

Testimony of COL (Ret.) Seth Krummrich

House Foreign Affairs Committee

“A Failure to Plan:

Examining the Biden Administration’s Preparation for the Afghanistan Withdrawal

27 July 2023

Introduction:

Chairman McCaul, Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, Ranking Member Crow, and the members of the committee and subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify. I want to pass a special thanks to the members of the committee who served in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, flawed US government strategic decisions overshadowed the US military's planning efforts resulting in total strategic failure. The results speak for themselves. 665+ days since Afghan girls' education stopped at the 6th grade, millions of women lost their future overnight, and our Afghan brothers who stood shoulder to shoulder with us against the forces of tyranny and oppression now punished, jailed, or executed. All hope for a brighter future destroyed. The enemy runs Afghanistan.

The optics of our withdrawal were terrible, pictures of refugees falling off cargo planes, families smashed against the walls of Hamid Karzi International Airport (HKIA), and our military Service Members desperately trying to execute an evacuation in total chaos. Our ill-timed and hasty exit set the conditions for failure. Best military advice was ignored, the timetable heavily favored the Taliban, and our Afghan allies were not given the time and space to establish their government without US support. We failed our Afghan partners and humiliated ourselves on the global stage.

It is important to define success and failure. Fighting a war and establishing a sovereign government means we have the moral responsibility to end the conflict and withdraw our military in a deliberate and responsible manner. As we controlled the timing and tempo of the withdrawal, I define success as a methodical and orderly US withdrawal that sets the optimum conditions for the Afghan government to take charge and lead their country into the future. We absolutely failed to achieve that success. While the US Military did an incredible job executing their strict and restrictive orders for both the military withdrawal and Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) operations, the administration's ill-conceived timeline, selective intelligence blindness, failure to adopt best military advice, and the Department of State's inability to handle a crisis doomed the Afghan transition.

To be clear, the US government's planning process was just one part of the overall failure. For this testimony, I will focus on the Afghan Withdrawal and NEO planning processes though I am available to discuss any other issues surrounding the withdrawal. Below are three phases that best capture the planning process and the decision making based on my experience.

1. Strategic Decisions: Selective Intelligence and poor timing of the withdrawal created a sub-optimal environment for military planning and executing the retrograde and NEO missions. (Symbolic decision timing undercut the best tactical and operational timeline and military advice).

2. Planning: Poor US government planning based on a "best case scenario" that ignored both historically identified threats and the 4-Star Generals' recommended COA. The compressed planning timeline hampered "worst case scenario" planning.

3. Execution: As the crisis unfolded, CENTCOM executed the NEO plan. The Department of State's unresponsive and backlogged visa system abandoned our allies and friends, directly amplifying the humanitarian disaster at the HKIA gates. This failure forced ad hoc non-government "pop-up organizations" (Pineapple Express, Afghan Evac and Exfil Network, etc) to address our government's ineffective evacuation process in a desperate attempt to save our Afghan allies.

My perspective: As the Chief of Staff at Special Operations Command-Central (SOCCENT) in 2021, my job provided visibility into the high-end strategic level planning and decision-making process all the way down to the tactical execution of the Afghan withdrawal. SOCCENT commands and controls responsibilities for all Special Operations activities (-JSOC) in the Middle East and Central Asia, reporting directly to the Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander who is responsible for all U S military equities throughout the entire region. Based on my 28+ year career, I understand how the USG/military planning and decision-making system works both starting and ending conflicts. I worked as a planner and executor for the Iraq withdrawal in 2010-11 and in the 2011 Libya conflict with a unique vantage point on the Joint Staff as an executive assistant in the J3 front office. The Afghanistan withdrawal decision making flaws undercut military planning efforts and set the conditions for the Afghanistan government's failure.

My experience with Afghanistan can best be described as "bookends". In 2001-02, I was part of the initial invasion into Afghanistan with Task Force Dagger. I was a Special Forces Captain (rank:O-3), a team leader who fought in the conflict from November 2001- March 2002. In 2019-2022, I was the SOCCENT Chief of Staff as a Colonel (rank:O-6). Therefore, I had a chance to see hope take root in 2001-02 and hope destroyed in 2021 in Afghanistan.

I am a realist. I know the Afghanistan conflict would end at some point. I acknowledge the Biden Administration inherited the complex peace deal from the Trump Administration. This left the Biden Administration in the difficult position to execute the deal. The Biden Administration absolutely controlled the "when and how" that withdrawal would happen. Our desire to leave Afghanistan overshadowed a prudent approach required for an operation of this massive scope and scale based on timing and support to the Afghan government. We traded patience for speed, shaping the environment for the Afghan government and military's collapse and the space for the Taliban to seize power.

The defunct Afghanistan government's incompetence and corruption are the main reasons for their collapse. However, the US must own its share of the responsibility. I believe four Presidential administrations and the lack of a consistent Afghan strategy share responsibility for this failure not just the Biden Administration. That said, I believe the majority stakeholder for the failed transition and evacuation crisis is the Biden Administration as they set the timetable and operation in motion. But blaming an administration will not change what happened. Moving forward, the real value of this testimony is taking responsibility for our failures and acknowledging our mistakes so others can learn what to avoid in the future.

1.Strategic Decisions: Selective Intelligence and Timing

On 14 April 2021, the President announced the total withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021, the 20th anniversary of 9/11. It was presented as a deliberate and responsible withdraw that handed power to the Afghan government. The timeline was very aggressive; less than five months from announcement to mission completion, an incredibly tight timeline for military logistics planners to plan and execute a mission of this magnitude. For experienced Afghan veterans, the Administration's plan was overly optimistic. Success like this does not exist in Afghanistan, a place where struggle is a constant, success is rare. Setting a withdrawal timeline based on a symbolic date and selective intelligence while not planning for the worst-case scenarios created a self-generated crisis.

Prior to CENTCOM receiving the order to plan and execute the withdrawal, I saw three fundamental flaws that directly threatened the military plan and mission execution.

1. Selective intelligence. Intelligence drives planning. Before the withdrawal planning process started, all elements of our intelligence community painted a daily picture of Afghan current events, threats, and projected future outcomes based on their experience and training. Senior decision makers rely heavily on this intelligence to make the right decision, both “what to do” and “when to do it”. The trap decision makers fall into is selectively choosing intelligence to support their favored COA rather than letting intelligence inform and shape decisions. I call this “selective intelligence blindness.” A 5-month full retrograde operation with a transition of power to a fragile Afghan Government only makes sense if you believe the Taliban will not threaten the outcome. The Administration made that determination based on intelligence that overestimated the Afghan government and military’s capabilities and wished away the Taliban’s capabilities and plans. Studying the Taliban’s growing strength and intentions over the last 20 years, there was very little evidence to suggest the Biden administration’s plan would work and a mountain range of evidence to suggest the plan would fail. GEN Milley, GEN Miller, and Gen McKenzie all highlighted the key fact that the Taliban were not abiding by the Doha Agreement. In fact, the Taliban were increasing their violence. They all recommended to not withdraw until the Doha Agreement conditions were met. Yet, this expert analysis and clear Taliban threats were ignored skewing the final Course of Action selection by the President. The administration chose the intelligence they wanted to believe, not the intelligence that warned them of failure.

2. Timing. The withdrawal window, 01 May-11 September 2021, was planned during the peak of the well-known Afghanistan fighting season. The Taliban are at their strongest, most aggressive, and most logistically capable during the May-October time period. US and NATO forces endured this reality for 20 years, it was not a surprise. Why would we leave the fragile Afghan government vulnerable to the Taliban’s strongest advantage? Why did the “20 year anniversary of 9/11” matter more than delaying for 5 more months to provide space and time for the Afghan government and military to establish their footing? Removing US military support quickly at the height of the summer fighting season led to disastrous results. The lightning-fast US retrograde demoralized our Afghan forces as the Taliban attacked. With the aggressive Taliban on the march, the UN reported Afghanistan suffered its highest civilian casualty count on record, not because of international military action, but because of Afghan-on-Afghan violence.

3. Short planning / execution window. The Administration’s aggressive timeline put CENTCOM in an extremely difficult position to close and absorb a 4-star USFOR-A headquarters and mission, plan the withdrawal, and execute it in under 5 months (separate from the NEO mission). After POTUS’s April announcement, basic questions swirled around the planning teams. When is the command and control “baton handover” between USFOR-A and CENTCOM? Who should lead the planning efforts from April-July? It was painfully obvious that GEN Miller’s four-star experienced USFOR-A HQ was turning over on the ground Command and Control at a critical point to a Tampa-based CENTCOM team that historically relied on GEN Miler’s team to run the Afghan theater. Yes, on paper, GEN Miller reported to Gen McKenzie, but in practice, there were well defined lanes of responsibility that were largely respected by both staffs. The decision was made to end GEN Miller’s USFOR-A command on 12 July, frighteningly close to the September withdrawal goal with seemingly no consideration of the Taliban’s military advances or the collapsing ANDSF. The military has a planning maxim: “1/3 time to plan, 2/3rds time to rehearsal” before we execute operations. There was no time for traditional military planning to include looking at

worst case scenarios in real detail. To meet the 11 September timeline, we had to plan immediately and execute now.

2. The Planning Process

In GEN McKenzie's 12 July 2021 closing comments at the USFOR-A transitioning ceremony in Kabul, he laid out three goals for the future relationship with the Afghanistan government.

"While our drawdown continues and will be completed no later than the end of August, we have already reached the point where we can today thank USFOR-A and our NATO partners for their effort. Their work here is nearly complete, but the United States commitment to support the Afghan government and its armed forces carries on. And we retain a protective posture that enables us to do the following things:.

- *First of all, maintain an ongoing diplomatic presence.*
- *Second, support the Afghan security forces, people and government.*
- *And again, and finally, prevent Afghanistan once again, becoming a safe haven for terrorism that threatens the U.S. homeland and the homelands of our friends and neighbors."*

None of that happened. Shortly after this speech, the Taliban achieved irreversible momentum to take full control of Afghanistan. At CENTCOM, a switch flipped between planning for those three goals to executing the imminent NEO, the largest airlift evacuation in US history. How did the mission change 180 degrees in a matter of days? One glaring reason was the US Government's poor decision making.

The planning process: To understand how the US Government (USG), in particular the military, decides on which course of action (COA) to execute, it is worth reviewing the national planning system and process used to make the final COA decision. In the most basic terms, the President leverages the National Security Council, with DoD as a critical stakeholder, to take the President's guidance and generate COAs for the NSC and ultimately the President's decision. For military planning, this is an iterative process in which the Global Combatant Command (GCC), in this case CENTCOM, receives the initial guidance, generates a number of distinct COAs, and presents them to the Joint Staff for the CJCS and SECDEF to present to the NSC and President for review, modification, and a final decision. Equally as important as generating distinct COAs for the President and the NSC is identifying "when" in time and space the decision needs to be made to execute the chosen COA. Example: In the case of the Libyan conflict, 13 separate and distinct COAs were presented to the NSC and President Obama for consideration. In parallel, the decision points of "when" to strike were constantly updated by events on the ground and continual intelligence updates to the NSC and POTUS. While the military and inter agency (IA) provide their best recommendations, ultimately, the President decides which COA to execute and when to start the operation.

In Afghanistan: The same process unfolded with the Afghanistan withdrawal on a compressed timeline driven by the symbolic withdrawal date of 11 September 2021. Guidance was received from the President and the NSC, CENTCOM generated several COAs for consideration, the military and IA gave their best advice recommendations, and a decision was made to execute. In the late September 2021 SASC hearings, both Gen McKenzie and GEN Miller, the most experienced Generals with the best vantage point to understand what could happen with a rapid withdrawal, testified they advised against a full

withdrawal advocating for an advisor presence to help bolster the Afghan military until the Taliban met the conditions of the Doha Agreement. Their best military advice recommended COA was not chosen.

The President's directed COA reduced the US footprint to the US Embassy and its support missions at HKIA. I termed it as "the island", a space that included the Embassy compound and the roads leading to the airport, and HKIA. The post 11 September 2021 plan did have military personnel working at the Embassy but under Department of State authorities, a common relationship at our global embassies. The assumption was the Afghan government and military would remain in charge and the US would run its diplomatic functions, to include military liaison functions routinely found in all US embassies.

When the final decision is made, the military executes as directed. When the President's selected COA (the Island) was received by the CENTCOM team, a grim cloud of impending doom hung over the staff. The planning directives had defined guardrails that we followed. Over the next three months, we all watched the Taliban's advance and had our worst nightmares come true. When Ambassador called for a NEO on 14 August 2023, CENTCOM discarded the "Island plan" and immediately executed a massive NEO.

The Administration's COA captures the "mortal planning sin" of planning for the best-case scenario. In the military decision-making process, we plan for "most likely" and the "most dangerous" COAs. We spend time deliberately wargaming out what the worst outcome could be and develop resiliency options to prevent this dangerous outcome from happening. This planning happened at CENTCOM generating the best military advice to avoid a full withdrawal and leave an advisor force to assist the Afghan government and military as it stood on its own. After September 2021, I heard numerous senior leaders express "surprise" at the collapse of the AFG military and Government and the speed of which the Taliban took Kabul. I am incredulous of this supposed "surprise" as all the evidence of this outcome was clear well before the decision was made to withdraw. In my opinion, the evidence was ignored to fit the selected "Island" COA.

Two Plans: There were two plans that took place between April-August 2021. The first was the military withdrawal, largely complete by late July besides 600-700 service members tasked to protect the embassy and HKIA until a contract guard force could be established. The second was the NEO operation, initiated on 14 August by Ambassador Wilson. The NEO was impressive, the largest US airlift evacuation in history. Both military plans were successful operationally, but overall, the strategic goals were a complete and utter failure. It highlights that the military aspect is only part of the overall US government's plan, the "action arm" if you will. If the overall transitional strategy is flawed, it does not matter how well the military performs.

Execution: While the focus of this testimony is on the planning process, I want to touch briefly on relevant plan execution points.

1. The COA collapses: The Administration's COA did not survive long before the Taliban advanced on Kabul. In February 2021, the Taliban controlled 78 districts (of 419), mid-June, over 100 districts, and mid-July over 200 districts. By late June it was apparent that the Taliban achieved serious momentum taking villages, districts, then entire provinces. I called their advance the "red blob" as on our large Operations Center map, we tracked the Taliban front line advance daily, looking like a red blob gobbling up terrain at the speed of their logistics. NEO planning ramped up in DoD as CENTCOM pivoted to a full evacuation. While we had a solid plan for

evacuating US personnel and visa holders, The Department of State had no plan for helping our non-visa holding Afghan allies evacuate. Those allies were in mortal danger with the Taliban take-over.

2. Speeding to failure: The US military's retrograde was impressive in its speed and scope. The problem was the shock of our immediate departure stunned and de-moralized our Afghan allies, leaving them psychologically shaken and unnecessarily vulnerable the raging Taliban storm headed their way...at the height of the fighting season. The important documentary "Retrograde" captures the horrifying reactions of hardened Afghan forces learning the US was leaving immediately and not coming back. Once the initial Afghan forces faltered and fled, fear spread like wildfire and other units caved. Afghan units that wanted to fight found their logistics lines evaporated leaving them to be captured or killed without ammunition, air support or reinforcements.
3. Rules of Engagement / Air Strikes: The initial Rules of Engagement (ROE) were restrictive for the US, specifically could only be used in self-defense. As the US withdrew and the Taliban aggressively attacked the Afghan military and civilians, ROE loosened for air strikes to support Afghan units. It did not help. At a certain point, I openly asked "why are we continuing to kill Taliban when it is clear they will take the country?" There was no answer. Given the clear fate of Afghanistan, I assessed these strikes would only hurt our evacuation operations, threaten our imminent NEO and follow-on strategic goals.
4. Airlift: While the Afghan withdrawal was the biggest embarrassment in CENTCOM's history, the headquarters did a magnificent job orchestrating the NEO airlift campaign. Moving over 120,000 personnel in a few weeks is impressive and should be remembered as the lone bright spot in this disaster. It was the largest airlift in US history. The one criticism I had of CENTCOM is they completely focused on the airlift in July and August. There was relief and jubilation expressed by the CENTCOM senior leaders as MG Donohue's last plane departed Kabul. I felt emptiness and betrayal for those we abandoned. I was angry at the celebrations I witnessed. Over time I became less critical as I understand the relief and joy was based on the situation not being worse for our Service Members' evacuation.
5. Credit to the Taliban: I hate the Taliban; they are the enemy. Their values are diametrically opposed to the United States. I will give them credit for one thing, they helped us leave. It was the only part of the Doha Agreement they honored. If the Taliban chose to, they could've shot down our evacuation aircraft and humiliated us even further on the way out. The reality is our humanitarian crisis evacuation and subsequent global humiliation were self-generated. The Taliban did not dog-pile us when they had the chance. They knew they won. Once we left, they could ignore the rest of the naive Doha Agreement, which they did. The NEO could have been much worse for us. We got off easy. The Afghan people we left behind suffered the consequence of our feckless decisions.

3. Department of State's Failure, Ad-Hoc Groups Respond

The images of families pushed against the outer HKIA walls for days is impossible to forget. Why were they not allowed safe passage from Afghanistan? Based on my observations, the blame falls on the State Department's inability to stand up a crisis task force and address their broken Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. The Afghan allies who worked closely with the US for decades and committed to lead Afghanistan after the US's departure were trapped with no escape. The SIV program was specifically designed to help our allies in this exact situation. It failed at the worst possible time.

On 30 June 2023, the Department of State's After Action Review slams the Department for their failure to plan and glaring lack of leadership that amplified the humanitarian crisis at HKIA. Prior to President Biden's 14 April announcement, the SIV application process was backlogged months and in many cases years. After working for years to support US efforts, these Afghans patiently waited for their SIVs to be approved and depart Afghanistan. Now that the Taliban were on the march, those Afghans that planned to stay and lead the government now found themselves in a panic to secure a visa for their families and get out of Afghanistan before the Taliban could exact their retribution.

The last two weeks in August were brutal. Tens of thousands panicked Afghans packed the walls around HKIA desperately trying to get airlifted to safety. The State Department gave ineffective instructions to "submit your SIV application, go home, and wait for a phone call to proceed to HKIA." Those calls were not coming, and the Afghans knew it. The Taliban now controlled the roads leading to the airport. They checked for visas and if the fleeing Afghans were on their "arrest on sight list." Therefore, our Afghan allies had to stay at HKIA and pray an opportunity presented itself to escape.

Frustrated Americans created ad hoc pop-up organizations like the Pineapple Express, the Afghan Exfil and Evac channel, and many other similar groups. These organizations all knew trapped and desperate Afghans and lobbied for their evacuation. When the Department of State's SIV program broke, these groups reached out to Service Members and Inter-Agency personnel at HKIA to assist getting their friends through the gates, onto a plane, and to a safe haven. Cloak and dagger bona fides replaced the SIV process to get our friends out of Afghanistan. Disgusted by our failure, I provided support to these organizations. By day, I lobbied for these Afghan friends through my formal military channels. At night, I supported the Afghan Exfil and Evac team. Here is one vignette that demonstrates how these groups found ways to save our friends when the State Department failed.

BG Abdul Latif vignette

On 25 August 2021, I received a call from a friend that Brigadier General (BG) Abdul Latif, an Afghan General who fought for over seven years supporting our Marines and Army Special Forces in the ever-violent Gardez Province, was on the run in Kabul with his family. The Taliban burned his house down and he needed to flee the country. The problem was he and his family did not have approved SIVs as they planned to stay in Afghanistan. Now they all had a death sentence and needed to escape.

I reached out to BG Latif. He was living out of his sedan with his wife and three young sons (pic below) for 7 days. He was desperate, scared, and out of options. He sent me his family's passport and personal information. I loaded it in the SIV system and received the horrible advice to "send them home and wait for a call." If they did that, they would all be dead. I reached out to my Afghan Evac and Exfil channel and started working through the informal channels.



The team put me in touch with an inter-agency contact at HKIA. I explained who I was and BG Latif's situation. He sent me a map with a gate location (pic below) and said to move BG Latif and his family here, at midnight, show a secret cellphone picture (cup of coffee) to the guard and say, "I need to see Dave and Dan".



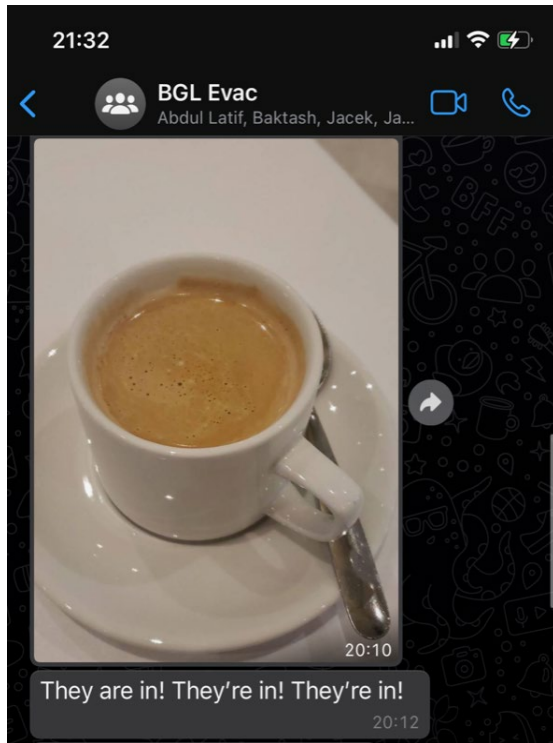
BG Latif and his family moved to this unmarked gate at midnight, it was packed (pic below). There was no guard. Meanwhile, the US warned of an imminent attack on HKIA. Talking BG Latif, we decided he would stay there as he had no choice but to risk death to save his family. Petrified, he and his entire family held their ground. No guard appeared for the next 5 hours. The pressure was intense.



As hope faded to get BG Latif and his family out on his eighth day of living in the HKIA chaos, I received a call from my HKIA contact to move BG Latif to another gate immediately. More warnings of imminent attacks were announced. BG Latif and his family rush to the next gate. The sun rose on the morning of 26 August 2021 when they arrived at the next gate. It was also packed. BG sent me a pic (see below).



Desperate, BG Latif waved the coffee cup picture while he and his family started screaming for “Dave and Dan”. The Marines, in the tower (picture) saw the coffee picture and send a group of Marines out, grab BG Latif and his family in the chaos, and pull them into HKIA. I got this message from my HKIA contact.



BG Latif sent me two pics shortly thereafter. The first is his family in HKIA, looking relieved and happy, the second a few hours later, on a US plane headed to Qatar and an uncertain future.



Three hours after I received these pictures, terrorists hit Abbey Gate and killed 183 Afghans hoping for their opportunity to escape and 13 brave and amazing US Service Members.

I wept for the Latif family's successful escape and the heartbreak for those that died trying to escape, all friends of the US who were failed by their government and our broken promise of a responsible withdrawal and transition to an Afghan government. I was proud to stand with US citizens who stepped in to help where the US Government's strategy failed. As a professional military officer, I was ashamed and filled with rage that we screwed this transition up so badly. In my opinion, our failure brought dishonor to the many sacrifices of our KIA, WIA, Gold Star family members, combat veterans, military

families the endured the deployments, and all of our NATO and Afghan allies' sacrifices. The bill remains too massive to articulate. In my heart, I suspect our effort in Afghanistan was not worth the cost.

Conclusion:

"The enemy is in charge in Kabul, there's no other way to describe that."

"Intelligence reports suggesting the Afghan forces could hold off longer were "a swing and a miss." "

Gen Mark Milley, 28 September, 2021 SASC hearings.

I focused this testimony on the US Government and Military's planning processes, specifically where the Administration's strategy failed and where the military succeeded despite the overall failure. Our government controlled the "when and how" we would leave Afghanistan and transition to the Afghan government. We failed. The Biden Administration's decisions undercut any chance for success to transition to a full standing Afghanistan government.

We have a moral responsibility to be deliberate with these difficult and massive undertakings. In the future, we must be conservative and cautious, not speed up the process and rush to failure. Move at the speed of your slowest element, in this case, the Afghan military. We must respect the intelligence assessments, especially those reports that don't fit your narrative. Always remember who you are dealing with and negotiate from a position of strength. The Taliban were not equal partners in this situation. The Taliban were (and remain) untrustworthy and held no military advantage when the US and NATO supported Afghanistan. The Taliban made no effort to honor the Doha Agreements leading up to the April 2021 decision to retrograde. Since the Afghanistan collapse, the Taliban failed to uphold 6 of 7 of their key Doha Agreement provisions. "We held up our end of the bargain" is a naïve and foolhardy statement when you are dealing with a proven duplicitous partner. We controlled the withdraw and transition mission. We failed. The Taliban won. Afghanistan is a terrorist incubator again. We must do better in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

A personal note: This was a difficult and painful undertaking as the Afghan collapse still haunts me. I must acknowledge the great work by the James Haley VA hospital's PREP team for helping me heal and restore my resiliency. Specifically, I want to thank Dr Praveen Gootam, Sharon Haire, and especially Dr Joan Wilbanks. Programs like PREP are vital for caring for combat veterans and their families, today and into the future. **Thank you to all members of Congress that support and champion the VA's efforts.** They save lives daily. They saved mine.