

Joe Biden Is Who We Said He Was

By Dan McLaughlin

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Joe Biden has badly, visibly bungled America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. He has compounded the problem with his sluggish and dishonest public statements. This has gone so badly that even people and institutions that are normally sympathetic to Biden and his party have noticed. American allies have been appalled, and vocal about it. What is slowly dawning on people is that Biden's critics were right about him all along. Not since James Buchanan has America had a president who came so prepared by experience for the job, yet had so little clue how to do it. That reality will be shoved from consciousness soon enough by people with a professional stake in not acknowledging it, but a growing number of the American people are likely to remember. So will our allies and enemies around the world.

The Hollow Man

It was possible, if you did not look too closely, to construct a case on paper over the past year and a half for Joe Biden as an appropriate person to be president of the United States, commander in chief of its armed forces, and leader of the free world. Certainly, Biden did not lack for experience in high, national public office, exposing him to everything a man would need in order to be prepared for the job. He was a senator for 36 years, dating back to the closing days of the Vietnam War. He chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee twice, including during the post-9/11 era when Congress authorized the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He served two terms as vice president. He traveled to war zones and met scores of foreign leaders. Biden was also a man who came up from humble means and was seasoned by [personal tragedy](#). One could characterize his years in office as the record of a public servant who values important institutions, took many mainstream positions, and showed a willingness and ability to work with people across the aisle.

Yet, longtime Biden-watchers knew better. Two sets of critiques of Biden have followed him over the course of his career, and Republicans and conservatives have hardly been the only ones to level them. First were the things people noticed about Biden before 2019. For all his time-serving in Washington, Biden was widely understood to be a lightweight, a fabulist, a plagiarist, an exaggerating braggart, a walking gaffe machine, a purveyor of malarkey who covered his inch-deep grasp of everything with his Irish charm and his ability to talk fast and at length until the listener had long since lost track of the topic. Biden rarely had ideas of his own, and when he did, they were usually the subject of mockery. His capacity for filling airtime at Senate hearings without actually saying anything was legendary. Yet, as Clarence Thomas and others warned, Biden could also be two-faced, reassuring people with promises in private and breaking them in public.

He could handle the Senate because he'd been there since he was 29, and there are lots of places to hide from accountability as one of a hundred. When Obama made the biggest right decision of

his career to take out Osama bin Laden, Biden was the guy in the room [saying](#) “Mr. President, my suggestion is, don’t go” because there would be nobody to pass the political buck to if it failed.

It wasn’t just the bin Laden raid. Biden was also known for being [wrong on just about every significant foreign-policy issue in Washington for half a century](#), from the Cold War to the War on Terror. In 1973-75, after the United States had signed the Paris Peace Accords that were supposed to end the Vietnam War without the collapse of South Vietnam, Biden was a loud voice in the Senate for cutting off any further U.S. assistance to prevent the North from overrunning the South. He [didn’t care about America’s moral obligations](#):

“I may be the most immoral son of a gun in this room,” Biden said at a Democratic caucus in early 1975 as he argued against aid to Cambodia. . . . “I’m getting sick and tired of hearing about morality, our moral obligation. There’s a point where you are incapable of meeting moral obligations that exist worldwide.”

He didn’t care what happened to the people we abandoned, either:

“I do not believe the United States has an obligation, moral or otherwise, to evacuate foreign nationals. . . . The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese.”

Barack Obama was in high school in Hawaii in the years that led up to the fall of Saigon. Donald Trump was still just another no-name real estate developer from Queens. George W. Bush was packing off to Harvard Business School. Bill Clinton was fresh out of law school and teaching in Arkansas. Jimmy Carter was winding down his single term as governor of Georgia, still unknown on the national stage. Ronald Reagan was leaving behind his governorship of California and gearing up for his first serious national campaign. But Joe Biden was already in D.C. helping shape the congressional policy that tied the hands of Gerald Ford while Saigon was overrun.

Hawks and doves alike blasted Biden for opposing the Gulf War in 1990-91, supporting the Iraq War in 2002-03, opposing the surge in 2007, and [supporting](#) the 2009-11 withdrawal (a move that was seconded by [Tony Blinken](#) and [Lloyd Austin](#), now his secretaries of state and defense). In 2010, Biden [boasted](#) of the U.S. departure from Iraq, “Some said that our drawdown would bring about more violence. Well, they were wrong, because the Iraqis are ready to take charge.” Instead, ISIS took over nearly half the country, and the United States had to go back to war.

Biden never actually ran anything bigger than a Senate committee (which runs on its staff) until he was vice president. The things he ran as vice president (such as overseeing the stimulus) were notable disasters. *Politico* [reported](#) that Biden’s own boss, Barack Obama, warned another Democrat in 2016, “Don’t underestimate Joe’s ability to f*** things up.” It has not been hard to notice how much Obama has kept his distance from his former veep as Biden does just that. You might prefer partying on Martha’s Vineyard with George Clooney and John Legend, too, if the alternative was making your political legacy a hostage to fortune in the hands of Joe Biden.

The façade of Biden’s genial charm was also prone to cracking when he was actually pushed to do more than just run his mouth. His infamous meltdowns on the campaign trail in 1987 happened when reporters were hot on his trail for stealing another man’s speeches and biography. Biden told one voter, “I have a much higher IQ than you do, I suspect,” and tried to shout down the press with a series of lies about his academic attainments. “I exaggerate when I’m angry,” Biden conceded later. Yes, we noticed. When he debated Paul Ryan in 2012, he went full Joe Biden, shouting over Ryan repeatedly to prevent any sort of engagement with his ideas.

With Biden’s 2020 presidential campaign came a second set of newer critiques. He was visibly not the same man in his late seventies, no longer able to talk his way around trouble. That was widely noticed by progressives in the primaries until it became inconvenient to mention. The quick-tongued gaffes turned to confusion and sentences that were abandoned midstream after Biden lost his way. Without the old gift of blarney, Biden’s fuse when confronted was shorter — he called one voter a “lying, dog-faced pony soldier,” and berated another with “look, fat” and challenged the guy to a push-up contest. The man who once would talk to anyone about anything for any amount of time retreated to taking questions only from pre-scripted lists of friendly reporters. Biden was always a man without courage, but now he was discarding long-held positions overnight, allowing himself to be bullied by his own party’s extremists. Generational changes in Congress had also robbed him of his feel for how the Hill works.

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The pandemic was a godsend, allowing him to hide in his basement for months and avoid unscripted questions. He won the election [by making himself as small and low-profile as he needed to be](#). Opinion polls for much of this year have shown him enjoying a honeymoon period with voters tired of Trump who are happy to have an absentee president for a while.

Leading from Behind

Biden’s handling of Afghanistan has exposed all of that. Presidents can remain aloof from Capitol Hill. They can send out underlings to handle public-health guidance, lawsuits, or new regulations. But foreign crises demand active, personal leadership. That has gone badly. Everyone who said for decades that Biden was a lightweight ill-equipped to handle a major crisis has been vindicated.

The country has fallen rapidly into chaos, ruining the work of two decades of American soldiers in ways that cannot easily be repaired. Bagram Airfield was [inexplicably abandoned](#) to the Taliban without even informing the Afghan army commander. More than 10,000 Americans were caught behind the lines, and [Biden’s national-security team had no plan to get them out](#). Biden had even [eliminated a State Department program](#) for evacuating Americans in danger overseas. [Billions of dollars in weaponry we provided to the Afghan army fell into Taliban hands](#), to use or to barter to other enemies who can better deploy it. At a Pentagon [briefing](#) on Monday, General Hank Taylor admitted that he could not answer whether the United States was

“taking any other sort of steps to prevent aircraft or other military equipment from falling into the hands of the Taliban.”

Once again, as in Vietnam, Biden was blindly committed to total withdrawal without regard for the consequences on the ground, and more determined to pander to his party’s left flank than to ensure a competent withdrawal. As in Vietnam, the military, strategic, and humanitarian costs were terrible, and played out on television in a spectacle of national humiliation that reverberated around the globe.

Once again, as in Iraq in 2010, Biden was blithely confident in public that all was well and would work out fine. He [even pledged](#) that the situation was nothing like South Vietnam in 1975. He promised in early July — *six weeks ago* — that the Afghan army could handle the situation, and that it was highly unlikely that the Taliban could take over. Those assurances [proved demonstrably false](#). Biden has [lied at enormous length](#). Stuck in a defensive crouch, Biden has [fallen back on his habit](#) of just making stuff up and then trying to talk over the truth:

The *New York Times* confirms what many of us suspected, that President Biden was informed of how the Taliban was likely to quickly reconquer Afghanistan, [and he simply chose to lie to the American public](#). “Classified assessments by American spy agencies over the summer painted an increasingly grim picture of the prospect of a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and warned of the rapid collapse of the Afghan military, even as President Biden and his advisers said publicly that was unlikely to happen as quickly, according to current and former American government officials.”

In his first public remarks, Biden refused to take questions but nonetheless managed to spin out a web of falsehoods and blame-shifting. He blamed Donald Trump for agreeing to leave Afghanistan in May 2021 (a deadline that Biden himself inexplicably changed to September 11), yet tried to take credit for ending the war. In fact, Biden has reversed course on plenty of Trump foreign-policy initiatives, even ones that were intensively negotiated with allies and adversaries across the globe. It was Biden’s choice to go forward, and Biden’s choice how to do it. Biden blamed the Afghan government for not negotiating with the Taliban. He [misleadingly blamed](#) the Afghan army for folding up despite U.S. close air support, not mentioning that we had in fact withdrawn that support when he decided to pull out.

Biden’s anger when cornered has also come out again. When he sat down with George Stephanopoulos on Wednesday and took just a few pre-scripted questions Friday, he bristled at even a few probing questions. In the Stephanopoulos interview, when asked about the scenes of chaos in Kabul, Biden sneered that this was old news: “That was four days ago, five days ago!” It was two days earlier; Biden had lost track of the days. On Friday, he shut down the questioning after a single adversarial question from NPR, of all sources.

Biden has, [as Jim Geraghty has detailed](#), kept a very light schedule of public appearances as this has all spun out of control, while taking few calls from foreign heads of state. Yet, even limited to the most delicate schedule, he is unequal to the task.

Too Ugly to Ignore

Biden might, in normal circumstances, have relied on the American and European press, Democratic politicians, and his allies abroad to close ranks against any criticism. But instead, they have come to face what he really is.

Why? Perhaps because the failure is too public and too easily dramatized to ignore. There is a difference between bad, and bad with pictures. For all the American media's political biases, there is no rule of television more certain than "if it bleeds, it leads."

The cable news networks have rediscovered the power of the visual images of American failure, led by CNN's Clarissa Ward. The public is alarmed, with Biden's approval rating crashing ten points in a month and likely to get worse before it hits bottom.

American allies have been aghast at this performance, given that we acted unilaterally and high-handedly in ending a collective NATO operation, and did so [with little consultation with them](#):

In his Monday speech, Mr. Biden made only a glancing reference to NATO and none to America's European allies in his account of the conflict. U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson reportedly had to wait a day and a half after requesting a call with the President to get Mr. Biden on the phone.

The *Washington Post*, maybe the newspaper with the most important readership among the center-left Washington establishment, published a [column](#) on Thursday titled "Withdrawal from Afghanistan forces allies and adversaries to reconsider America's global role":

President Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan has triggered a globe-spanning rethink of America's role in the world, as European allies discuss their need to play a bigger part in security matters and Russia and China consider how to promote their interests in a Taliban-led Afghanistan. . . . In the European Union, which held an emergency session of foreign ministers on Afghanistan on Tuesday, officials offered rare criticism of Washington for risking a flood of refugees to their borders and the return of a platform for terrorism in Central Asia. . . . Germany's conservative candidate to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel, Armin Laschet, on Tuesday called the withdrawal of forces "the greatest debacle that NATO has experienced since its foundation."

In fact, it appears that Biden [lied to our allies about his intentions](#):

President Joe Biden told key allies in June that he would maintain enough of a security presence in Afghanistan to ensure they could continue to operate in the capital following the main U.S. withdrawal, a vow made before the Taliban's rapid final push across the country, according to a British diplomatic memo seen by Bloomberg. Biden promised U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other leaders at the Group of Seven summit in Cornwall, England, that "critical U.S. enablers" would remain in place to keep Kabul safe following the drawdown of NATO forces, the note said. British officials determined the U.S. would provide enough personnel to ensure that the U.K. embassy in Kabul could continue operating.

Critics in the British Parliament were scathing on Biden's "dishonour." As the BBC [summarized](#) the reaction in the British press:

A number of papers also highlight anger at Joe Biden — with [the Daily Telegraph headline](#): "Parliament holds the president in contempt". It describes the criticism as an unprecedented rebuke to a US president. [An unnamed cabinet minister tells the Times](#) the US failure to realise that Afghanistan was on the brink of collapse shows that America is "looking inward and is unwilling to do even a modest amount to maintain global order". The minister adds: "The US remains by far and away our most important ally, but we are not Washington's most important ally by some stretch."

The Beeb, hardly a redoubt of hawkish or right-wing sentiment, has been blasting away at Biden all week. North America editor Jon Sopel, for example, [thundered](#):

The shambolic unravelling of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan comes from a yet to be written textbook of "how to lose at everything". Warnings hadn't been heeded, intelligence was clearly totally inadequate, planning was lamentable, execution woeful. . . . Did no-one think that it might have been better to have ordered the withdrawal for the dead of winter when Taliban forces weren't there, poised to fill the vacuum? . . . After the bewildering events of the past few days, how exactly is America back?

Until Sunday, Europe thought Joe Biden was an expert on foreign policy. Now, the American president's decision to allow Afghanistan to collapse into the arms of the Taliban has European officials worried he has unwittingly accelerated what his predecessor Donald Trump started: the degradation of the Western alliance and everything it is supposed to stand for in the world.

Across Europe, officials have reacted with a mix of disbelief and a sense of betrayal. Even those who cheered Biden's election and believed he could ease the recent tensions in the transatlantic relationship said they regarded the withdrawal from Afghanistan as nothing short of a mistake of historic magnitude. "I say this with a heavy heart and with horror over what is happening, but the early withdrawal was a serious and far-reaching miscalculation by the current administration," said Norbert Röttgen, chairman of the German parliament's foreign relations committee. "This does fundamental damage to the political and moral credibility of the West."

. . . While Merkel has avoided direct criticism of Biden, behind the scenes she has made it clear that she considered the hasty withdrawal a mistake. "For those who believed in democracy and freedom, especially for women, these are bitter events," she told a meeting with officials from her party late Monday, according to German media reports.

Back home, Leon Panetta, the defense secretary under Obama from 2011 to 2013 and a man who has served alongside Biden for decades, looked at the inept execution of the withdrawal and [commented](#), "It just struck me that they were crossing their fingers and hoping chaos would not result." Panetta suggested that Biden just isn't the same man anymore: "It's not the Joe Biden that I often saw in the National Security Council raising questions about the planning involved in any decision that the president had to face."

Three different Senate committees, all led by Democrats, have now [promised](#) to launch probes of what went wrong — a highly unusual display, given the longstanding refusal of Democrats on Capitol Hill to investigate their own administrations. New Jersey’s Bob Menendez: “I am disappointed that the Biden administration clearly did not accurately assess the implications of a rapid U.S. withdrawal. We are now witnessing the horrifying results of many years of policy and intelligence failures.”

It is long past time for people to notice who Joe Biden always was, and who he has become in his dotage. He is a hollow man, incapable of managing a picnic, let alone a war. His credibility, always unearned, is shot. His only real skill is his quick tongue, and it has deserted him. Even his onetime virtues — his old-timey patriotism, his faith in institutions, his empathy for others — are easily discarded as the old man reverts to his base instincts when cornered. Biden must hobble through the remainder of his presidency, if only because the alternative is Kamala Harris, his [imprudent choice — or threat](#) — of an heir. But nobody should, any longer, pretend that Joe Biden is fit to lead this nation.