

Joe's hazy memory: Biden does not 'recall' if he was warned to keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan

By Katelyn Caralle, U.S. Political Reporter For Dailymail.com 08:17 EDT 19 Aug 2021

Joe Biden said he can't 'recall' if he was warned to maintain a troop presence in Afghanistan and insisted 'no one is being killed' during the chaos at the Kabul airport in a series of confusing comments in his first interview on the bungled withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover.

He also said he would have still pulled troops from Afghanistan without former President Donald Trump's deal to get everyone out by May 1 in a reversal of his finger-pointing at his predecessor for the chaos.

'Your top military advisers warned against withdrawing on this timeline – they wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops,' ABC's George Stephanopoulos said to Biden in an interview that aired Thursday morning.

'No, they didn't,' the president pushed back. 'It was split. That wasn't true. That wasn't true.'

'They didn't tell you they wanted troops to stay?' Stephanopoulos asked.

'No, not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a time frame – all troops, they didn't argue against that,' Biden reiterated.

There were multiple warnings from top brass and military intelligence officials who cautioned against a total withdrawal from Afghanistan, claiming the situation was ripe for the Taliban to take over.

on Tuesday that Biden knew the risks of a total troop pull out and went forward with it anyway despite objections and warnings from his team.

Biden also said in the interview that chaos in Kabul was inevitable - months after saying it was not - and snapped at a question over photos of Afghans falling from planes and packing a C-17 while trying desperately to flee the Taliban.

The president's performance was blasted from all arenas with Republicans and Democrats branding Biden 'shameful' and calling for him to 'take responsibility' for the scenes of violence and disorder in recent days as thousands attempted to flee while the Taliban advanced.

He falsely claimed, at one point, that 'no one is being killed' in the chaotic scenes around the Kabul airport – despite 12 confirmed deaths.



President Joe Biden insisted that his military advisers and intelligence officers did not tell him to keep a U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. 'No one said that to me that I can recall,' he said

Biden v. Reality: Biden falsely stated the US has no troops in Syria - when there are 900 - in a series of lies of bungled statements in ABC interview

Biden says there was 'no way' to leave Afghanistan without chaos ensuing, but six weeks ago he said a Taliban takeover was 'highly unlikely.'

Biden told Stephanopoulos that chaos in Kabul was always in the cards for an Afghanistan withdrawal, but just six weeks ago he said that a Taliban takeover was 'highly unlikely.'

'There's no way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens,' the president said in a Wednesday interview.

In his July 8 briefing, Biden assured the press: 'It is not inevitable. The likelihood of the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.'

And even though the president said mayhem was inevitable, he laid blame on Afghani forces unwilling to fight and President Ashraf Ghani who fled the country.

'When you had the government of Afghanistan, the leader of that government, get in a plane and taking off and going to another country; when you saw the significant collapse of the Afghan troops we had trained, up to 300,000 of them, just leaving their equipment and taking off - that was, you know, I'm not, that's what happened. That's simply what happened', he said.

Biden says US doesn't have a military presence in Syria, but 900 troops remain there.

The president told Stephanopoulos that al-Qaeda could build up a significant presence in Afghanistan sooner than the original intelligent assessment of 18 to 24 months, but the US should be more worried about the threat from al-Qaeda in Syria.

'Al Qaeda, ISIS, they metastasize. There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria. There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa. There's significant greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan,' Biden said.

'We have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out. We're-- we don't have military in Syria to make sure that we're gonna be protected--'

The US does in fact have troops in Syria - 900 of them. Those troops are advising and supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces to fight the Islamic State, a role they have played since the US-led intervention in 2014.

Biden says he can't recall military officials suggesting he keep the 'stable' 2,500 troop presence in Afghanistan, though reports show Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley made exactly such a request.

'Your top military advisers warned against withdrawing on this timeline – they wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops,' Stephanopoulos said to Biden.

'No, they didn't,' the president pushed back. 'It was split. That wasn't true. That wasn't true.'

'They didn't tell you they wanted troops to stay?' Stephanopoulos asked.

'No, not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a time frame – all troops, they didn't argue against that,' Biden reiterated.

The Wall Street Journal reported the president ignored Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley's request to keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and did not yield Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's warning about the stability of the country without a U.S. troop presence.

Stephanopoulos pressed the president on the report: 'Your military advisers did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops, it's been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we can continue to do that?'

'No, no one said that to me that I can recall,' Biden said.

An exasperated Milley declined to rule out 'regrets' on Thursday. 'Right now the focus is on the mission [evacuating Americans and allies] ... there will be plenty of time to talk about regrets,' he said when asked if the US should have done anything differently.

Biden argued that the recent stability was not due to the troop presence but due to a peace deal with the Taliban signed by President Trump promising US forces would leave, which Biden has said he was bound to honor.

Milley did say on Wednesday intelligence had only predicted Kabul could fall to the Taliban in a matter of weeks, months or years, not days.

'There's nothing that I or anyone saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days,' Milley added, further reflecting the Biden administration's frustration with Afghan security forces they believe were unwilling to fight.

'This comes down to an issue of will and leadership. And no, I did not, nor did anyone else, see a collapse of an army of that size in 11 days,' Milley underscored again.

Biden says US has control of Kabul airport, though Taliban fighters have formed a wall around the airport and are controlling who goes in and out.

'Now, granted, it took two days to take control of the airport. We have control of the airport now,' Biden told Stephanopoulos.

Heart-wrenching scenes on Monday showed Afghans desperate to flee throwing themselves in front of US aircraft taxiing down the runway. US service members fired shots killing at least two civilians in an effort to push the Afghans back behind airport walls to clear out Americans.

And on Wednesday night US troops used teargas and fired shots into the air to control the increasingly desperate crowds of Afghans at the airport, while Taliban fighters blocked Westerners from getting to evacuation planes in a fifth day of chaos.

The Taliban appear to be tightening their grip, instituting checkpoints and stopping people from even getting to the airport, and there are no troops there on the ground to retrieve them because they are all at the airport defending it from a stampede of frightened natives.

The Taliban has promised foreign governments that they will let through all Westerners and civilians who want to board flights, but even ABC journalists were blocked from getting to the airport on Thursday despite having paperwork proving who they were.

Since Aug. 14, only 7,000 have been evacuated, though Biden said the US was trying to bring home 10,000-15,000 Americans and another 50,000-60,000 Afghans, all by Aug. 31 - 12 days from now.

Between Tuesday and Wednesday, US forces only removed 2,000 people on 18 jets that could have taken 10,000.

Some on the ground called it a 'lottery' and described people with paperwork getting through but being turned away, while others without any ticket out are making their way onto planes through luck and force.

On Wednesday, Afghan mothers who can't get through handed their babies over the wall to Western soldiers to be put on flights without them. American troops have been seen helping some women over the barbed wire, while shouting at others to stand back.

Biden says 'no one is being killed' at Kabul airport, though the Taliban have killed at least 12.

'But, look, b-- but no one's being killed right now, God forgive me if I'm wrong about that, but no one's being killed right now,' Biden told Stephanopoulos when the ABC anchor noted 'pandemonium' at the Kabul airport.

There are at least 12 confirmed deaths in the chaotic scenes around the airport, according to Taliban and NATO officials. Those deaths included the two who were shot by the US military at the airfield and two who fell to their deaths from a US plane as it took off.

Their deaths were caused by either gunshots or stampedes, a Taliban official told Reuters on Thursday. He told Afghans to go home if they didn't have the proper paperwork to leave, adding a veiled warning: 'We don't want to hurt anyone at the airport.'

Biden says Afghani stowaways plunging to their death was 'four or five days ago,' - it was two days before the interview.

'We've all seen the pictures. We've seen those hundreds of people packed into a C-17. You've seen Afghans falling –' Stephanopoulos said before being cut off by the president.

'That was four days ago, five days ago,' Biden quipped, seemingly brushing off harrowing footage that emerged on Monday of two Afghans falling to their deaths after clinging to the wheels of a US evacuation flight,

'What did you think when you first saw those pictures?'

'What I thought was we have to gain control of this,' he said. 'We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did.'

'We have control of the airport now,' Biden said as he lauded what has been widely viewed as missteps in evacuating Americans and allies from Afghanistan.

Stephanopoulos pushed back: 'Still a lot of pandemonium outside the airport.'

'Oh, there is,' the president admitted in the interview.

'But no one's being killed right now,' he claimed. 'God forgive me if I'm wrong about that, but no one's being killed right now.'

So far there are a dozen confirmed deaths since the Taliban took over Kabul on Sunday when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

A 14-year-old girl was killed in a stampede at the Hamid Karzai International Airport and her family released images of her body on Thursday in an attempt to draw attention to the plight of Afghans desperate to get on an evacuation flight.

Marzia Rahmati is believed to be one of the youngest of the 12 victims who have died in the disorder at Kabul airport since the Taliban took over.

Others were killed when they were run over by aircraft rolling down the runway at the Kabul airport and two were shot by U.S. military personnel at the airport.

Two people were seen plummeting to their deaths from a U.S. Air Force plane on Monday as they clung to the side of the aircraft when it taxied away from Hamid Karzai International.

Of the horrific scenes at the airport, including the two who fell hundreds of feet to their death, Biden dismissed it as something that happened 'days ago.'

He appeared pleasantly surprised that the Taliban were letting Washington evacuate Americans from Afghanistan without issue, but said his administration was having 'more difficulty' evacuating Afghans who helped the U.S. military and now have Taliban targets on their backs.

Biden snapped back at Stephanopoulos when he was questioned about footage of two Afghans falling to their deaths after clinging to the wheels of a U.S. evacuation flight from Kabul on Monday, brushing off the harrowing images.

'We've all seen the pictures. We've seen those hundreds of people packed into a C-17. You've seen Afghans falling –' Stephanopoulos said before being cut off by the president.

'That was four days ago, five days ago,' Biden quipped.

'What did you think when you first saw those pictures?'

'What I thought was we have to gain control of this,' he said. 'We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did.'

Biden promised to get Americans and allies, including interpreters, out of Afghanistan.

'We got 1,000-somewhat, 1,200 out, yesterday, a couple thousand today. And it's increasing,' he told Stephanopoulos. 'We're gonna get those people out.'

The president admitted during his interview, which was taped at the White House on Wednesday, that he would have still withdrawn troops from Afghanistan without the deal Trump reached for a total withdrawal by May 1.

'I would have tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes,' he said.

The comment is a stunning reversal of Biden playing the blame game and insisting he didn't have a choice but to withdraw because of the last administration's negotiations.

The Journal reported the president ignored Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley's request to keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and did not yield Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's warning about the stability of the country without a U.S. troop presence.

Biden pushed back against that report in his first interview since the Taliban overtook the country and chaotic scenes emerged from Kabul where hundreds of Afghan citizens overran the Hamid Karzai International Airport in an attempt to get on evacuation flights.

Stephanopoulos pressed the president on the report: 'Your military advisers did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops, it's been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we can continue to do that?'

'No, no one said that to me that I can recall,' Biden said.

A top general who was put in charge of withdrawing all 2,500 remaining American troops from Afghanistan warned earlier this summer that the Taliban's push to take parts of the country were 'concerning' and warned the withdrawal could lead to a civil war.

'I think what you're seeing -- just if you look at the security situation -- it's not good,' General Austin Scott Miller in an interview in June. 'The Afghans have recognized it's not good. The Taliban are on the move.'

'If you go back to what the Taliban's objectives are, they want to take over and so at some point that implies that at some point they are in Kabul,' he warned at the time. 'And certainly some of them remember what it was like the last time under with the Taliban regime.'

Miller said the U.S. was 'creating conditions' that could contribute to a Taliban take over.

Biden explained in his interview that the recent 'stability' ahead of the withdrawal was not due to a military presence, but because there was a promise that U.S. troops would leave within a certain time frame.

'The reason why it's been stable for a year is because the last president said, 'We're leaving and here's the deal I want to make with you, Taliban. We're agreeing to leave if you agree not to attack us between now and the time we leave on May the 1st,' Biden detailed.

'Less than two months after I elected to office, I was sworn in, all of a sudden, I have a May 1 deadline,' he continued.

Biden said 'there is no good time to leave Afghanistan.'

'Fifteen years ago it would have been a problem, 15 years from now,' he said. 'The basic choice is, am I going to send your sons and your daughters to war in Afghanistan in perpetuity?

'No one can name for me a time when this would end. And what constitutes defeat of the Taliban? What constitutes defeat? Would we have left then?' the president questioned the ABC News host.

'Let's say they surrender like before – OK. Do we leave then? Do you think anybody – the same people who think we should stay would've said, 'No, good time to go'? We spent over \$1 trillion, George, 20 years. There was no good time to leave.'

Biden said that there was 'no consensus' in intelligence reports or military recommendations that the Taliban would overrun the government – referencing

his July comments were he said the Islamic militant group's total take over was 'highly unlikely.'

'The idea that the Taliban would take over was premised on the notion that the – that somehow, the 300,000 troops we had trained and equipped was gonna just collapse, they were gonna give up. I don't think anybody anticipated that,' he said.

Biden insisted that he handled the situation in the best way possible, despite a slew of criticism.

'You don't think this could have been handled better in any way, no mistakes?' Stephanopoulos asked Biden.

'No, I don't think it could have been handled in a way that – we're going to go back in hindsight and look but the idea that somehow there is a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens. I don't know how that happened,' he responded.

He also promised to get Americans and allies, including interpreters, out of Afghanistan.

'We got 1,000-somewhat, 1,200 out, yesterday, a couple thousand today. And it's increasing,' he told Stephanopoulos. 'We're gonna get those people out.'

Americans in Afghanistan, however, are getting some mixed signals from the U.S. government on what to do – with the State Department claiming Monday they should shelter in place and then the Defense Department saying on Wednesday that the Taliban was instructed to let those with the proper paperwork through checkpoints and into the airport.

But ex-pats and western visa holders claim they cannot get 'anywhere near' the Kabul airport on Thursday because 'huge crowds' of 'terrified locals' are blocking the way.

Videos captured snapshots of the chaos as gunmen fired shots over the heads of panicked crowds while hitting people with rifles - as those on the ground said

Taliban fighters were dishing out beatings and lashings seemingly at random, with people being trampled and crushed in the throng.

Paul 'Pen' Farthing, a former Marine who now lives in Kabul with his wife, described the scene as a 'clusterf***', telling DailyMail.com: 'Two ex-pats - one British and one Norwegian - have already been forced to turn back this morning because they can't get through.'

'And last night a UN convoy carrying various foreign nationals, who had been working in Afghanistan for NGOs, had to turn round because of the sheer volume of people on the street,' he added.

There are 12 confirmed deaths in the chaos around and at the Kabul airport so far

Three stowaways 'fall to their deaths from plane' in Kabul

F-18 fighter jets from USS Ronald Reagan start patrolling over Kabul as US troops on the ground fire shots: Just 2,000 people reach half-empty US evacuation flights, of whom only 300 are actually American

US troops used teargas and fired shots into the air on Wednesday night to control the increasingly desperate crowds of Afghans at the airport, while Taliban fighters blocked Westerners from getting to evacuation planes in a fifth day of chaos in Kabul.

US Air Force fighter jets are now on standby in Kabul and are performing overwatch flights as the shambolic rush to get tens of thousands of Westerners and Afghan allies out of the region continues.

It is the latest development in an increasingly tense situation on the ground in Kabul where the Taliban, which had promised peace, appears to be tightening its grip. Its fighters on the street are stopping people from getting to the airport, where jets are waiting to fly them to safety, and there are no troops there on the ground to retrieve them because they are all at the airport defending it from a stampede of frightened natives.

Overnight, 12 US Air Force C-17 cargo jets removed 2,000 people from the region - an average of just 160 people per flight, despite the planes being able to carry 600 people - six fewer aircraft than in the previous 24 hours. Since August 14, the US has only removed 7,000 people in total from the region.

Only 300 of those who flew out were American and officials can't give a breakdown of who else was on the planes or whether or not they had the right paperwork to be there.

Those on the ground say it's a lottery who gets through and that some people with tickets are being crushed or turned away, while Afghans with no paperwork are getting on through sheer luck and pushing their way to the front.

The Air Force promised to lift between 5,000 and 9,000 out per day and there are at least 50,000 waiting to be taken to safety but people are not being processed quickly enough because of manic crowds at the airport's gates and on the roads, which are being blocked by the Taliban.



US troops clash with desperate Afghans at Kabul airport as the struggle to contain crowds of thousands of desperate nationals continues. The troops have resorted to using tear gas and firing warning shots to stop the crowds from scaling walls



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US troops clash with desperate Afghans at Kabul airport as the struggle to contain crowds of thousands of desperate nationals continues. The troops have resorted to using tear gas and firing warning shots to stop the crowds from scaling walls

US soldiers fire tear gas to hold back crowd from Kabul Airport



© Rise to Peace via REUTERS

US troops at Kabul airport are using tear gas to control crowds of frantic Afghans who are trying to climb over to be put on evacuation flights. Footage shows shots being fired into the air in the darkness to disperse crowds



© AFP via Getty Images

A half empty C-17 flies out of Kabul with Afghan refugees on board on Thursday. Overnight, 2,000 people were removed on the jets - an average of 160 per flight - when they can take 600

The Afghan teen who chose to die clinging to plane rather than live under the Taliban

This is the teenage Afghan national youth team footballer who died when he became trapped in the landing gear of a US evacuation flight in a desperate attempt to flee the Taliban.

Zaki Anwari, 19, was born after the US drove the Taliban from Afghanistan and would only have heard about their rule from his parents while living under the western-supported regimes of Presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani.

He attended a prestigious international school in Kabul alongside the children of diplomats and his social media profile is one of an aspiring influencer, filled with western-influenced modelling style photos.

His football team the Khorosan lions reported that he had been among the teen's videoed clinging to the side of a US C-17 transport.

Mr Anwari's remains were discovered in the wheel well of a US C-17 transport jet when it arrived in Qatar, after the plane had taken off from Kabul with despairing Afghans clinging to the fuselage on Monday.

The athlete was among several people who died after clambering onto the aircraft as it took off, with harrowing video showing bodies tumbling to the ground as the jet climbed into the sky.

Two of those who died when they fell from the plane were reported to be teenage brothers who sold watermelon at Kabul's central market. Aged 16 and 17, social media reports said the brothers routinely scavenged in the bins of Kabul's markets to provide for their mother because the family was so poor.

The horrifying scenes of so many young men sat on a fin below the plane's turbine as it barreled down the runway, only to then fall hundreds of feet to their

deaths, will likely become the defining image of Joe Biden's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The United States Air Force later said that the pilots decided to go ahead with takeoff because the jet 'was surrounded' and there was a 'rapidly deteriorating security situation around the aircraft.'

Mr Anwari's death was confirmed by the General Directorate of Physical Education & Sports of Afghanistan, Arian News reported on Thursday.

The promising footballer had rushed to the airport hours after Kabul fell to the Taliban, joining thousands of others in pouring onto the runway and then chasing after the USAF jet despite warning shots ringing out.

The beloved teen had attended the prestigious French-speaking Esteqlal High School, in Kabul, and had been called up to the national youth team as a 16-year-old. His 'unspeakable loss' was mourned by his friends and peers on social media today.

In a poignant last Facebook post, Mr Anwari had written: 'You're the painter of your life. Don't give the paint brush to anyone else!'



Anwari attended a prestigious French-American school in Kabul alongside the children of western diplomats



his social media profile is one of an aspiring influencer, filled with western-influenced modelling style photos.



Nikki Haley

@NikkiHaley



This is such a slap in the face to the thousands of Americans still in Afghanistan. He had no plan, he has no urgency, and he won't take responsibility.

#Shameful

ABC News @ABC · 7h

EXCLUSIVE: Pressed on whether the U.S.'s exit from Afghanistan could have been handled better, Pres. Biden tells @GStephanopoulos, "The idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing—I don't know how that happens." abcn.ws/3gdCgXh



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Liz Cheney 
@Liz_Cheney



A truly ignorant and shameful performance by an American president.

 ABC News  @ABC · 7h

EXCLUSIVE: Pressed on whether the U.S.'s exit from Afghanistan could have been handled better, Pres. Biden tells @GStephanopoulos, "The idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing—I don't know how that happens." abcn.ws/3gdCgXh



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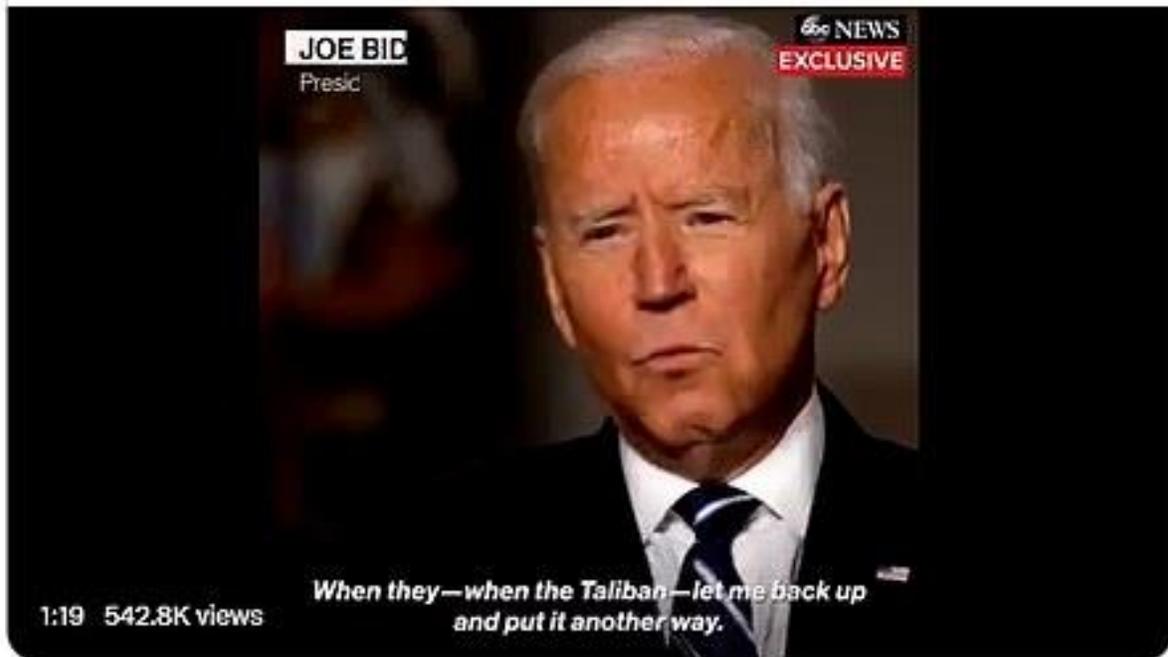


No way to avoid this chaos? That's a bald-faced lie.

Joe Biden is as dishonest as he is impotent.

 ABC News  @ABC · 1h

EXCLUSIVE: Pressed on whether the U.S.'s exit from Afghanistan could have been handled better, Pres. Biden tells @GStephanopoulos, "The idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing—I don't know how that happens." abcn.ws/3gdCgXh



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Biden panned for 'shameful' comments on Afghan withdrawal during ABC interview: 'It's really bad'
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Matters continue to get worse for President Biden as critics on both sides of the aisle panned the comments he made to ABC's George Stephanopoulos about h...
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Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, M.D. 
@RepMMM



This statement downplaying his administrations lack of planning, speaks volumes to their lack of commitment to the safety of our American troops and Afghan allies. Unacceptable.

 ABC News  @ABC · 3h

EXCLUSIVE: Pressed on whether the U.S.'s exit from Afghanistan could have been handled better, Pres. Biden tells @GStephanopoulos, "The idea that somehow, there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing—I don't know how that happens." abcn.ws/3gdCgXh



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John McCormack 
@McCormackJohn



Biden waited more than 72 hours since Kabul fell to commit to bringing home every American citizen stuck in Afghanistan.

In the interim, top admin officials hedged.

Still not clear what the plan is to accomplish this goal.



GeorgeStephanopoulos  @GStephanopoulos · 6h

In an exclusive interview, Pres. Biden tells me that U.S. troops will stay until all Americans are out of Afghanistan, even if past Aug 31 deadline.
abcn.ws/3k96R9m



10:55 PM · Aug 18, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone


FULL TRANSCRIPT OF BIDEN'S AFGHANISTAN INTERVIEW WITH GOOD MORNING AMERICA

On Thursday morning, released the full transcript of President Biden's Good Morning America interview with George Stephanopoulos.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. President, thank you for doing this.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Thank you for doin' it.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Let's get right to it. Back in July, you said a Taliban takeover was highly unlikely. Was the intelligence wrong, or did you downplay it?

BIDEN: I think -- there was no consensus. If you go back and look at the intelligence reports, they said that it's more likely to be sometime by the end of the year. The idea that the tal -- and then it goes further on, even as late as August. I think you're gonna see -- the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others speaking about this later today.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you didn't put a timeline on it when you said it was highly unlikely. You just said flat out, 'It's highly unlikely the Taliban would take over.'

BIDEN: Yeah. Well, the question was whether or not it w-- the idea that the Taliban would take over was premised on the notion that the -- that somehow, the 300,000 troops we had trained and equipped was gonna just collapse, they were gonna give up. I don't think anybody anticipated that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you know that Senator McConnell, others say this was not only predictable, it was predicted, including by him, based on intelligence briefings he was getting.

BIDEN: What -- what did he say was predicted?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Senator McConnell said it was predictable that the Taliban was gonna take over.

BIDEN: Well, by the end of the year, I said that's that was -- that was a real possibility. But no one said it was gonna take over then when it was bein' asked.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So when you look at what's happened over the last week, was it a failure of intelligence, planning, execution or judgment?

BIDEN: Look, I don't think it was a fa-- look, it was a simple choice, George. When the-- when the Taliban -- let me back -- put it another way. When you had the government of Afghanistan, the leader of that government get in a plane and taking off and going to another country, when you saw the significant collapse of the ta-- of the-- Afghan troops we had trained -- up to 300,000 of them just leaving their equipment and taking off, that was -- you know, I'm not-- this -- that -- that's what happened.

That's simply what happened. So the question was in the beginning the-- the threshold question was, do we commit to leave within the timeframe we've set? We extended it to September 1st. Or do we put significantly more troops in? I hear people say, 'Well, you had 2,500 folks in there and nothin' was happening. You know, there wasn't any war.'

But guess what? The fact was that the reason it wasn't happening is the last president negotiated a year earlier that he'd be out by May 1st and that-- in return, there'd be no attack on American forces. That's what was done. That's why nothing was happening. But the idea if I had said -- I had a simple choice. If I had said, 'We're gonna stay,' then we'd better prepare to put a whole hell of a lot more troops in --

President Joe Biden speaks with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, Aug. 18, 2021, in Washington, D.C.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But your top military advisors warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops.

BIDEN: No, they didn't. It was split. Tha-- that wasn't true. That wasn't true.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They didn't tell you that they wanted troops to stay?

BIDEN: No. Not at -- not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a timeframe all troops. They didn't argue against that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So no one told -- your military advisors did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops. It's been a stable situation for the last several years. We can do that. We can continue to do that'?

BIDEN: No. No one said that to me that I can recall. Look, George, the reason why it's been stable for a year is because the last president said, 'We're leaving. And here's the deal I wanna make with you, Taliban. We're agreeing to leave if you agree not to attack us between now and the time we leave on May the 1st.'

I got into office, George. Less than two months after I elected to office, I was sworn in, all of a sudden, I have a May 1 deadline. I have a May 1 deadline. I got one of two choices. Do I say we're staying? And do you think we would not have to put a hell of a lot more troops? B-- you know, we had hundreds-- we had tens of thousands of troops there before. Tens of thousands.

Do you think we woulda -- that we would've just said, 'No problem. Don't worry about it, we're not gonna attack anybody. We're okay'? In the meantime, the Taliban was takin' territory all throughout the country in the north and down in the south, in the Pasthtun area.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So would you have withdrawn troops like this even if President Trump had not made that deal with the Taliban?

BIDEN: I would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes, because look, George. There is no good time to leave Afghanistan. Fifteen years ago would've been a problem, 15 years from now. The basic choice is am I gonna send your sons and your daughters to war in Afghanistan in perpetuity?

STEPHANOPOULOS: That's--

BIDEN: No one can name for me a time when this would end. And what-- wha-- wha-- what-- what constitutes defeat of the Taliban? What constitutes defeat? Would we have left then? Let's say they surrender like before. OK. Do we leave then? Do you think anybody-- the same people who think we should stay

would've said, 'No, good time to go'? We spent over \$1 trillion, George, 20 years. There was no good time to leave.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if there's no good time, if you know you're gonna have to leave eventually, why not have th-- everything in place to make sure Americans could get out, to make sure our Afghan allies get out, so we don't have these chaotic scenes in Kabul?

BIDEN: Number one, as you know, the intelligence community did not say back in June or July that, in fact, this was gonna collapse like it did. Number one.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They thought the Taliban would take over, but not this quickly?

BIDEN: But not this quickly. Not even close. We had already issued several thousand passports to the-- the SIVs, the people-- the-- the-- the translators when I came into office before we had negotiated getting out at the end of s-- August.

Secondly, we're in a position where what we did was took precautions. That's why I authorized that there be 6,000 American troops to flow in to accommodate this exit, number one. And number two, provided all that aircraft in the Gulf to get people out. We pre-positioned all that, anticipated that. Now, granted, it took two days to take control of the airport. We have control of the airport now.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Still a lotta pandemonium outside the airport.

BIDEN: Oh, there is. But, look, b-- but no one's being killed right now, God forgive me if I'm wrong about that, but no one's being killed right now. People are-- we got 1,000-somewhat, 1,200 out, yesterday, a couple thousand today. And it's increasing. We're gonna get those people out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But we've all seen the pictures. We've seen those hundreds of people packed into a C-17. You've seen Afghans falling--

BIDEN: That was four days ago, five days ago.

STEPHANOPOULOS: What did you think when you first saw those pictures?

BIDEN: What I thought was we ha-- we have to gain control of this. We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did.

STEPHANOPOULOS: I-- I think a lot of-- a lot of Americans, and a l-- even a lot of veterans who served in Afghanistan agree with you on the big, strategic picture. They believe we had to get out. But I wonder how you respond to an Army Special Forces officer, Javier McKay (PH). He did seven tours. He was shot twice. He agrees with you. He says, 'We have to cut our losses in Afghanistan.' But he adds, 'I just wish we could've left with honor.'

BIDEN: Look, that's like askin' my deceased son Beau, who spent six months in Kosovo and a year in Iraq as a Navy captain and then major-- I mean, as an Army major. And, you know, I'm sure h-- he had regrets comin' out of Afganista-- I mean, out of Iraq.

He had regrets to what's-- how-- how it's going. But the idea-- what's the alternative? The alternative is why are we staying in Afghanistan? Why are we there? Don't you think that the one-- you know who's most disappointed in us getting out? Russia and China. They'd love us to continue to have to--

STEPHANOPOULOS: So you don't think this could've been handled, this exit could've been handled better in any way? No mistakes?

BIDEN: No. I-- I don't think it could've been handled in a way that there-- we-- we're gonna go back in hindsight and look, but the idea that somehow there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens. I don't know how that happened.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So for you, that was always priced into the decision?

BIDEN: Yes. Now, exactly what happened-- is not priced in. But I knew that they're gonna have an enormous, enorm-- look, one of the things we didn't know is what the Taliban would do in terms of trying to keep people from getting out, what they would do. What are they doing now? They're cooperating, letting

American citizens get out, American personnel get out, embassies get out, et cetera. But they're having-- we're having some more difficulty in having those who helped us when we were in there--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And we don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Pardon me?

STEPHANOPOULOS: We don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Well-- we do know generically and in some specificity what's happening outside of Kabul. We don't know it in great detail. But we do know. And guess what? The Taliban knows if they take on American citizens or American military, we will strike them back like hell won't have it.

STEPHANOPOULOS: All troops are supposed to be out by August 31st. Even if Americans and our Afghan allies are still trying to get out, they're gonna leave?

BIDEN: We're gonna do everything in our power to get all Americans out and our allies out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does that mean troops will stay beyond August 31st if necessary?

BIDEN: It depends on where we are and whether we can get-- ramp these numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000 a day coming out. If that's the case, we'll be-- they'll all be out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: 'Cause we've got, like, 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in the country right now, right? And are you committed to making sure that the troops stay until every American who wants to be out--

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: -- is out?

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about our Afghan allies? We have about 80,000 people--

BIDEN: Well, that's not the s--

STEPHANOPOULOS: Is that too high?

BIDEN: That's too high.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How many--

BIDEN: The estimate we're giving is somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 folks total, counting their families.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does the commitment hold for them as well?

BIDEN: The commitment holds to get everyone out that, in fact, we can get out and everyone that should come out. And that's the objective. That's what we're doing now, that's the path we're on. And I think we'll get there.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So Americans should understand that troops might have to be there beyond August 31st?

BIDEN: No. Americans should understand that we're gonna try to get it done before August 31st.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if we don't, the troops will stay--

BIDEN: If -- if we don't, we'll determine at the time who's left.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And?

BIDEN: And if you're American force -- if there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: You talked about our adversaries, China and Russia. You already see China telling Taiwan, 'See? You can't count on the Americans.'
(LAUGH)

BIDEN: Sh-- why wouldn't China say that? Look, George, the idea that w-- there's a fundamental difference between-- between Taiwan, South Korea, NATO. We are in a situation where they are in-- entities we've made agreements with based on not a civil war they're having on that island or in South Korea, but on an agreement where they have a unity government that, in fact, is trying to keep bad guys from doin' bad things to them.

We have made-- kept every commitment. We made a sacred commitment to Article Five that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with-- Taiwan. It's not even comparable to talk about that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Yeah, but those--

BIDEN: It's not comparable to t--

STEPHANOPOULOS: --who say, 'Look, America cannot be trusted now, America does not keep its promises--'

BIDEN: Who-- who's gonna say that? Look, before I made this decision, I met with all our allies, our NATO allies in Europe. They agreed. We should be getting out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Did they have a choice?

BIDEN: Sure, they had a choice. Look, the one thing I promise you in private, NATO allies are not quiet. You remember from your old days. They're not gonna be quiet. And so-- and by the way, you know, what we're gonna be doing is we're gonna be putting together a group of the G-7, the folks that we work with the most-- to-- I was on the phone with-- with Angela Merkel today. I was on the phone with the British prime minister. I'm gonna be talking to Macron in France to make sure we have a coherent view of how we're gonna deal from this point on.

STEPHANOPOULOS: What happens now in Afghanistan? Do you believe the Taliban have changed?

BIDEN: No. I think-- let me put it this way. I think they're going through sort of an existential crisis about do they want to be recognized by the international community as being a legitimate government. I'm not sure they do. But look, they have--

STEPHANOPOULOS: They care about their beliefs more?

BIDEN: Well, they do. But they also care about whether they have food to eat, whether they have an income that they can provide for their f-- that they can make any money and run an economy. They care about whether or not they can hold together the society that they in fact say they care so much about.

I'm not counting on any of that. I'm not cou-- but that is part of what I think is going on right now in terms of I-- I'm not sure I would've predicted, George, nor would you or anyone else, that when we decided to leave, that they'd provide safe passage for Americans to get out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Beyond Americans, what do we owe the Afghans who are left behind, particularly Afghan women who are facing the prospect of subjugation again?

BIDEN: As many as we can get out, we should. For example, I had a meeting today for a couple hours in the Situation Room just below here. There are Afghan women outside the gate. I told 'em, 'Get 'em on the planes. Get them out. Get them out. Get their families out if you can.'

But here's the deal, George. The idea that we're able to deal with the rights of women around the world by military force is not rational. Not rational. Look what's happened to the Uighurs in western China. Look what's happening in other parts of the world.

Look what's happenin' in, you know, in-- in the Congo. I mean, there are a lotta places where women are being subjugated. The way to deal with that is not with

a military invasion. The way to deal with that is putting economic, diplomatic, and national pre-- international pressure on them to change their behavior.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about the threat to the United States? Most intelligence analysis has predicted that Al Qaeda would come back 18 to 24 months after a withdrawal of American troops. Is that analysis now being revised? Could it be sooner?

BIDEN: It could be. But George, look, here's the deal. Al Qaeda, ISIS, they metastasize. There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria. There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa. There's significant greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan. And we have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out. We're-- we don't have military in Syria to make sure that we're gonna be protected--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And you're confident we're gonna have that in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: Yeah. I'm confident we're gonna have the overriding capability, yes. Look, George, it's like asking me, you know, am I confident that people are gonna act even remotely rationally. Here's the deal. The deal is the threat from Al Qaeda and their associate organizations is greater in other parts of the world to the United States than it is from Afghanistan.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And th-- that tells you that you're-- it's safe to leave?

BIDEN: No. That tells me that-- my dad used to have an expression, George. If everything's equally important to you, nothing's important to you. We should be focusing on where the threat is the greatest. And the threat-- the idea-- we can continue to spend \$1 trillion and have tens of thousands of American forces in Afghanistan when we have what's going on around the world, in the Middle East and North Africa and west-- I mean, excuse me-- yeah, North Africa and Western Africa. The idea we can do that and ignore those-- those looming problems, growing problems, is not-- not rational.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Final question on this. You know, in a couple weeks, we're all gonna commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The Taliban are gonna be ruling Afghanistan, just l-- like they were when our country was attacked. How do you explain that to the American people?

BIDEN: Not true. It's not true. They're not gonna look just like they were we were attacked. There was a guy named Osama bin Laden that was still alive and well. They were organized in a big way, that they had significant help from arou-- from other parts of the world.

We went there for two reasons, George. Two reasons. One, to get Bin Laden, and two, to wipe out as best we could, and we did, the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did it. Then what happened? Began to morph into the notion that, instead of having a counterterrorism capability to have small forces there in-- or in the region to be able to take on Al Qaeda if it tried to reconstitute, we decided to engage in nation building. In nation building. That never made any sense to me.

STEPHANOPOULOS: It sounds like you think we shoulda gotten out a long time ago--

BIDEN: We should've.

STEPHANOPOULOS: --and-- and accept the idea that it was gonna be messy no matter what.

BIDEN: Well, by the-- what would be messy?

STEPHANOPOULOS: The exit--

BIDEN: If we had gotten out a long time ago-- getting out would be messy no matter when it occurred. I ask you, you want me to stay, you want us to stay and send your kids back to Afghanistan? How about it? Are you g-- if you had a son or daughter, would you send them in Afghanistan now? Or later?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Would be hard, but a lot of families have done it.

BIDEN: They've done it because, in fact, there was a circumstance that was different when we started. We were there for two reasons, George. And we

accomplished both ten years ago. We got Osama bin Laden. As I said and got criticized for saying at the time, we're gonna follow him to the gates of hell. Hell, we did--

STEPHANOPOULOS: How will history judge the United States' experience in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: One that we overextended what we needed to do to deal with our national interest. That's like my sayin' they-- they're-- they-- they b-- b-- the border of Tajikistan-- and-- other-- what-- does it matter? Are we gonna go to war because of what's goin' on in Tajikistan? What do you think?

Tell me what-- where in that isolated country that has never, never, never in all of history been united, all the way back to Alexander the Great, straight through the British Empire and the Russians, what is the idea? Are we gonna s-- continue to lose thousands of Americans to injury and death to try to unite that country? What do you think? I think not.

I think the American people are with me. And when you unite that country, what do you have? They're surrounded by Russia in the north or the Stans in the north. You have-- to the west, they have Iran. To the south, they have Pakistan, who's supporting them. And to the-- and-- actually, the east, they have Pakistan and China. Tell me. Tell me. Is that worth our national interest to continue to spend another \$1 trillion and lose thousands more American lives? For what?

STEPHANOPOULOS: I know we're outta time. I have two quick questions on COVID. I know you're gonna make-- be makin' an announcement on booster shots today. Have you and the first lady gotten your booster shots yet?

BIDEN: We're gonna get the booster shots. And-- it's somethin' that I think-- you know, because we g-- w-- we got our shots all the way back in I think December. So it's-- it's-- it's past time. And so the idea (NOISE) that the recommendation-- that's my wife calling. (LAUGH) No. (LAUGH) But all kiddin' aside, yes, we will get the booster shots.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And-- and finally-- are you comfortable with Americans getting a third shot when so many millions around the world haven't had their first?

BIDEN: Absolutely because we're providing more to the rest of the world than all the rest of the world combined. We got enough for everybody American, plus before this year is-- before we get to the middle of next year, we're gonna provide a half a billion shots to the rest of the world. We're keepin' our part of the bargain. We're doin' more than anybody.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. President, thanks for your time.

BIDEN: Thank you.