

Statement for the Record Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)
Committee on Oversight and Government Accountability
“The Biden Administration’s Disastrous Withdrawal from Afghanistan,
Part I: Review by the Inspectors General”
Wednesday, April 19, 2023

After years of negotiations with the Taliban initiated by the Trump administration that excluded the Afghan National Government, President Biden made the difficult yet courageous decision to end the longest war in U.S. history. 2022 marked the first year this century that no American servicemembers lost their lives in Afghanistan. The administration conducted the largest airlift in history, a herculean effort that evacuated approximately 120,000 American citizens and allies in just a few short weeks. While oversight over the calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan is necessary, our critiques must be equally fair. This committee must not substitute oversight over the withdrawal for oversight over the entire 20-year engagement.

In 2019, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker argued that by not insisting on the inclusion of the Afghan government in negotiations, “we have ourselves delegitimized the government we claim to support.” By entering into a misguided “peace process” that forced President Biden to acquiesce to Taliban demands, the Trump administration bears substantial responsibility for the chaotic withdrawal. It was Secretary Pompeo, not Blinken, that met with the Taliban co-founder and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to broker a flawed withdrawal agreement that former national security advisor H.R. McMaster characterized as a “surrender agreement with the Taliban.”

The Trump administration actively undermined the Afghan government while it strengthened the hand of the Taliban. In 2020, the Trump administration pressured the Afghan government to free five thousand Taliban fighters, many of whom later played central roles in retaking the country for the Taliban’s repressive regime. In the wake of his election loss in 2020, President Donald Trump ordered a potentially catastrophic immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Somalia, but according to testimony released by the congressional January 6th committee, senior officials never followed through on the plan. Notwithstanding the dangerous and tumultuous handling of Afghanistan by the Trump administration, President Biden accomplished what President Trump set out to do and finally withdrew American troops, ending the longest war in U.S. history.

I do have serious concerns, however, about how the withdrawal was planned and conducted, and how the United States processed and evacuated at-risk Afghan civilians. For the last 20 years, our servicemembers, non-profit organizations, and government contractors in Afghanistan have relied on the assistance of Afghan employees. Whether serving as security guards, translators or drivers, the success we did manage to achieve in Afghanistan would not have been possible without their help, despite what it meant for their safety. Even after the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS-K no longer had a significant presence in Afghanistan, the men and women who assisted Americans were still met with threats from those who remained loyal to terrorist organizations. My office submitted over 22,000 names to the State Department for assistance and is still working diligently to get these people and their families to safety in the United States.

As many at-risk Afghans remain in Afghanistan or third countries, the United States must do all that is within its power to help those who assisted us during the 20-year engagement. The Biden Administration has done what is within their power to streamline immigration and refugee processes eviscerated during the Trump administration. For years, before the fall of Kabul, Republicans had intentionally pushed to shift resources away from conducting SIV interviews to create a massive backlog of SIV applicants. Then Trump anti-immigration expert Stephen Miller stated the goal plainly, "Resettling [Afghans] in America is not about solving a humanitarian crisis; it's about accomplishing an ideological objective to change America." When President Obama asked Congress to increase the SIV cap in 2016, Senate Republicans rejected the effort. During the final 300 days of the Trump Administration, not a single SIV interview was conducted at U.S. Embassy Kabul.

I was proud to join my colleagues in cosponsoring the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would provide work permits and a path to permanent residency for the thousands of Afghans left in limbo after they entered the United States on humanitarian parole. For any outrage that comes from Committee Republicans, I hope they direct it to the former Republican Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Chuck Grassley, who blocked the Afghan Adjustment Act from coming to a vote on the Senate floor. Passing the Afghan Adjustment Act must continue to be a critical and immediate bipartisan priority for the Congress.

With the Taliban now firmly in control of Afghanistan, we are seeing the reemergence of the Afghanistan of the 1990s. On December 21, 2022, the Taliban reneged on their promise to the international community and began to enforce its ban on women attending any education beyond the 6th grade. A number of internationally recognized humanitarian organizations that frequently operate in war-torn countries announced they would be forced to suspend operations in Afghanistan after they were no longer permitted to hire Afghan women. President Biden should be lauded for demonstrating the United States over the horizon capabilities when he the order to strike and kill Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri, though his presence in Afghanistan demonstrated the organization's longstanding preference for Afghanistan to regain strength and eventually plot and launch attacks against the United States.

Earlier this month the Biden Administration released its assessment outlining the key decisions and challenges surrounding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. I applaud the White House's thorough assessment of the entirety of our involvement in Afghanistan. It is imperative Congress also conduct a sober assessment that includes a full accounting of Trump's deal with the Taliban that preceded the withdrawal, what we did right in response, and most critically, what we did wrong. It won't be easy to acknowledge our failures, but it's what sets us apart from the rest of the world. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about their assessment of our involvement, and how we should recalibrate to support the people of Afghanistan moving forward.