

**Opening Statement (As Prepared)**  
**Chairman Adam Smith**  
**House Armed Services Committee Hearing:**  
***“Ending the U.S. Military Mission in Afghanistan”***  
**September 29, 2021**

***Stream the hearing here: <https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings?ID=EFD55E56-DF6E-4F1A-983F-76192E43A01C>***

Good morning. I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today: the Honorable Lloyd Austin III, Secretary of Defense, General Mark Milley, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Frank McKenzie, Commander, U.S. Central Command. I want to thank them for their time today as they provide an update on the issues surrounding the end of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan.

I am looking forward to what I hope will be a very important policy discussion. At the center of our examination of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, is the desire to learn from our 20-year involvement there. We must have an open and honest analysis of everything that went into that, not just events and decisions of the last 6 months or year.

But before I continue, I would like to take a moment to recognize the service of the over 800,000 men and women who served in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. More importantly I would like to remember and honor the 2,461 who made the ultimate sacrifice along with the over 20,000 who bear the physical wounds of war, and those who bear the unseen wounds of war. While we will vigorously debate policy decisions related to the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, I believe that I speak for the entire committee when we express our gratitude to those and their families who have sacrificed so much over these last 20 years. We owe them a debt that cannot be repaid.

I agreed, and continue to agree, with the decision that was made to end our military presence in Afghanistan. It was the right decision. Our larger mission to help build a government in Afghanistan that could govern effectively and defeat the Taliban had failed. More money and more lost American lives were not going to change that. The events we witnessed in Afghanistan in the wake of the collapse of the Afghan government in August happened primarily because of this reality.

There was no easy or safe way to get everyone out of the country we wanted to get out. Yet, in the face of that, our military conducted the largest airlift in history, in coordination with the rest of the interagency and our allies, evacuating over 120,000 people. This evacuation operation did not come without costs. Sadly, we lost 13 U.S. service members and dozens of innocent Afghans due to ISIS-K's attack at Abbey Gate on August 26. There was also a tragic mistake on August 29 when a drone strike killed as many as 10 civilians. Following this mistake, I, and others, expect to be provided with the results of the timely, comprehensive, and transparent investigation of this tragedy, including accountability measures and any changes to procedures. Importantly, our work is not done as there are more who remain in Afghanistan who would like to leave, and we must work to ensure the interagency has all the tools required and is coordinated to assist

those remaining individuals.

To the military withdrawal mission in August, we should, of course, look at the details of that mission, which we fully intend to do today. We need to know much more about a withdrawal that felt unnecessarily rushed toward an August deadline.

That said, it was never going to be easy to withdraw American citizens, legal permanent residents, U.S. military equipment, and vulnerable Afghans. Further, doing so sooner would not have improved the situation. The military would have had to pull out thousands of people as well as military equipment against the will of the existing democratically-elected Afghan government and, instead of having the tacit cooperation of the Taliban, they would have been engaging U.S. forces in active combat all while ISIS-K would have still been a dynamic threat.

Most importantly, I want to address the idea that some have put forward that the U.S. could have just left a couple thousand troops behind and everything would have been fine. This includes some former military leaders. They are simply wrong. Some that have put forward this argument have pointed to the fact that we have troops in places like South Korea, Japan, and Germany, therefore, we could have left troops in Afghanistan.

This is absolutely not the choice that was faced. It wasn't a matter of leaving troops in a peaceful country to deter adversaries. Intelligence reports state that the Taliban would have fought U.S. or ally troops that remained. There would have been ongoing conflict, U.S. involvement in war, not a peaceful presence like the South Korea, Japan, or Germany examples. Further, leaving 2,500 troops behind would have also been unconscionable - the risk to those service members and their ability to adequately defend themselves once the Taliban started attacking again was too high. Thousands of additional troops would have been required.

President Biden made the right call in tough circumstances. The execution wasn't perfect, but the actual reality of the situation meant it would have been nearly unachievable and resource intensive to get a different outcome in Afghanistan.

If the U.S. military had stayed, more Americans would have died every year we stayed and, in the end, we would have had to face the same disastrous result. Simply put, the cost in American lives and resources wouldn't demonstratively change the outcome in Afghanistan and the decision to leave was the right one.

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