 2020 brief?

General MCKENZIE. No. Nothing substantive was done. They maintained a NEO plan that we've talked about before. We continued to refine our plan going forward to account for the reduced numbers.

Mr. HILL. Right. And, of course, General Milley just testified to that a few minutes ago, about his conversations with Secretary Esper—

General MCKENZIE. Right.

Mr. HILL [continuing]. And coming down to——

General MCKENZIE. That's correct.

Mr. HILL [continuing]. The Christmas, and then, January number on the military side.

So, that implies that, upon being sworn into office, that President Biden and his advisors took the decision to get out completely. When was the first time, General Milley, that you were told that the President had taken the decision that we are going to exit completely—from a planning point of view, not the date you agreed to, but just from a planning point of view?

General MILLEY. Yes, that was—well, the announcement was on the 14th. If my memory serves me right, I think I was informed on maybe the 11th——

Mr. HILL. Right.

General MILLEY [continuing]. Something like that. But it's just prior.

Mr. HILL. So, upon that announcement, would you say that the Department of Defense and State began a coordinated effort to accomplish the goal, the goals of the June brief to President Trump? Or was there no effort to get, as you both talked about today numerous times, both departments—State having the preeminent role on exiting the Nation and DOD a supportive role?

General MILLEY. It was—it was a coordinated effort, coordinated interagency effort, led by the National Security Council. And we did what's called a TTX or a ROC drill, a rehearsal of concept drill on 8 May. And there were several of these type things. There was tons of coordination being done.

But the fundamental flaw, the fundamental principle was to—well, the decision was to leave a diplomatic presence, leave the embassy there. And that is leaving an embassy in a war zone, while simultaneously withdrawing your military forces. We strongly thought at the time that the embassy should come out and that it was not tenable to keep an embassy in a war zone. And so, we thought they should be coming out.

Mr. HILL. Yes. Thank you for that.

Let me switch subjects to the subject of equipment, equipment owned by the Afghan National Forces. At any time during that planning from the early Trump planning in June 2020 until spring of 2021, was there a contingency plan to, as you saw the situation could deteriorate, to also disable the fixed wing, rotary wing, or larger artillery pieces that belonged to the Afghan government?

General MILLEY. I'll let General McKenzie speak to the specifics. But, yes, we disabled as much equipment that we could prior to departing.

Mr. HILL. But U.S. equipment. I'm talking about the equipment belonging—you testified a few minutes ago the distinction between them.

General MILLEY. Oh, there was similar——

Mr. HILL. Also, the Afghan government?

General MILLEY. Oh, some of it, yes. I'll let Frank talk to the details of it.

General MCKENZIE. The Afghans were using that equipment. In order to allow them to use it, we did not disable it.

I would tell you, at places like HKIA, the airfield, where there was Afghan equipment there, after we established a perimeter, we did, in fact, destroy all that equipment. It will never be useful to anybody.

Mr. HILL. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields.

I just want to announce the White House and congressional leaders have agreed to grant 12,000 Special Immigrant Visas for Afghan nationals who assisted the United States. It will be the State Department foreign operations funding bill. I think those were certainly supported by me and the ranking member as well.

Mr. MEEKS. I just want to say thank you because it is something that we both support and we are working on that, what I was talking about.

Chairman MCCAUL. We cannot say, hey, we left them behind; we're not going to give them a visa to get out of there, right?

The chair recognizes Mr. Mills.

Mr. MILLS. Thank you.

Chairman MCCAUL. And thank you for your service getting Haitian Americans out of Haiti.

Mr. MILLS. Well, it is an honor to be able to do this, to be able to help Americans out of Haiti, as we did with the 255 that we got out of Israel, and as we did with the Americans out of Afghanistan. So, there is a pattern of abandonment that has existed throughout this Administration that I'm going to call attention to immediately.

I want to thank the Gold Star Families, who I consider to be friends at this point, and who we have had many longstanding conversations with.

And I can tell you, Steve, that many of us will be looking to get all charges dropped, which never should have been levied against you to begin with, for a grieving father who lost both of his sons, who, understandably, would be upset when there still has been no accountability.

Responsibility, people are seeing a lot of responsibility. "Oh, it's my fault." "It's my fault." "It's my fault." These same individuals are continuing to get promoted. These same individuals are continuing to serve. These are people who are allowed to serve after making critical errors that cost lives, but people who refused because of religious and medical exemptions are being purged out of our military, who are willing to serve. Think of the irony of this.

Now, I do want to thank both of you for your service.

I'm going to ask a series of rhetorical questions, but they are needed in an effort to try and base a context of my further questions.

Mr. Milley, can you tell me exactly kind of what your description of your job was, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

General MILLEY. I mean, it's codified in law the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is a senior military advisor. He's not in the chain of command. Military advisor to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council, and by extension, to Congress. And it is his job or her job, and it's to be the senior military advisor of a group of people called the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We are all the chiefs of the individual services.

You represent the Joint Chiefs and you represent their advice to the President and the Secretary of Defense. And if there's any dissenting advice, you give that as well.

Mr. MILLS. But, traditionally, you're——

General MILLEY. An advisor.

Mr. MILLS. Your role is advisory?

General MILLEY. It's an advisor. It's an advisor to——

Mr. MILLS. And, General McKenzie, your role, as Commander of CENTCOM, is actual ground force operation command, is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. Joint force operational command.

Mr. MILLS. Joint force operation command.

General MCKENZIE. I'm in the chain of command. I'm responsible for everything that goes——

Mr. MILLS. Which means, at the end of the day, whatever happens on the ground, the buck stops with you, correct?

General MCKENZIE. That's correct.

Mr. MILLS. So, I would like to ask a question because I understand the advisory role, and I think that General Milley has made it very clear, the direction in which he had advised, and it was very different than what this Administration has done. And I think that you have testified to the same.

But I do have some issue with some of the things that were said. I think that when you look at the Secretary of Defense, he has made comments before this committee to say there was no actionable or credible intelligence that was provided that could have led to the understanding of when the suicide bomber was going to do this.

However, I think you have all read the day-to-day intelligence reports, as I have, in a classified setting, that would speak very much to the difference of that, even to the extent and the clarity of saying, moving into this location or this city, planning has commenced; planning is finished; execution is imminent. And these are the day-to-day logs that we all saw, which will prove that there was credible intelligence that could have been rendered on that.

Not to mention the fact that there was in the State Department—who I put a tremendous amount of responsibility on, and have requested multiple times for Antony Blinken to go ahead and step down—the 23 dissent cables which warned early on what would occur in this.

Now, my only real severe issue that I have had as of late, General McKenzie, is that you have made multiple comments in the media and otherwise to the extent that a brave hero, in my opinion, who has sacrificed his limbs for this country, Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews, that his recollection of the events that took place on August 26th, to quote you, sir, “that he was not recalling this correctly.” And second, you said that you claimed there was no BOLO that would even meet the description.

Now this is the rhetorical part of this. Where were you on August 26th, sir?

General MCKENZIE. Tampa, Florida.

Mr. MILLS. Well, I can tell you where Sergeant Vargas-Andrews was, and he was sitting at the gate. And I would trust on-the-ground information far more than someone who is sitting 9, 10, 11

thousand miles away, who is potentially watching from ISR and potentially being briefed by the commanders on the ground. But his testimony, which has been corroborated, by the way, by multiple marines who have testified before this committee about the events that he has actually made comment and made clear actually did take place.

And we're fortunate enough, General McKenzie, that the gentleman who actually endured the most from this, who was on the ground—and ground truth matters, as we all know—is sitting right there. So, would you like the opportunity to tell Sergeant Vargas right there that he is not recalling the incidents that occurred on August 26th correctly; that he and his fellow marines are not actually the ones who said there was a BOLO of this description; that he is incorrect in his assessment, which is putting into question his integrity? Do you want to face him and tell him that before him now?

General MCKENZIE. I do not want to face him and tell him that. I want to say that the battlefield is a very complex place. There were a lot of threats that were flowing around out there that day. I honor his service. I regret he was injured.

Mr. MILLS. Have you spoke to him since then?

General MCKENZIE. I have not spoken to him since then.

Mr. MILLS. So, you, obviously, haven't honored him, nor has anyone else come to even question him about what took place, even after our committee a year ago. So, a lot of what——

General MCKENZIE. I have a lot of——

Mr. MILLS. Sir, I'm still talking.

General MCKENZIE. If he has some questions——

Mr. MILLS. Sir, General? The bottom line is that he deserved that respect, like these Gold Star Families deserve that respect. And to question his integrity, to question what took place on August 26th that he observed from his own eyes and sacrificed his limbs for; that you're unwilling to actually face him and actually tell him the same thing that you were willing to say to MSNBC and all the rest, which is that his recollection is incorrect, and that there was no such thing—it's shameful.

With that, I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields.

My understanding is the two generals have met with the families; that they are willing to meet with Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews.

And you deserve that, sir.

With that, the chair recognizes Mr. Lawler.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just to followup on my colleague's question here, General McKenzie, when did you retire?

General MCKENZIE. 1 April 2022.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. And, General Milley, when did you retire?

General MILLEY. I came out of my duty position on the night of the 30th of September, and I officially retired 1 November.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. And so, at any point between the disastrous withdrawal in Afghanistan and to today, have either of you spoken with Sergeant Vargas-Andrews?

General MILLEY. I have not personally spoken to Vargas. I want to—

General MCKENZIE. No, I have not.

General MILLEY. I want to speak to him—

General MCKENZIE. I have not.

General MILLEY [continuing]. But I have not, that's correct.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. He testified before this committee a year ago. Are you both aware of that?

General MILLEY. I am.

General MCKENZIE. I am.

Mr. LAWLER. Did you watch his testimony?

General MILLEY. I did.

General MCKENZIE. I did not.

Mr. LAWLER. Did you get a report on his testimony?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, I did.

Mr. LAWLER. And at no point did you feel the need to reach out to him or ask for a meeting, based on his testimony?

General MILLEY. For me, personally, that would be inappropriate, because while I was in uniform as the Chairman, there was an active investigation that was going on. Sergeant Vargas was part of that. And it would be very inappropriate for me to meet with any of the potential witnesses during an active investigation.

Mr. LAWLER. And from your standpoint?

General MCKENZIE. And the CENTCOM investigation has actually been reopened. So, that's still an active investigation. So, no, it would not—I would not have sought to—

Mr. LAWLER. OK. So, based on an active investigation, how are you going to meet with him today, if that's the standard?

General MILLEY. We're not on active duty anymore. So—

General MCKENZIE. That kind of investigation has been closed.

Mr. LAWLER. Right.

General MCKENZIE. It has not yet been briefed to the families, but that investigation is no longer active.

Mr. LAWLER. OK.

General MILLEY. So, we're—

Mr. LAWLER. So, as of today, you're both going to seek to meet with him?

General MILLEY. Yes. But, also, we're in different statuses now. So, we're no longer on active duty. He was the commander; I was the Chairman. And you do not want unlawful command influence on an active investigation. So, that's while in uniform. Now we're not in uniform and I want to meet with Sergeant Vargas.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. With respect to the decision by President Biden to announce September 11th as the deadline for full U.S. military withdrawal, was there any tactical or military reason for that date?

General MCKENZIE. Not that I'm aware of.

General MILLEY. Not that I know of.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. So, was it purely political and from the standpoint of a symbolic date, from your understanding?

General MILLEY. I'll be candid. I do not even know where or who made the decision of the 11th September thing. I, frankly, thought it was actually inappropriate at the moment in time, but it was very rapidly changed to the end of August.

Mr. LAWLER. And you were never involved in the decision to do that?

General MCKENZIE. No.

General MILLEY. Not to pick the date, no.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. General McKenzie, you said in your opening statement that you, and you alone, are responsible for the military operations that occurred during the withdrawal. Again, I ask, did you set the date for the withdrawal?

General MCKENZIE. No, I did not.

Mr. LAWLER. Did you make the decision to bring our troop level to zero?

General MCKENZIE. I did not.

Mr. LAWLER. President Biden is the Commander-in-Chief. Did he make those decisions?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, he did.

Mr. LAWLER. So, is it your position that he bears no responsibility for the aftermath; that you are the only one that bears the responsibility for the military operations?

General MCKENZIE. So, I was responsible for military operations. The Commander-in-Chief is responsible for those and all the other operations, to include those of the Department of State, all the other appropriate Cabinet agencies. But I—

Mr. LAWLER. But you report to the Commander-in-Chief?

General MCKENZIE. I do.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. So, at the end of the day, is he responsible for the decision to set the date and to set the troop level to zero?

General MCKENZIE. Yes.

Mr. LAWLER. So, he bears responsibility, not just you?

General MCKENZIE. That's correct.

Mr. LAWLER. OK. General Milley, you told the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, in September 2021, that one provision of the Doha Agreement the Taliban adhered to was the most important one, which was: do not attack us or the coalition forces. You said that the Taliban did not attack U.S. and coalition forces. Didn't the Taliban carry out at least some attacks against U.S. and coalition bases in 2021, including indirect fire attacks?

General MILLEY. There were, but the Taliban themselves, the senior leaders who were part of this negotiation, they would deny that. They would—the Taliban is a very amorphous organization. You know, you never can be certain if they have total control over their individual units with indirect fire. There were some attacks. The issue was a lethal attack. Really, that's the fundamental piece.

And there was also some specifics about no VBIEDs in the cities—

Mr. LAWLER. So, in other words, it depends on the definition of "it"?

General MILLEY. No, no, not at all.

Mr. LAWLER. I mean, what do you mean?

General MILLEY. So, it says no attacks on the—and I think Congressman Self has the agreement. I do not have it in front of me. But I think it says no attacks on U.S. or coalition forces.

I can tell you, in conversation with Zal Khalilzad, what you're talking about here is lethal attacks really. But, also, there's some specifics I believe—and I'm doing it from memory without a docu-

ment in front of me—about no VBIEDs in the cities; no mass casualty attacks, those sorts of things.

Now, the problem is they had figured to adhere to most of that. There were some attacks. They weren't lethal. But they did pick up the pace on attacks on Afghan Security Forces, and that's really significant. By my memory, I think we're looking at somewhere between 30 and 40 thousand attacks. It was like the peaking, the peak of attacks on Afghan Security Forces that had occurred in 2020 and 2021. It's a very significant amount of attacks on the Afghan Security Forces, leading, obviously, to the summer of 2021.

But the idea of not attacking coalition or U.S. forces, I would say, largely, that was adhered to by the Taliban.

Mr. LAWLER. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired.

The chair recognizes Mr. Moran.

Mr. MORAN. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Both gentlemen, thank you so much. Both of you gentlemen have made statements calling for transparency and understanding regarding the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and I agree with those statements.

I want to pause, also, at the beginning and recognize and thank the Gold Star Families that are here today in this room and convey my condolences for their loss, their deep loss of their loved ones.

I also want to recognize Sergeant Tyler Vargas-Andrews, who is here, and thank him for his dedicated service to this country as well, and for his testimony last year. It was very insightful.

But I want to come back to you guys. Thank you both for being here today and undertaking this pursuit of truth. That's what we are here to do. I know you have had a long day. We are just about done. Just a couple more of us left.

But the American people certainly deserve the truth, and the families who lost loved ones most certainly deserve it as well.

So, I want to ask both you guys a question I do not think anybody has asked today. And that is, generally, if you have advice for this committee, as we look forward into the future, as to how should we look toward additional transparency and accountability in this regard? What further witnesses should we interview, as a committee, to better understand what happened wrong with the Afghan engagement and withdrawal, and how can we do better next time? So, that is my first question to you, is: what additional witnesses does this committee need to engage with?

General MILLEY. Well, I mean, I'm not, obviously, in Congress for that. This role is in Congress and it is for you to get an accurate tactical picture of what occurs at HKIA at the time of the NEO, et cetera. It seems to me you would have to ask the tactical commanders. You would have to get them. You know, this is General Donahue. This is Admiral Vasely. This is General Sullivan.

But you're not the committee of oversight and jurisdiction on the military. That's the House Armed Services Committee. So, I do not know how you do that.

But if you're going to get an accurate picture, you're going to have to—obviously, you've interviewed with Sergeant Vargas and others. There's lots of people along the line that will need to be discussed.

The second thing is documents. And Chairman McCaul I think mentioned it upfront. There is a lot of documents. The vast majority of them are classified and many very highly classified.

And how that would work between, say, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, CIA, et cetera, and the various committees—but to get a full, comprehensive, holistic picture, you're going to have to get documents and all that. That's going to take a long time, and there's rules that govern all that. And I think you guys know those rules.

So, the documents and the witnesses. But the specific military witnesses, I think that would have to go—I do not know the rules 100 percent here, but I think that has to go over to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees—

Mr. MORAN. OK. Thank you.

General MILLEY [continuing]. Not this committee.

Mr. MORAN. General McKenzie, let me just ask you about after-action reviews. As you guys went through after-action reviews after the evacuation, who was involved? When did those first ones take place? When is the last one that you participated in that took place?

And excluding any kind of executive privilege discussions, would you talk about what were the top frustrations that were communicated during those after-action reviews, and maybe top two of the consensus positions—what we could have done better or what we should do differently next time?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. The after-action reviews begin pretty quickly after an operation is over, because you want to capture people's remembrances while they're still very strong and before they go on to do other things.

So, we had a series of those at every level. Every unit does it. Some of them come at CENTCOM's level. Some do not come to CENTCOM's level.

But if I were going to pick a couple of things that I think I would hit on, that would be, first of all, the requirement to absolutely be better integrated with the Department of State. And I think it has been a common theme today. We're only partially responsible for that, but I think that is a very key thing.

The second thing would be—and it's not a bad news story, but it's just a story that you need to continue to work on—is you need to understand your strategic lift requirements; what's going to be required to get out of some place; how you want to scope and scale that.

I think those are a couple of things that are absolutely very important as you take a look at it. If I were just going to pick two of those, those are probably the two I would look at first.

Mr. MORAN. And then, the last topic—yes, sir, General?

General MILLEY. OK. I would just offer one more thought there. One thing that you may take a look at is the law on lead Federal agencies with respect to noncombatant evacuation operations. Who has decision authority? An Ambassador or a combatant commander? The Department of State, Secretary of State, or the Secretary of Defense?

Right now, the law is Ambassador and Secretary of State, but that's something that might be taken a look at. Because command

and control, and the decision authority, and who is in charge matters. And when you make these calls matters.

So, I think that's something—I believe it's codified in law, actually, about the departments. I'm not positive about that, but I think it is.

Mr. MORAN. Quick question about chain of command. When the team on the ground was seeking authority to take out the prospective bomber and they saw somebody that matched the description, they were told, quote, "Leadership does not have engagement authority for us. Do not engage."

Did we ever figure out what happened in the chain of command there, so that the folks on the ground did not ever give the authority to engage with who might have been the bomber that day?

General MILLEY. I do not have personal knowledge of that. That's one of the reasons I want to talk personally to Sergeant Vargas.

Mr. MORAN. Yes.

General MILLEY. I do not have personal knowledge of that set of asks or denials. I know the rules of engagement and what it authorizes, but I do not have personal knowledge of those conversations back and forth.

Mr. MORAN. OK.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman's time has expired.

Let me clarify to the gentleman from Texas, we are working with the committee of jurisdiction over DOD—that is Armed Services—to get a document production, including the sniper photos that Tyler testified to that he handed over to the commanding officer and the command center. In my opening statement—that has yet to be produced. We expect that to be produced.

In addition, these two gentleman are at a very high level. The COs on the ground are Admiral Vasely and General Donahue, and we have requested through HASC as well that they testify before the Congress. We will vigorously pursue this, and if we have to do it with a joint hearing, which has been done before, of Armed Services and Foreign Affairs, that is our plan. And we are not going to give up on this until we get the answers.

Mr. MORAN. Thanks.

Chairman MCCAUL. And we do have a classified briefing, I want to say, after this. So, I want to get through this.

We have Mr. Burchett.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Like you, my father was a World War II veteran. Dad was a marine, and he told me the only thing generals ever gave him was a hard time. So, I fully expect to get that from you all.

[Laughter.]

Mr. BURCHETT. You do not need to write that down, but that's just—that's just me personally. This is for either one of you.

General MILLEY. My father was a Marine in World War II, and he said the same thing.

Mr. BURCHETT. Do what?

General MILLEY. That my father was a Marine in World War II with the 4th Marine Division and he said the same thing.

Mr. BURCHETT. Mine was in the 1st Marine Division. His colonel was Chesty Puller. So, thank you.

This is for either one of you all. The Taliban was in violation of the Doha Agreement. Why did we remove our troops?

General MILLEY. I think that's a question for policymakers, not for either of us.

Mr. BURCHETT. So, you all, I guess what I want to get at is you all weren't involved in the consultation of that?

General MILLEY. We absolutely were involved in the consultation and we pointed out repeatedly that the conditions were not being met.

Mr. BURCHETT. That is what I wanted to know.

Can you explain why the arbitrary deadline of August 31st was chosen as the date of removal from Afghanistan? And was the State Department or Department of Defense the ones that chose this date?

General MILLEY. Didn't choose the date, but I can tell you some of the logic and thinking that was going behind that.

So, the date of May 1st is the Doha Agreement.

Mr. BURCHETT. Right.

General MILLEY. This current Administration, the Biden Administration, comes into office on the 20th of January. And then, the first week in February—actually, I think the first meeting is either the 3d, 4th, or 5th, or something like that—but the first week in February is the beginning of a 10-week deliberation that was quite rigorous, actually—lots of meetings; lots of readouts, et cetera—by the National Security Council, to include the current President.

And then, the decision—well, the guidance to the State Department was to get additional time; work with the Taliban; postpone the 1 May. And I think the most that the State Department would get was, I think, whatever that is, 6 months I think it is.

So, that, then, bounds your problem. From time of decision, 14 April, we're not going to go with 1 May, and it takes you out X amount of days. I think it was—whatever that is—to the end of August, September. But that was—that was the backstop and that was because of negotiations between Zal Khalilzad and the Taliban as to how much he could push it to the right.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thirteen Americans, including my constituent, Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss, and 170 Afghanis were killed at Abbey Gate. Do you all consider this withdrawal a success?

General MILLEY. Well, as I said in my opening statement, and I've previous said in several previous testimoneys, I think the whole thing is a strategic failure. I've said that openly several different times.

But at the same time, I want it really clear that the United States military did its job, and the United States military did what was asked of it; and that anyone who served in Afghanistan, or any family of the fallen, or any of the wounded—every single one of them did their job, did what bravery and courage could ask of. They did it with professionalism. They did it with dignity. They did it with courage and they did it with compassion. So, I believe the United States military executed its mission, and I think that they did so with great professionalism.

Mr. BURCHETT. And my dad had another saying; I'm sure he stole it from somebody. But old men make decisions and young

men die. And that is apparent that is what happened here, and those old men being at the State Department.

Would it have been better to choose a measure of operational success other than a date, when deciding your all's date of withdrawal?

General MILLEY. I think one of the lessons, if you want to call it a lesson, I suppose, is do not put date-certain on things like this. Don't announce them and do not put date-certain. That's, basically, you lose whatever leverage you might have, if you were involved in some sort of negotiation.

Mr. BURCHETT. It seems to me that we have never learned that lesson. We always announce these dates, and then, whether it be Vietnam or some other debacle, it just seems to always end the same way.

General McKenzie, you are not getting enough air time. So, I want to ask you a question, if that's all right, brother.

What was CENTCOM's official assessment of the ties between the Taliban and other terrorist organizations? And do you agree in hindsight with those assessments?

General MCKENZIE. I think we had a pretty consistent assessment that the Taliban was opposed to ISIS. They had theological disputes, and the Taliban, given an opportunity, would push ISIS out of Afghanistan. And they tried to do that on a couple of occasions, but had limited success.

On the other hand, their ties with Al Qaeda were deep and profound, and there was no way, in my judgment, that they were ever going to separate from Al Qaeda. And so, those are the two major organizations that you see operating in the region.

ISIS, yes, given a choice, they would just as soon be rid of them. Al Qaeda, they are not going to take that action. Now today, ISIS-K probably is the more potent of the two threats, but it is difficult to project into the future.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right. I have run out of time, but I would just like to say to the families I hope you all find some peace in your life and hope the Lord blesses you all. And thank you for the sacrifice.

Momma lost her brother in the Second World War, and to the day she died, when they played that National Anthem, she teared up.

And I hope you have some real peace in your lives. So, thank you all.

Mr. Chairman, I apologize for going over.

Chairman MCCAUL. The gentleman yields.

The chair recognize Mr. Issa.

Mr. ISSA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, good to see you again, and General McKenzie.

I was looking over your long and distinguished careers. And what I noticed was you were both on active duty just before I left active duty. General Milley, you were promoted to first lieutenant in 18 months. I did not get that lucky and I wasn't that good.

You said something, General Milley, that I think was profound. In fairness to the United States military, there were no military mistakes while under military command in this case. And that brings a couple of questions.

First of all, both of you during the day have said we should see more; we should hear more, and so on. If I could point out something to see if you have seen it—they have distributed it to you. The question is, here is a public log that shows a vast amount of a video that I haven't seen; I have not been made aware of it. Some of it is redacted, but most of it, you can read what it says. And the timelines are pretty pronounced.

Do you believe that—I mean, obviously, that exists; this was a FOIA. Have you, either one of you, seen any of these videos and do you think we should see them on the committee as a whole?

General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I've probably seen most of these videos at one time or another. I should certainly see no reason why you shouldn't see them.

Mr. ISSA. OK. It will not surprise you we haven't. So, when this became aware—we became aware of it and I wanted to ask.

I want to point out 211 and 214, 217 and 223. General McKenzie, do you recognize those and are they of particular significance? Also, 212 and 213.

General MCKENZIE. I read the titles. I understand what they say. I just cannot associate them with a video.

Mr. ISSA. OK. Well, hopefully, we will see them.

General Milley, during your career rising through the ranks, I had four careers. One of them was here in Congress. So, I do want to correct one thing you said, which is very unusual for a nobody private or a captain to do, but we do have the jurisdiction. And you said it very well in your own statement, and I would like to point it out for the Gold Star Families that are here.

This committee could, all or in part, change the question of who is in charge, Title X, or not, in the case of an armed withdrawal. We could decide whether the chief of mission continues to be accountable to somebody back in Foggy Bottom, or whether you would have been in the direct chain going back to the Pentagon.

We could put primary responsibility on the amount of forces necessary in each and every—and, General McKenzie, you know your marines and what they do. You know how many more we have after Benghazi. You know what happened because of Benghazi, what General Amos did.

So, for the Gold Star Families, this committee does have at least most of the jurisdiction to decide whether or not a State Department that in our own investigation clearly made decisions that were counter to the safety of Americans there, counter to the safety of our allies, but not necessarily counter to their own safety, although, in fairness, the decision not to move the embassy, either out of the country or to the military base instead, certainly contributed.

So, General, both of you, Generals—and, look, I have nothing but respect for your service and for the tough situation you both found yourself in in this withdrawal. But I'm going to ask you to, basically, answer as much of a yes or no as you can.

If you had had the authority to determine the continued presence, would it have been dramatically different from a standpoint of safety of American personnel?

General MILLEY. Go ahead.

General MCKENZIE. I want to make sure I understand the question. You're talking—

Mr. ISSA. If you had been told that we were withdrawing—

General MCKENZIE. Right.

Mr. ISSA [continuing]. Would you have done it differently, as a military man, rather than the way it was done?

General MCKENZIE. I would have begun sooner.

Mr. ISSA. Would have begun sooner?

General MCKENZIE. Yes. That's probably the principal thing I would have done. I would have begun much sooner than when we actually did.

General MILLEY. And I would have the same. I would have brought the embassy and the State Department out with the military by the middle of July. That is what, if there was one thing I would do over—you do not get do-overs in this stuff, but if there was a do-over, that would be it. And that point was debated and discussed, and so on and so forth. But that is a yes, to answer that, that particular question.

Mr. ISSA. The last question, Mr. Chairman, if I may?

If you had been given the opportunity to determine that you wanted Afghanistan to stay free and independent of the Taliban, would that have been possible during your chairmanship?

General MILLEY. Well, I think that if you kept 2500 as your min force—and it wasn't just any 2500; this is a group of 2500 that were very, very highly talented, the Special Forces—I think that group of 2500, plus the NATO forces, plus the contractors, I believe to this day that the Afghan Security Forces and the Afghan government would not have collapsed.

But I also know, believe, and I believe it would have happened, is that the war with the Taliban would have reopened. And that could have possibly meant another increase in forces.

So, if your purpose, the political, strategic purpose made by policymakers is to withdraw, then the idea of keeping 2500—with the possibility of even increasing—it is, obviously, at cross-purposes.

Mr. ISSA. So, if I could surmise, or, you know, summarize what you said, if we had had the same attitude in Afghanistan that we have until today in South Korea, that, in fact, if there is an adverse combatant force that is unrelenting, you keep sufficient forces in order to prevent them from prevailing, even if it's more than half a century?

General MILLEY. Well, I think that, if your intent, your strategic intent, is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a platform for terrorism to strike the United States, and to do that, you've got a means—the government of Afghanistan and the Afghan Security Forces—and if you withdraw, they're going to collapse, then I think you either accept the risks of that collapse, and if you're going to do that and withdraw completely, then I agree 100 percent with what General McKenzie said earlier—you're going to have to withdraw quickly, fast. That includes your State Department folks. Or make a decision to stay. It's a binary choice there. There's not a lot of gray in between.

And I think that if you decide to stay, there's risks associated with that, and the likelihood that war again would start with the Taliban.

Mr. ISSA. And the marines, sir, would the marines confer with the Army in this case——

Mr. ISSA. The gentleman's time has expired.

And Mrs. Miller-Meeks is recognized.

Mr. ISSA. Oh, I did not realize. Thank you.

Chairman McCAUL. And we kept you in the 5-minute——

Mr. ISSA. I thought it was done. I thought it was——

Chairman McCAUL. OK.

Mr. ISSA. I thought it was the closing act, Chairman.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. I would like to thank Chairman McCaul for the opportunity to wave on this hearing today, and to our witnesses for testifying before the committee, and for the Gold Star Families that are here.

The reason I wanted to be here at this hearing is that I am a 24-year military veteran, Vietnam era veteran. My brother served in Vietnam. My husband is a 30-year Vietnam era veteran as well. My father was career Air Force. Six of his eight children served in our military.

The botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 was the single worst foreign policy disaster of the United States that has not been witnessed since the fall of Saigon. And I mentioned this at a Homeland Security hearing in June of that year.

This completely preventable catastrophe resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. service members, one of which including Corporal Daegan Page grew up in Red Oak, Iowa, and 170 Afghans.

When President Biden took control of the White House, the world was at peace and our enemies on guard. Since the disastrous withdrawal of Afghanistan showed our weaknesses on the world stage, Russia has invaded Ukraine; China has dramatically increased its aggression in the South China Sea against Taiwan, and even in the Philippines; Hamas has launched a horrific attack against Israel, and the Houthis are launching attacks in the Red Sea, openly attacking U.S. and allied service members in the Middle East.

You both previously testified that you recommended maintaining a small force in Afghanistan, instead of a full withdrawal. General Milley, you have also previously stated that the withdrawal was a strategic failure.

Was it less problematic to defend Bagram Air Base than HKIA? And why was the decision made to give up Bagram Air Base, for which we could do counterterrorism and better to protect than in the middle of an urban area?

General MILLEY. I'll let General McKenzie talk the specifics of Bagram. But Bagram was not a feasible course of action to keep open, once a decision was made to withdraw U.S. forces below 2500.

And Frank can talk to the numbers, but to maintain security and to maintain Bagram as an open air base would have required a brigade combat team. You're looking at 5,000-plus, plus a battalion to patrol the 30-mile road between Kabul and Bagram. So now, you're looking at 6,000, and then, you're still going to have to take care of HKIA, which in the end ended up being 6,000 Americans, 2,000 internationals, and others. So, about 8,000 with HKIA. So, you're looking at 15–20 thousand people.

If your strategic purpose is to withdraw from 2500 to zero, it does not make—it does not pass the common-sense test to, then, increase to 15,000.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. Now, I'm going to reclaim my time.

General MILLEY. That's the fundamental issue.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. Can either of you provide U.S. intelligence—it was woefully inaccurate in predicting how quickly Afghanistan would fall to Taliban control. Was this willful neglect of the Biden Administration, of the State Department, if you advised them that the potential for a fall would be rapid?

General MILLEY. We, the United States military, consistently indicated that there would be a likely collapse of the government and the ANSF upon a full withdrawal of the United States military, and we estimated that that would be months, not in August—months. We thought, at least I thought it would be sometime in the late fall, Thanksgiving/Christmas. I extended that out to maybe spring. It could get past Christmas and into spring. The intelligence community estimated anywhere between 12 and 24 months after the full withdrawal of the U.S. military.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. And was there a recommendation to the Biden Administration and the State Department that there would be a strategic intent and benefit of keeping Bagram Air Base and troops within Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. Was there a value to maintaining a presence in Afghanistan and Bagram Air Base?

General MILLEY. Well, I thought that keeping—you would have to have at least 2500, if you're going to keep Bagram. So, I thought, personally, I thought at the time, my assessment at the time—and I've said this publicly before—that keeping 2500, the value was to buy time to achieve the conditions of Doha and a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and GIRoA.

Presidents are in positions to make very difficult decisions, and I'm looking at this from a military standpoint. Two Presidents in a row, a much wider angle of view, taking in much more factors than I do as a general, they both decided the same thing, just with different timing.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. But, General Milley, with all due respect—

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS [continuing]. Even as a nurse in the Army, I had to push back against majors and lieutenant colonels—

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS [continuing]. And colonels and generals who were recommending things that were in our patients—

General MILLEY. Yes.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS [continuing]. Not in their best interests and would have cost them their lives.

General MILLEY. Right.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. We expect to have pushback from the military when a State Department or a Commander-in-Chief is doing things that are not in the best interest of this country and in the best interest of our service men and women.

General MILLEY. There were many heated, lengthy sessions and debates——

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. Let me just end here with recruitment down——

General MILLEY [continuing]. Lots of pushback.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS [continuing]. Will we have to wait until November or January 2025 to finally get accountability for the disastrous, incompetent call——

Chairman MCCAUL. We have to go to a classified briefing. Please make this short. It has been a long day. Wrap up your question.

Mrs. MILLER-MEEKS. I'm sorry, I just did, Chairman. I just said, will we have to wait until November or January 2025 to finally get accountability for the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan?

With that, I yield back. Thank you.

Chairman MCCAUL. I thank the gentlelady.

I would like to recognize the ranking member for a closing statement.

Mr. MEEKS. Again, I want to thank the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, and former Commander of the United States Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, Jr., for testifying before Congress again, and providing vital insight, as this committee continues to use its oversight authority on Afghanistan, including its withdrawal, but including our oversight.

Your testimony I think reinforces the need to have bipartisan, good-faith oversight for our 20 years in Afghanistan. I believe that the American public and our service members, and those Gold Star Families, the 13 at Abbey Gate, but also there's over 2,461 that lost their lives at our 20 years, going on 20 years in Afghanistan. The American people deserve nothing less.

And I would hope and I will join, and I will say to those Gold Star Families here whose hearts I really feel, that I will on stand to make sure that we do the 20-year investigation, so that they can get and find out what we did right; what we did wrong, for the benefit of everybody in our military.

And I think, in order to do that, we need to do it not in a political way, but in a bipartisan way. And clearly, from the testimony of the generals here, it is investigating what took place during the Bush administration, the Obama administration, the Trump Administration, and the Biden Administration. And then, and only then, will we be able to make that account to the American people in a thorough and nonpolitical and bipartisan way.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MCCAUL. I thank the ranking member.

We did establish the Afghanistan War Commission on the National Defense Authorization, and it is a board of highly esteemed people, just like Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who knows these issues probably better than anybody. This is not a partisan group. I look forward to their recommendations.

With respect to this investigation, we are focused on the evacuation. And so, I do look forward to working with my friend on lessons learned and legislative recommendations to move forward to ensure that this never happens again.

And I think, as we have heard today, it was the lack of a plan by the State Department and the failure to timely execute the plan that led to the chaos at HKIA and led to the suicide bomber, the Abbey Gate terror attack.

That truth will come out. We will get the commanding officers before this committee and we get the production of the sniper photos that Tyler took, and we will get it soon.

And so, with that, we are going to stand in recess, as we move to the classified space to have the classified portion of the briefing.

I apologize if I was a little impatient. It has been a long day. I appreciate your patience.

But we really need to get into the classified space before the votes.

Thank you so much. We will see you soon.

[Recess.]

Chairman MCCAUL. And without objection, the committee stands in recess.

[Whereupon, at 4:59 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX



**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

Michael T. McCaul (R-TX), Chairman

March 7, 2024

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs to be held at 1:00 p.m. in room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building. The hearing is available by live webcast on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>.

DATE: Tuesday, March 19, 2024

TIME: 1:00 p.m.

LOCATION: 2172 RHOB

SUBJECT: An Assessment of the Biden Administration's
Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals

WITNESSES: General Mark A. Milley (Retired)
Fmr. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
at the U.S. Department of Defense

General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. (Retired)
Fmr. Commander of United States Central Command
at the U.S. Department of Defense

*NOTE: Witnesses may be added.

By Direction of the Chair

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202-226-8467 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
MINUTES OF FULL COMMITTEE HEARING

Day Tuesday Date March 19 Room 2172 RHOB

Starting Time 1305 Ending Time 1659

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman McCaul

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Attached

NON-COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Rep. Miller-Meeks

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

Attached

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 1659

Meg Wagner
Full Committee Hearing Coordinator

Committee on Foreign Affairs

118th Congress

ATTENDANCE

Date: March 19, 2024

Representative	Present	Absent	Representative	Present	Absent
Mr. McCaul	X		Mr. Meeks	X	
Mr. Smith	X		Mr. Sherman	X	
Mr. Wilson	X		Mr. Connolly	X	
Mr. Perry	X		Mr. Keating	X	
Mr. Issa	X		Mr. Bera		X
Mrs. Wagner	X		Mr. Castro		X
Mr. Mast	X		Ms. Titus		X
Mr. Buck		X	Mr. Lieu		X
Mr. Burchett	X		Ms. Wild	X	
Mr. Green		X	Mr. Phillips	X	
Mr. Barr	X		Mr. Allred		X
Mr. Jackson		X	Mr. Kim		X
Mrs. Kim	X		Ms. Jacobs		X
Mrs. Salazar		X	Ms. Manning		X
Mr. Huizenga	X		Mrs. Cherfilus-McCormick		X
Mrs. Radewagen	X		Mr. Stanton		X
Mr. Hill	X		Ms. Dean	X	
Mr. Davidson	X		Mr. Moskowitz	X	
Mr. Baird	X		Mr. Jackson		X
Mr. Waltz	X		Mrs. Kamlager-Dove		X
Mr. Kean	X		Mr. Costa		X
Mr. Lawler	X		Mr. Crow	X	
Mr. Mills	X		Mr. Amo		X
Mr. McCormick	X		Mr. Schneider	X	
Mr. Moran	X				
Mr. James		X			
Mr. Self	X		Rep. Miller-Meeks	X	

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM REPRESENTATIVE CONNOLLY

“An Assessment of the Biden Administration’s Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America’s Generals”

House Foreign Affairs Committee

March 19, 2024, 1:00pm

Rayburn 2172

Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

After years of negotiations with the Taliban by his predecessor that excluded the Afghan National Government, President Biden made the difficult yet courageous decision to end the longest war in U.S. history. In 2022 and 2023, American servicemembers were not in the line of fire, risking their lives in Afghanistan. The administration conducted the largest airlift in history, a herculean effort that evacuated approximately 120,000 American citizens and allies in just a few short weeks. While oversight over the calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan is necessary, our critiques must be equally fair. Today we have the opportunity to hear from Ambassador Khalilzad on not just the withdrawal, but lessons to learn from what occurred during the Trump Administration and the negotiation of the Doha agreement.

If committee Republicans have any doubt about who is responsible for what led to our calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, they should look no further than the former President’s own words. On June 26, 2021, at a political rally, former President Trump himself took full credit for the deal, stating “I started the process. All the troops are coming back home. They couldn’t stop the process. Twenty-one years is enough, don’t we think? Twenty-one years. They [the Biden Administration] couldn’t stop the process.” It is disingenuous to look at August 2021 without understanding the previous administration’s negotiations that undermined the Afghan government and strengthened the hand of the Taliban.

In 2020, the Trump administration pressured the Afghan government to free five thousand Taliban fighters, many of whom later played central roles in retaking the country. In the wake of his election loss in 2020, President Donald Trump ordered a potentially catastrophic immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Somalia, but according to testimony released by the congressional January 6th committee, senior officials never followed through on the plan. Notwithstanding the dangerous and tumultuous handling of negotiations by the Trump administration, President Biden accomplished what President Trump set out to do and finally withdrew American troops from Afghanistan, ending the longest war in U.S. history.

In 2019, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker argued that by not insisting on the inclusion of the Afghan government in negotiations, “we have ourselves delegitimized the government we claim to support.” By entering into a misguided “peace process” that forced President Biden to acquiesce to Taliban demands, the Trump administration bears substantial responsibility for the chaotic withdrawal. It was Secretary Pompeo, not Blinken, that met with the Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to broker a flawed withdrawal agreement that former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster characterized as a “surrender agreement with the Taliban.”

For the last 20 years, our servicemembers, non-profit organizations, and government contractors in Afghanistan have relied on the assistance of Afghan employees. Whether serving as security guards, translators or drivers, the success we did manage to achieve in Afghanistan

would not have been possible without their help, despite what it meant for their safety. Even after the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS-K no longer had a significant presence in Afghanistan, the men and women who assisted Americans were still met with threats from those who remained loyal to terrorist organizations. My office submitted over 22,000 names to the State Department for assistance and is still working diligently to get these people and their families to safety in the United States.

As many at-risk Afghans remain in Afghanistan or third countries, the United States must do all that is within its power to help those who assisted us during the 20-year engagement. The Biden Administration has done what is within their power to streamline immigration and refugee processes eviscerated during the Trump administration. For years, before the fall of Kabul, Republicans had intentionally pushed to shift resources away from conducting SIV interviews to create a massive backlog of SIV applicants. Then Trump anti-immigration expert Stephen Miller stated the goal plainly, "Resettling [Afghans] in America is not about solving a humanitarian crisis; it's about accomplishing an ideological objective to change America." When President Obama asked Congress to increase the SIV cap in 2016, Senate Republicans rejected the effort. During the final 300 days of the Trump Administration, not a single SIV interview was conducted at U.S. Embassy Kabul.

The Bipartisan Security Supplemental that was negotiated in the Senate, and then determined by Speaker Johnson "Dead on Arrival" in the House of Representatives after Donald Trump voiced his opposition, included significant provisions that would provide work permits and a path to permanent residency for the thousands of Afghans left in limbo after they entered the United States on humanitarian parole. For any outrage that comes from Committee Republicans, I hope they realize it is their party that is currently blocking the Afghan Adjustment Act and the security supplemental from coming to a vote on the House floor.

With the Taliban now firmly in control of Afghanistan, we are seeing the reemergence of the Afghanistan of the 1990s. On December 21, 2022, the Taliban reneged on their promise to the international community and began to enforce its ban on women attending any education beyond the 6th grade. A number of internationally recognized humanitarian organizations that frequently operate in war-torn countries announced they would be forced to suspend operations in Afghanistan after they were no longer permitted to hire Afghan women. The humanitarian situation remains dire, and that was why Senator Merkley, and I took action to urge the State and Treasury Departments to help Afghans at risk of starvation. While we must ensure that U.S. aid does not get into the hands of the Taliban, we must understand the ramifications if aid were to be cut off aid to vulnerable Afghans.

Now we need to conduct a thorough assessment of the entirety of our involvement in Afghanistan to provide a full accounting of Trump's deal with the Taliban that preceded the withdrawal, what we did right in response, and most critically, what we did wrong. We must understand the best way to support the Afghan people in their long quest for basic freedoms and dignity. It won't be easy to acknowledge our failures, but it's what sets us apart from the rest of the world. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about their assessment of our involvement, and how we should recalibrate to support the people of Afghanistan moving forward.

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Withdrawal from Afghanistan by America's Generals
 House Committee on Foreign Affairs
 Full Committee
 Greg Stanton (D-AZ)
 General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. (Retired)
 Tuesday, March 19, 2024 at 1:00 PM ET, Rayburn 2172

Question 1:

While we know that the Defense Department and military leadership are responsible for handling policies, planning, and operational matters around a troop withdrawal, we also know that no agency operates in a vacuum. And, indeed, the situation in Afghanistan demanded—and was met with—a whole of government response. You both have long, decorated careers in the military that afforded you significant experience working with the Defense Department and other federal agencies. So I'd welcome an assessment from you on the following:

Do you agree that a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the corresponding effort to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies, required a whole-of-government effort? What is your assessment of that effort? Did it occur? Where did it fall short?

Answer: I agree that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the corresponding effort to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies required a whole-of-government effort. The United States was unable to achieve a whole-of-government response. While there are many reasons for this, it is my opinion that delaying the beginning of the evacuation until mid-August was the primary factor.

Question 2:

I am an original cosponsor of and huge proponent of the Afghan Adjustment Act. There are many, many Afghans who served the US mission in Afghanistan and are now targets of the Taliban, including members of the Female Tactical Platoon. Several FTPs reside in my district, and I have had the privilege of hearing—and recounting—their stories. But they are still hoping for permanent status in the US and ask for US support in getting their families in Afghanistan to safety.

How would you assess the impact of the Special Immigrant Visa program, and how important do you believe it is for Congress to increase the numbers of visas so that the Administration can fulfill the commitments made to those Afghans who supported our effort over the past 20 years? Why?

Answer: The SIV program is the responsibility of the Department of State, and they would be best positioned to answer your question about its effectiveness. I do support widening the aperture to get out as many Afghans as possible that worked with us over the past 24 years.

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Not Answered

Question 2:

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Not Answered

Question 3:

General Milley, you've previously testified that the Doha Agreement undermined the morale of and confidence in the Afghan government. You also testified that the order to drawdown to 2,500 by January 15, 2021, further impacted the morale and will of the Afghan military, in your assessment.

What informs this understanding? Why do you believe they responded to the Agreement the way that they did?

Not Answered