

Jacob Smith

Command Sergeant Major, United States Army

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

27 July 2023

“A Failure to Plan: Examining the Biden Administration’s Preparation for the Afghanistan Withdrawal”

Members of the committee, my name is Command Sergeant Major Jake Smith. I use my rank and title only to identify myself and my position to speak on this matter. I testify before you not as an official representative of the United States Army, but as a private citizen. I must preface my testimony by making it abundantly clear that I am not here to place blame on any organization or individual for the result of our nation's end days in Afghanistan. It is not my place as a Soldier to do so. It is merely my duty to present this committee with the facts I know to be true so you may make a well-informed decision.

I understand that my testimony comes at potential personal risk as a professional Soldier. To mitigate this risk I will stick to the facts and circumstances I personally witnessed and offer minimal personal opinion. I very respectfully ask that any questions you may ask of me keep to the facts of the matter and shy from any personal beliefs or opinions I may hold.

I must also preface by stating I will present my testimony to the best of my recollection. As the email address associated with my position was voided on my exit and the fact that I destroyed any and all physical classified correspondence prior to my exit from Afghanistan, I cannot recall certain names or specific dates; however, basic timelines and associations with personnel and organizations are factual.

To give you a brief personal context, the conflict in Afghanistan has consumed my entire adult life. I took my first step in Afghanistan in April 2002 as a 21-year-old newly appointed Team Leader. I took my final step out on July 2, 2021 as the Area Support Group - Afghanistan and Bagram Senior Enlisted Leader. All totaled, I have deployed 14 times to Afghanistan.

I have fought, bled, and lost more friends than I chose to count within the borders of Afghanistan and from suicide. When you compare my service to that of my peers you will see that my service is, at best, very average. My peers have quietly sacrificed beyond any measure for the countries of both Afghanistan and Iraq. I want to publicly acknowledge and thank everyone who has ever served in these conflicts, as well as their families who have endured their own unique hardships and battles. The untold sacrifice your country has asked of you is not lost or unnoticed.

In a strange coincidence, I have served with two members of this committee. I served in the same Ranger Platoon as Representative Jason Crow. I have also served in the same Task Force as Representative Jeffery Mast. It is an unusual circumstance, but it is good to see both of you again.

From October 11, 2020, to 2 July 2021, I served as the Area Support Group - Afghanistan, or ASG, Senior Enlisted Leader. The duties and responsibilities of ASG included all base life support functions of the remaining nine US military installations in Afghanistan. These functions included billeting, dining facilities, public works, sanitation, and emergency response. I served as the chief advisor to my commander, COL Travis Jacobs. Of particular importance to my testimony is my understanding of the life support capabilities of BAF and HKIA.

In May of 2021, I was given the additional duty to serve as the Bagram Senior Enlisted Advisor. This duty included the oversight of all force protection measures and entry control points on Bagram. I served as the chief advisor to my commander, COL Michael Scarpulla. Of particular importance to my testimony was my understanding of the security measures that were in place on Bagram.

In January 2021, as we awaited guidance from newly elected President Biden, I developed and implemented standards for clearing Bagram. These standards included cleanliness, serviceability, and most importantly clearance of any and all matters of operational security. We had not received the order to go to zero at that time, but we knew that in order to clear the roughly 2500 buildings on Bagram to standard we had to start immediately.

It was sometime in the spring that we received the first tentative planning date to work towards finalizing our go-to zero effort, September 11th, 2021. The order came to begin to close the smaller bases, but two were left in question; Bagram and Hamid Karzai International Airport, or HKIA. For these two installations, there was a looming question of when or if they would close.

Part of General Miller's guidance was to maintain order, discipline, and dignity as we collapsed. We would not just up and leave. We would hand over exceptionally clean and orderly bases to the Afghan government. I have an immense amount of respect for General Miller and happily executed his guidance to the absolute best of my ability. While I cannot specifically speak for others, I can say the general attitude of US and partner forces, GS civilians, and contractors felt the same.

We were instructed to get as small as we could, but still function on the chance Bagram would be used in future efforts. This presented a significant issue for Bagram as we could not collapse to the point of inoperability. We had to have the personnel vital to running power, security, and sanitation. If we began to close the infrastructure too aggressively we could not function or maintain security if Bagram was to stay open.

It was sometime in the Spring that I first met with planners from the US Embassy in Kabul. Roughly four planners came to Bagram to conduct a sight survey to determine if Bagram was the appropriate spot to conduct a Non-Combatant Evacuation or NEO. I cannot recall their names, but I believe this is information this committee can attain with minimal effort. The ASG

real property manager and I spoke with them about billeting and logistics should a NEO be conducted from Bagram.

In this conversation, I was told HKIA was the other option for conducting a NEO. It was also in this meeting I learned the number of persons that would need to be evacuated. Prior to this meeting, I had reviewed the contingency plan for a NEO that had already been created years prior. The contingency plan accounted for 45,000-50,000 persons that would need to be evacuated. It was members of the embassy team who informed me the real number would be anywhere from 120,000-140,000.

I advised the embassy team against using HKIA for the following reasons:

-Bagram could house 35,000 people without overloading the infrastructure, whereas HKIA could hold under 4,000.

-HKIA was a shared civilian airfield. It was not completely controlled by the military. This presented issues of securing the airfield from those trying to overrun the significant weak points in security. Bagram had a completely secure airfield that would require a massive military offensive to overrun.

-HKIA was surrounded by the city of Kabul and its 4.4 million residents. If there was a fight to be had it would be in an urban environment and exceptionally difficult to undertake and control. Bagram had a small town on the western edge and open terrain on the majority of the north, east, and west. Movement of any kind could be detected, controlled, or eliminated very early. The defendability of Bagram was exponentially greater than that of HKIA.

-Bagram held the logistical capability to meet the requirements of 130,000 people, HKIA did not. Bagram had over 35,000-bed spaces and could create more using cots within the airfield hangars if necessary. Bagram had four dining facilities and food that could have fed those fleeing. I personally signed for over \$2 million worth of food that was turned over to the Afghani government. Bagram had thousands of gallons of potable water and onsite water purification capabilities.

-Bagram had a role 3 hospital, meaning it had the greatest lifesaving capability of any hospital remaining in Afghanistan. HKIA had a role 2 hospital, meaning it had a degraded capability to that of Bagram. When Bagram closed, an MRI machine was moved to HKIA to make it a role 2+.

-The issue of personal comfort was brought up in this particular conversation. I explained there was an already cleared compound on Bagram that was once owned by a government agency. It held very comfortable living conditions to accommodate those who wished for such comforts.

-Finally, Bagram had two large and two portable industrial-sized incinerators. It had two industrial material shredders. It had the mechanical capability to destroy any and all vehicles with relative ease. It had the ability to destroy sensitive equipment on an industrial scale in a short amount of time. HKIA did not.

In hindsight, I have looked back and tried to identify any pragmatic rationale for using HKIA over Bagram. The only answer I have identified is the ease of evacuees living in Kabul getting to the airfield. However, this course of action presented significant issues for anyone living outside of Kabul to get into the city. As Bagram was primarily surrounded by open terrain it would have been overall easier to access by the general population of those evacuating.

When I laid out all my points the site survey team verbally agreed with me, but I understand that a site survey team does not make the command decision on what bases stay open and what bases close. I met twice more with this survey team, once in May and once in June. In these meetings, I inquired about the offensive the Taliban had launched in May and the increasing ground they controlled, indicating an advance on Kabul. I inquired if a NEO was going to be held in Bagram due to the Taliban's rapid advance with little opposition. The team acknowledged the ground the Taliban had gained but offered little further insight into the decision-making thought process.

On or about June 14th we were given the word to close Bagram by July 4th, well short of the originally planned date of September 11th. HKIA would remain open to provide a quick reactionary force for the embassy located approximately four miles away. This was to be an enduring mission. All talks of conducting a NEO were ceased. It is my understanding that those in the embassy believed the Taliban would not advance to and take Kabul.

I exited as one of the final conventional forces on Bagram on 2 July 2021. My thoughts stayed with the forces that would stay on the ground as the Taliban controlled about 50% of Afghanistan on the day I departed. One single US Infantry company, C Co, 4-31 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division led by CPT Swasey Brown and 1SG Andrew Kelly, protected HKIA for approximately six weeks before things began to unravel in mid-August. An area once protected by hundreds of Soldiers and contractors was now protected by 113 American Soldiers and two Companies of partner forces. Approximately 430 other US service members in non-combat arms roles occupied HKIA in other roles, such as logistics and maintenance. This was the only force left in Afghanistan other than the Afghan Army when Bagram was closed.

I will offer this final bit of personal opinion. The mission asked of this Company, and the subsequent Marines, Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and coalition forces called in to reinforce this small security contingent was monumental. This force overcame the very predictable conditions that existed when senior Afghani leadership fled and allowed their government to fall with little

to no opposition. There is no force in the world that could have executed such a chaotic and difficult mission better than our US and coalition forces did. They were asked to control absolute panic and anarchy and they somehow did it. Thank you for allowing me to speak here today.