

“US State Department report details damning failings around chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal”.

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/politics/state-department-afghanistan-withdrawal-report/index.html>

The US State Department on Friday released its long-awaited [Afghanistan After Action Review report](#), which found that both the Trump and Biden administrations’ decisions to pull all US troops from Afghanistan had detrimental consequences, and details damning shortcomings by the current administration that led to the deadly and chaotic US withdrawal from that country after nearly two decades on the ground.

“The decisions of both President (Donald) Trump and President (Joe) Biden to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan had serious consequences for the viability of the Afghan government and its security,” the unclassified report said.

“Those decisions are beyond the scope of this review, but the AAR (After Action Review) team found that during both administrations there was insufficient senior-level consideration of worst-case scenarios and how quickly those might follow,” it said.

The report was publicly released more than a year after the 90-day review of the evacuation was completed and includes findings around the [tumultuous final weeks](#) of the US presence in Afghanistan, as well as a number of recommendations for improvement moving forward.

A senior State Department official did not explain why it had taken so long for the report to be published, nor why it was released before a holiday weekend, saying they would not discuss questions related to “process.”

Asked about the report on Friday and whether he admitted there were “mistakes during the withdrawal,” Biden noted that he had vowed that al Qaeda “wouldn’t be there.”

“I said we’d get help from the Taliban,” the president said in response to the shouted question after remarks at the White House. “I was right.”

A [US intelligence assessment last August](#) found that al Qaeda had not reconstituted in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal.

The Biden administration's frenzied withdrawal after 20 years of US involvement has come under immense scrutiny by predominantly Republican lawmakers. However, accusations about who was responsible for the chaotic final weeks have fallen largely along party lines, with Republicans pointing fingers at the Biden administration and Democrats, including the White House, casting blame on the Trump administration for the deal that set the US withdrawal into motion.

Sharper criticism of Biden admin actions than earlier White House document

The State Department's report contains much sharper criticism around the Biden administration's actions than the [White House summary document](#) released in April. That document blamed the Trump administration's decisions for creating the conditions that led to the chaos of the evacuation, and did not overtly admit any mistakes.

The report noted that "when the Trump administration left office, key questions remained unanswered about how the United States would meet the May 2021 deadline for a full military withdrawal, how the United States could maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul after that withdrawal, and what might happen to those eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program as well as other at-risk Afghans."

Once Biden decided in April 2021 to proceed with full withdrawal, with a new deadline of September 11, 2021, the subsequent speed of the US military's "retrograde" from Afghanistan "compounded the difficulties the Department faced in mitigating the loss of the military's key enablers," it stated.

"Critically, the decision to hand over Bagram Air Base to the Afghan government meant that Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) would be the only avenue for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO)," the report stated.

That evacuation operation had to be expedited when in mid-August 2021, following rapid gains by the Taliban, President Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan and the government in Kabul collapsed.

"The sudden departure of President Ghani from Kabul and the fall of the city to the Taliban happened with a speed that caught almost all close observers by surprise," the report said, noting that "until Kabul fell,

commercial flights out of Afghanistan were available and even Afghans planning to depart were taking time to sell property and settle their affairs.”

“But there had been warning signs that prospects the Afghan government forces would defend Kabul and hold out for a possible negotiated transfer of power were evaporating,” it said.

The handling of the evacuation operation has been one of the areas where the administration and the State Department have received the most criticism, as thousands of Afghans who had served alongside US forces were left behind and those on the ground struggled through perilous circumstances to try to reach the airport and get out before government-led evacuation efforts ended.

“U.S. military planning for a possible NEO had been underway with post for some time, but the Department’s participation in the NEO planning process was hindered by the fact that it was unclear who in the Department had the lead,” the review found.

“Senior administration officials had not made clear decisions regarding the universe of at-risk Afghans who would be included by the time the operation started nor had they determined where those Afghans would be taken. That added significantly to the challenges the Department and DoD faced during the evacuation,” the report said.

Crisis preparation was inhibited

According to the review, “crisis preparation and planning were inhibited to a degree by concerns about the signals that might be sent, especially anything that might suggest the United States had lost confidence in the Afghan government and thus contribute to its collapse,” which it did in mid-August 2021.

Although the State Department established an Afghanistan Coordination Task Force, “it failed to establish a broader task force as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in late July and early August 2021.”

“Naming a 7th Floor principal to oversee all elements of the crisis response would have improved coordination across different lines of effort,” the report stated, referencing the floor of the State Department where senior officials’ offices are located.

The report noted that in the chaos, the State Department received an “overwhelming volume of incoming calls and messages to the Department

from other government agencies, Congress, and the public inquiring about individual cases mostly with regard to at-risk Afghans,” which created an immense challenge.

Moreover, the State Department “proved unable to buffer those on the ground in Kabul from receiving multiple, direct calls and messages from current or former senior officials, members of Congress, and/or prominent private citizens asking and in some cases demanding that they provide assistance to specific at-risk Afghans.”

“Responding to such demands often placed Department employees at even greater risk and hindered the effort to move larger groups of people out,” the review found.

“Constantly changing policy guidance and public messaging from Washington regarding which populations were eligible for relocation and how the embassy should manage outreach and flow added to the confusion and often failed to take into account key facts on the ground,” it noted.

National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications John Kirby told CNN on Friday that Biden had “wanted the team to be ready” for “low probability, high-risk, worst case scenarios.” Kirby did not address the specifics of the report, which laid out how the State Department did not wholly prepare for those scenarios.

Not all of the findings of the review were negative, and it praised the work of the employees who were involved in efforts around the evacuation, particularly those at the US Embassy in Kabul.

“The AAR affirmed what I and so many already knew to be true: our people in Afghanistan, in Washington, and at sites around the world demonstrated extraordinary courage, ingenuity, and dedication to mission in the face of complex and demanding conditions,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an email to employees Friday.

“In the days, weeks, and months ahead, I’ll continue to listen to you, learn from the improvements you’re making, and work with you to meet the intent of the review’s recommendations,” Blinken said in the email, which was obtained by CNN.

The report detailed 11 recommendations, mostly related to the Department’s crisis response and preparedness.

“In particular, the AAR’s recommendations identify the need to plan better for worst-case scenarios, to rebuild and strengthen the Department’s core crisis management capabilities, and to ensure that senior officials hear the broadest possible range of views including those that challenge operating assumptions or question the wisdom of key policy decisions,” the report said.