

# EXAMINING THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

*Tuesday, September 14, 2021*

U.S. Senate,  
Committee on Foreign Relations,  
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in Room SD-106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Coons, Murphy, Kaine, Markey, Merkley, Booker, Schatz, Van Hollen, Risch, Rubio, Johnson, Romney, Portman, Paul, Barrasso, Cruz, Rounds, and Hagerty.

## OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

**The Chairman:** This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for joining us today.

Last week, the New York Times reported on a local Afghan reporter who goes by the name of Nemat. He was covering a demonstration by several women protesting against the Taliban. He was arrested. His camera was confiscated.

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
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Nemat said, and I quote, "I told them I was a journalist and showed them my ID card, but they accused me of organizing the protests. They took me into a room, tied my hands with a scarf, and started beating me with a cable."

The horror he experienced is hard to fathom. He described a demonstrator covered in blood after being severely beaten and saw Taliban militants abusing prisoners. One of Nemat's colleagues said, "They were mocking us and saying, 'You want freedom? What freedom?'"

This is not the Taliban of 2001. This happened last week. Amid the extensive oversight work planned in Afghanistan, we must not lose sight of people like Nemat and the courageous women who continue to protest in the streets, calling for freedom in the face of violence and threats. A repression of the Afghan people is happening in real time, and the world must bear witness and hold the Taliban accountable.

Let me turn to the focus of today's hearing. Mr. Secretary, the execution of the U.S. withdrawal was clearly and fatally flawed. This committee expects to receive a full explanation of the administration's decisions on Afghanistan since coming into office last January. There has to be accountability.

We will have other hearings to develop a set of lessons learned over the course of the war, to understand the many mistakes made over the course of 20 years. The diversion of attention and

resources when the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq despite its irrelevance to the 9/11 attacks, the double-dealing by Pakistan in providing a safe haven to the Taliban, and the list goes on.

We need to understand why successive administrations made so many of the same mistakes repeatedly. Perhaps most urgently, we need to understand why the Afghan government and military collapsed so precipitously. This rapid collapse laid bare a fundamental fact, that successive administrations lied to the Congress over the years about the durability of the Afghan military and governing institutions, and we need to understand why.

The chaos of last August is due in large part to the February 2020 surrender deal negotiated by President Trump, a deal that was clearly built on a set of lies. A deal that led to the release of 5,000 hardened Taliban fighters, boosting the militant group on the battlefield this summer.

We know now that the Taliban had no intention of pursuing a political path and peace deal with the Afghan government. It had no intention of pursuing a democratic path. It had no intention of breaking ties with Al Qaeda. And it clearly had no intention of allowing women to have their rightful seat at the table and to participate fully in society.

To demand the Taliban abide by its commitments now and expect a different result I think is somewhat absurd. The Taliban rules Afghanistan, so we will have to deal with it in some form. But let us not kid ourselves. There is no such thing as a reformed Taliban. This group is woefully stuck

in the 14th century with no will to come out. Their concept of political representation and legitimacy is based squarely on the use of violent force and intimidation.

The administration says that we should judge the Taliban by their actions, and I agree. And their actions since taking over Afghanistan have been pretty horrifying. Beating women activists, murdering ethnic and religious minorities such as the Hazara, separating classrooms by gender, shutting down local media, refusal to break with Al Qaeda, appointing the head of a foreign terrorist organization as designated by our Government from the Haqqani Network to lead the Ministry of Interior, and the list goes on.

With this in mind, the United States and the United Nations should maintain existing sanctions on the Taliban. The U.S. should reimpose those sanctions that were waived during the negotiations process, and the U.S. should consider new measures to impose higher costs on the group and its leaders while ensuring that lifesaving humanitarian aid is able to assist those most vulnerable to hunger, disease, and disaster.

Nor should any country be in a rush to unilaterally recognize this regime. At a minimum, the following criteria must be met before recognition is even considered. Absolute repudiation of the Taliban of all cross-border terrorism, including Al Qaeda and associated groups. Equality of rights for girls and women. Protection of minority, ethnic, and religious groups. Commitment to democratic elections and ending all narcotics-related activity.

So, yes, the Taliban now run Afghanistan, but that does not mean we ever accept their behavior. I supported the decision to eventually withdraw our military from Afghanistan. I have long maintained, however, that how the United States left mattered. Doing the right thing in the wrong way can end up being the wrong thing. And to get this right, the Biden administration needed to answer two fundamental questions. First, would the withdrawal leave a durable political arrangement in its wake? Second, would the U.S. and our allies maintain an ability to collect intelligence, conduct counterterrorism operations in a region still rife with groups, including ISIS-K, seeking to do us harm?

I believe the U.S. clearly fell short on the first measure, and time will tell on the second. But the prospects do not look promising. So let me start with some framing questions about the Biden administration's Afghanistan decision-making.

First, upon coming into office, how did the Biden administration assess the impact on the ground of President Trump's flawed deal with the Taliban? Did the administration attempt to negotiate better terms with the Taliban upon coming into office?

Second, did the President's April withdrawal announcement set in motion any explicit contingency planning in the event that the Taliban rapidly took over the country? What was the plan to evacuate all Americans? What was the plan to evacuate SIVs, P1s, P2s, and other at-risk groups?

What was the plan to evacuate staff and those affiliated with Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other U.S.-funded organizations?

President Trump, with Stephen Miller, intentionally blocked SIVs from being processed, which I think is a barbaric and cruel decision which likely resulted in death for some U.S. partners. How did the Biden administration specifically accelerate processing SIVs upon coming into office?

And third, what was the plan to avoid or deal with a refugee and humanitarian crisis? I expect you will address some of these issues in your opening remarks.

Let me applaud the efforts of the personnel on the ground from the Departments of State and Defense who worked under horrific circumstances. Their actions in evacuating over 120,000 individuals were nothing short of heroic, and these personnel deserve answers. The American public deserves answers. And the Afghan people certainly deserve answers.

So let me close with three points. First, while communication from the administration has been frequent throughout this crisis, information from State, the Pentagon, and the White House has often been vague or contradictory. This was obviously a fluid and difficult situation. Frustration among many Members was high, and this has to improve.

And to put this in context, Member frustration came on top of years of stonewalling by the Trump administration and its refusal to engage the Senate on the Taliban negotiations. This is one of the examples why I have been trying to pursue on the CASE Act to understand what are the written

agreements, that come between an administration and others. Maybe if we had seen all of the elements of it, we would have been poised in a better position.

Second, I am very disappointed that Secretary Austin declined our request to testify today. A full accounting of the U.S. response to this crisis is not complete without the Pentagon, especially when it comes to understanding the complete collapse of the U.S.-trained and funded Afghan military.

His decision not to appear before the committee will affect my personal judgment on Department of Defense nominees. I expect the Secretary will avail himself to the committee in the near future, and if he does not, I may consider the use of committee subpoena power to compel him and others over the course of these last 20 years to testify.

Third, I implore the administration to remain focused on Afghanistan. It is critically important that the world bear witness and take action when possible in response to Taliban abuses. Your visit, Mr. Secretary, to Qatar and Germany sent the right message, and I strongly urge sustained attention to Afghanistan in the months and years to come.

I also urge the administration to strengthen its resolve and efforts to secure the relocation of our civil society partners now at grave risk who were left behind in Afghanistan. They include heroic individuals working for organizations on the frontlines of U.S. efforts to strengthen democracy and human rights, including the rights of Afghan women and girls.

Finally, I know that Senator Young is not with us today. He is home in Indiana attending the funeral of Marine Corporal Humberto Sanchez. Corporal Sanchez was among those killed in the horrendous terror attack on August 26 at the Kabul airport.

I would like to suggest that we have a moment of silence and pay our respects to all those brave American service members who were killed or injured on that day and that we also honor the thousands of American service members, Afghan soldiers, and civilians who were casualties of this 20-year war. Please join me in a moment of silence.

[Moment of silence.]

**The Chairman:** Thank you.

With that, let me turn to the distinguished ranking member, Senator Risch, for his opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

**Senator Risch:** Thanks very much, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, good morning, and welcome back to our committee. You are doing the right thing testifying here today, and I thank you.

However, like the chairman, I am disappointed that some of your colleagues have declined to testify, particularly Secretary Austin. There are questions that we really need to have answered, and



it is disheartening that they declined to testify. The debacle in Afghanistan is an interagency failure, and the fact that you are the only one stepping up is disheartening.

I agree with the chairman that the withdrawal was a dismal failure. One of the things we need to get to the bottom to is, who is responsible for this? Who made the decisions? There is real questions right now as to who is making the decisions.

We know for a fact that the President of the United States is somewhat disadvantaged here in that someone is calling the shots. He cannot even speak without someone in the White House censoring it or signing off on it. As recently as yesterday, in mid sentence he was cut off by someone in the White House who makes the decision that the President of the United States is not speaking correctly.

So I would like to know who this person is. This is a puppeteer act, if you would, and we need to know who is in charge and who is making these decisions. And the only way we are going to get that is when we have people like you come in and answer questions. And when we get to questions, I am going to have more questions for you in that regard.

While I supported a responsible end to the war in Afghanistan, no American thinks we should have left this way. America cannot end wars simply by walking away. It is naive to assume our enemies will lay down their arms, leave us alone, and suddenly enshrine human rights if we go

home. Indeed, there is a fierce battle of ideas and ambitions on the world stage, and the U.S. cannot remain neutral.

However, President Biden presented the American people with a false choice in Afghanistan, and the rushed and embarrassing retreat is a stain on America's credibility that will have implications for years to come. There were other options that could have protected our national security interests, allowed for a more measured reduction in force, and preserved American credibility.

I feel this administration is trying to blame the prior administration. And contrary to some that have said that the prior administration started this, is responsible, that is simply not true. The prior administration, when they took steps toward withdrawing from Afghanistan, entered into an agreement that had very, very specific conditions. I was privy to those. So I have personal knowledge of this.

The February 2020 agreement was contingent, contingent upon the Taliban reducing violence, meeting counterterrorism commitments, and engaging in substantive talks with the Afghan government. These were all very important, and most importantly, most importantly, it was telegraphed to the Taliban that failure to meet their commitments would be met with grave, grave circumstances for them. The Taliban failed to meet any of these commitments, and yet, yet this administration turned the country over to them.

President Biden chose to withdraw from Afghanistan without conditions and without prudent planning and obviously without, most important, telegraphing to the Taliban that they would enforce the conditions that the Taliban had agreed to. It did not happen. It was a strategic unforced error, and he did this against the advice of the commanders on the ground.

One of the most embarrassing things I thought was the strike that was made -- and obviously, we cannot talk about what we know from an intelligence standpoint -- but the kinetic strike that was made after the Taliban entered the country. This de minimis strike had dire consequences for civilians, but not for the Taliban.

These are facts. And the President's withdrawal led to a Taliban offensive to topple the democratically elected government, slammed the door on any chance for a final peace agreement, reversed the hard-earned rights of Afghan women and minorities, and will result in a safe haven for terrorists, many of whom wish to attack the United States.

The Biden administration left Afghanistan in total disarray and single-handedly created a humanitarian crisis with thousands of refugees and internally displaced Afghans in need of immediate emergency assistance.

Secretary Blinken, you characterized the evacuation as an extraordinary effort. You have touted over 124,000 evacuees. However, we abandoned the people we prioritized for departure. The Department's efforts were plagued by lack of basic planning, a failure to identify Americans, a failure

to energize the SIV process months in advance, ignoring repeated congressional offers to help, and a failure to recognize the Taliban for what it is, a terrorist organization.

The numbers are telling. You evacuated 6,040 Americans and say only a couple of hundred remain. Your own department told this committee in July that there were 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in Afghanistan. There is a huge difference between 6,000 and 15,000. What happened to these other Americans?

The situation with the Special Immigrant Visa evacuations is even more disturbing. Not counting the SIVs that arrived before Kabul's fall, you evacuated 705 of roughly 20,000 principal SIV applicants. What happened to these people?

This committee reached out to the Department in April, May, and June to help expedite SIV processing. We asked what additional authorities or resources you needed. For months, we received contradictory responses or no responses at all.

I will take a minute here to defend the State Department. One of the biggest problems to helping process SIVs was the enormous failure of the Department of Defense to provide the records needed to validate the Afghans who bravely helped our forces. The fact that DOD did not keep accurate records is irresponsible and a slap in the face to those who fought alongside of us. Obviously, we want to talk to Secretary Austin about this.

Despite the enormous efforts of our troops and diplomats on the ground, the preventable tragedy that unfolded at the airport in Kabul was a disaster of leadership and of the administration's own making. Not only were you unable to ensure that Americans had access to the airport, many were turned away repeatedly after braving Taliban checkpoints. But Americans outside of Kabul had absolutely no chance of evacuation.

Green card holders and SIVs should have been prioritized for access to the airport as well, but there was no mechanism to get inside. It was an informal network of Americans that helped get Americans and Afghans around the bureaucratic wall the administration set up at the airport. It should not have come to that.

The administration patting itself on the back for this evacuation is like an arsonist taking credit for saving people from the burning building he just set on fire. We know the U.S. military and our diplomats can do so much more than they did, if only their political bosses had gotten out of the way.

Now we have an untold number of Americans, U.S. contractors, and SIVs still in Afghanistan. Despite repeated assurances that you will get them out, you have been unable to do so. Planes are stranded in Northern Afghanistan. Our Voice of America employees and female Afghan students on scholarships have been abandoned, and our SIV applicants are in hiding as Taliban death squads hunt them down.

You said you would have mechanisms for continued evacuations after 31 August. Where is your plan? I have not seen it. I do not know that -- I have not talked to anyone who has seen it.

What I have seen is a rebuke from our European allies. They begged us for help, but where we were not helping our own citizens, how could we help them? Instead, we had to rely on the generosity of partners like Qatar.

What we have all heard and read is that the United States is no longer a reliable ally. And frankly, the way this evacuation was conducted, I cannot blame them. For years, despite strains in our relations with Europe and other allies, everyone knew the United States was the competent and capable partner. They trusted us to be the steady hand at the wheel that could navigate out of any difficult situation.

That confidence has been shattered. Now across the globe, allies doubt our resolve, and our competitors like China and Russia see weakness and think they can exploit this situation. The Biden administration alone is responsible for this debacle and its consequences.

Going forward, the challenges become even harder to resolve. U.S. actions must rebuild our credibility and re-establish deterrence. The U.S. will need more proactive policies on counterterrorism and security around the globe to discourage our competitors.

Over the weekend, we marked the 20th anniversary of September 11, but we have yet to receive details about how the administration's so-called "over the horizon" counterterrorism plan will

succeed. The Taliban's takeover destroyed the basis of that strategy, and despite repeated requests from the Hill, we have yet to receive a single piece of information about the administration's revised counterterrorism plan.

Meanwhile, the Taliban continues its relationship with Al Qaeda, and the new interior minister has a \$10 million U.S. bounty on his head for killing Americans. Any hope that the Taliban will protect American security is a fatally flawed assumption. You must redouble efforts with Afghanistan's neighbors to reach CT agreements and preserve disappearing intelligence networks.

Additionally, any country that offered support to the Taliban in their recent offensive should risk a strategic downgrade in their relationship with the United States. We also must understand Pakistan's role in this entire matter, as the chairman has alluded to. This is a difficult, but important situation.

I also remain concerned that the administration is rushing to normalize ties with the Taliban government. This must not occur without extensive congressional consultations. Your notification that you intended to restart foreign assistance is deeply, deeply concerning. I suspect there are other members of this committee that are going to speak to that. That is going to be a heavy lift for you.

On the security front, the United States spent over \$80 billion on Afghan security forces. Many of these funds bypassed the oversight of the State Department and this committee. We now see the

consequences of a Department of Defense that operates security cooperation on its own. The Taliban is now one of the best-armed terrorist organizations on the planet.

We have sent repeated requests for the administration's plan to address the captured equipment. We have yet to receive any response. As Secretary, I would hope you would demand that all DOD assistance programs once again require State Department concurrence.

In closing, I would like to speak directly to our diplomats, our men and women in uniform, our Gold Star families, our humanitarian workers, and our veterans. On behalf of the American people, I would like to say thank you. The ineptitude of this administration does not tarnish your service. What you did mattered.

You served nobly. You stood on the wall and prevented a terrorist attack against the United States for over 20 years at enormous cost to you and your families. America will always be indebted to you.

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Thank you, Senator Risch.

Mr. Secretary? The Secretary has agreed to stay with us so each member has an opportunity to answer their questions. As such and because of the nature of the subject matter, I have agreed that the Secretary has an extended opening statement.

With that, Mr. Secretary, you are recognized.



**STATEMENT OF HON. ANTONY J. BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE,  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**Secretary Blinken:** Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Ranking Member Risch, thank you very much. And to all members, I appreciate the opportunity to be with all of you today to discuss our policy on Afghanistan, including where we are, how we got here, and where we are going in the weeks and months ahead.

For 20 years, Congress has conducted oversight and provided funding for the mission in Afghanistan. And I know from my own time as a staff member here in this room for then-Senator Biden just how invaluable a partner Congress is. As I said when I was nominated, I believe strongly in Congress' traditional role as a partner in foreign policymaking. I am committed to working with you on the path forward in Afghanistan and to advance the interests of the American people.

On this 20th anniversary of 9/11, as we honor nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who lost their lives, we are reminded of why we went to Afghanistan in the first place, to bring justice to those who attacked us and to ensure it would never happen again. We achieved those objectives a long time ago. Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. Al Qaeda's capabilities were degraded significantly, including its ability to plan and conduct external operations.

After 20 years, 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, \$2 trillion spent, it was time to end America's longest war.

When President Biden took office in January, he inherited an agreement that his predecessor had reached with the Taliban to remove all remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1 of this year. As part of that agreement, previous administration pressed the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, including some top war commanders. Meanwhile, it reduced our own force presence to 2,500 troops.

In return, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and partner forces and to refrain from threatening Afghanistan's major cities. But the Taliban continued its relentless march on remote outposts, checkpoints, villages, and districts, as well as some of the major roads connecting the cities. By January of 2021, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 9/11, and we had the smallest number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan since 2001.

As a result, upon taking office, President Biden immediately faced the choice between ending the war or escalating it. Had he not followed through on his predecessor's commitment, attacks on our forces and those of our allies would have resumed, and the Taliban's nationwide assault on Afghanistan's major cities would have commenced. That would have required sending substantially more U.S. forces into Afghanistan to defend ourselves and to prevent a Taliban takeover, taking casualties and with, at best, the prospect of restoring a stalemate and remaining stuck in Afghanistan under fire indefinitely.

There is no evidence that staying longer would have made the Afghan security forces or the Afghan government any more resilient or self-sustaining. If 20 years, hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, training did not suffice, why would another year, another 5, another 10?

Conversely, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China and Russia or adversaries like Iran and North Korea would have liked more than for the United States to re-up a 20-year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade.

In advance of the President's decision, I was in constant contact with our allies and partners to hear their views and factor them into our thinking. When the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it. We all set to work together on the drawdown.

Similarly, we were intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning, as well as offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.

Despite this effort, at the time the evacuation began, there were still thousands of Americans in Afghanistan, almost all of whom were evacuated by August 31. Many were dual citizens living in Afghanistan for years, decades, generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place that they know as home is a wrenching decision.

In April, we began drawing down our embassy, ordering nonessential personnel to depart. We also used this time to significantly speed up the processing of Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans who worked for us. When we took office, we inherited a program with a 14-step process based on a statutory framework enacted by Congress involving multiple agencies and a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants.

There had not been a single SIV applicant interview in Kabul in 9 months, going back to March of 2020. The program was basically in a stall. Within 2 weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4, one of the first executive orders issued by President Biden directed us to immediately review the SIV program to identify causes of undue delay and find ways to process SIV applications more quickly.

This spring, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team of people in Washington processing applications from 10 to 50, doubling the number of SIV adjudicators in Kabul in our embassy there. Even as many embassy personnel began to return under ordered departure, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to process SIV applications.

As a result of these and other steps, including working with Congress, especially this committee -- Senator Shaheen and others -- by May, we had reduced the average processing time for Special Immigrant Visas by more than 1 year. Even amid a COVID surge in Kabul, we continued to

issue visas. And we went from issuing about 100 Special Immigrant Visas per week in March to more than 1,000 per week in August when our evacuation and relocation effort began.

That emergency evacuation was sparked by the collapse of the Afghan security forces and government. Throughout the year, we were constantly assessing their staying power and considering multiple scenarios. Even the most pessimistic assessments did not predict that the government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained.

They were focused on what would happen after the United States withdrew, from September onward. As General Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, "Nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days." Nonetheless, we planned and exercised a wide range of contingencies.

Because of that planning, we were able to draw down our embassy and move our remaining personnel to the airport within 48 hours. And the military, placed on standby by President Biden, was able to secure the airport and start the evacuation within 72 hours. And yes, that evacuation was an extraordinary effort, under the most difficult conditions imaginable, by our diplomats, by our military, by our intelligence professionals.

They worked around the clock to get American citizens, Afghans who helped us, citizens of our allies and partners, and at-risk Afghans on planes out of the country, off to the United States or to transit locations that our diplomats had arranged or negotiated in multiple countries. Our consular

team worked 24/7 to reach out to Americans who could still be in country, making 55,000 phone calls, sending 33,000 emails by August 31, and they are still at it.

In the midst of this heroic effort, an ISIS-K attack killed 13 service members who were working the gates at HKIA, wounded 20 others, killed and wounded scores of Afghans. Our service members gave their lives so that others can continue to live theirs. In the end, we completed one of the biggest airlifts in history, with 124,000 people evacuated to safety.

And on August 31 in Kabul, the military mission in Afghanistan officially ended, and a new diplomatic mission began. I want to acknowledge the more than two dozen countries that have helped with the relocation effort, some serving as transit hubs, some welcoming Afghan evacuees for longer periods of time. And as the 9/11 report suggested, it is essential that we accelerate the appointment process for national security officials since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice.

Today, there are nearly 80 State Department nominees pending before the Senate. Nearly two dozen have already been voted out of this committee on a strong bipartisan basis and simply await a vote in the Senate. For our national security, I respectfully urge the Senate and this committee to move as swiftly as possible to consider and confirm all pending nominees and to address what is a significant disruption in our national security policymaking.

Now let me briefly outline what the State Department has done in the last couple of weeks and where we are going in the weeks ahead. First, as you know, we moved our diplomatic operations from Kabul to Doha, where our new Afghan affairs team is hard at work. Many of our key partners have done the same thing. They have joined us there in Doha.

Second, we have continued our relentless efforts to help any remaining Americans, as well as Afghans and citizens of allied and partner nations, leave Afghanistan if they choose. Last week, on Thursday, a Qatar Airways charter flight with U.S. citizens and others onboard departed Kabul and landed in Doha. On Friday, a second flight carrying U.S. citizens and others departed Afghanistan.

These flights were the result of coordinated efforts by the United States, Qatar, and Turkey to reopen the airport and intense diplomacy to start the flights. In addition to those flights, half a dozen American citizens, a dozen permanent residents of the United States, have also left Afghanistan via overland routes with our assistance.

We are in constant contact with American citizens still in Afghanistan who have told us they wish to leave. Each has been assigned a case management team to offer specific guidance and instructions. Some declined to be on the first flights on Thursday and Friday for reasons including needing more time to make arrangements, wanting to remain with extended family for now, or medical issues that precluded traveling last week.

We will continue to help Americans and Afghans to whom we have a special commitment depart Afghanistan if they choose, just as we have done in other countries where we have evacuated our embassy and hundreds or even thousands of Americans remained behind -- for example, in Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, Somalia. There is no deadline to this effort.

Third, we are focused on counterterrorism. Taliban has committed to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States or our allies, including Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. We will hold them accountable for that. That does not mean that we will rely on them. We will maintain a vigilant effort to monitor threats, robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats, if necessary, and as we do in places around the world where we do not have military forces on the ground.

Fourth, we continue our intensive diplomacy with allies and partners. We initiated a statement joined by more than 100 countries and a United Nations Security Council resolution setting out the international community's expectations of a Taliban-led government. We expect the Taliban to ensure freedom of travel; to make good on its counterterrorism commitments; to uphold the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, minorities; to name a broadly representative permanent government; to forswear reprisals. The legitimacy and support that it seeks from the international community will depend entirely on its conduct.



We have organized contact groups of key countries to ensure that the international community continues to speak and act together on Afghanistan and to leverage our combined influence. Last week, I led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, plus NATO, the EU, the United Nations, to align our efforts.

And fifth, we will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Consistent with sanctions, this aid will not flow through the government, but rather through independent organizations like NGOs and U.N. agencies.

Yesterday, we announced the United States has provided nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan to meet critical health and nutrition needs, to address the protection concerns of women and children and minorities, to help more children, including girls, go back to school. This additional funding means the United States has provided nearly \$330 million in assistance to the Afghan people this fiscal year.

In Doha and Ramstein, I toured the facilities where Afghans that we evacuated are being processed before moving on to their next destinations. Here at home, I spent time at the Dulles Expo Center, where more than 45,000 Afghans have been processed after arriving in the United States. It is remarkable to see what our diplomats, our military, employees from many civilian agencies across the U.S. Government have been able to achieve in a very short time.

They have met an enormous human need. They have coordinated food, water, sanitation for thousands of people. They are arranging medical care, including the delivery of babies. They are reuniting families that were separated, caring for unaccompanied minors. It is an extraordinary interagency effort, a powerful testament to the skill, the dedication, the humanity of our people.

And I think we can all be deeply proud of what they are doing, and as we have done throughout our history, Americans are now welcoming families from Afghanistan into our communities, helping them resettle as they start new lives. And that is something to be proud of as well.

With that, I thank the members of this committee and look forward to your questions.

**[The prepared statement of Secretary Blinken follows:]**

**[COMMITTEE INSERT]**

**The Chairman:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Let me first begin by asking unanimous consent to enter into the hearing record a letter by the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council calling on the Biden administration to take immediate action at the United Nations to protect Afghan civilians, particularly women and girls.

Without objection, it is so ordered.

**[The information referred to follows:]**

**[COMMITTEE INSERT]**

**The Chairman:** All right. Let us start a series of 7-minute rounds. I am going to hold the time tight so that every member can get their opportunity, and I will start off by making sure that I do not exceed my 7 minutes.

So prior to the final flight out, we heard from both American citizens and Afghan partners seeking to access the airport they were either not being allowed through the gates, being sent back home, or simply abandoned. While we understand and appreciate the security issues that were at play, it is confounding that such a chaotic process arose to begin with.

So when did the administration begin to plan for a worst-case scenario contingency?

**Secretary Blinken:** In the spring and summer.

**The Chairman:** In the spring and summer of this year?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes. Multiple interagency meetings, exercises, looking at the different contingencies.

**The Chairman:** And so what was the specific planning put into the likely scenario that American citizens were going to have to evacuate under hostile conditions?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, planning went to a number of things, including the ability to move our embassy quickly, as we did in 48 hours, including the effort to make sure that we could control the airport, bring flights in and evacuate people out.

One of the things that happened, as you know, Mr. Chairman, is that the situation outside the airport became incredibly chaotic, with thousands of people massing at the airport, massing at the gates of the airport, and that created, among other things, a very, very challenging situation.

**The Chairman:** Should we not have started earlier so there would not have been a bigger surge on the SIV issue? I recognize, and I think it is only fair to put in context, that your own testimony suggested that there was a 17,000 SIV backlog that had -- 9 months had passed by without a single interview. So, obviously, you inherited a significant backlog. But -- and how many SIVs were awarded during the Trump administration?

**Secretary Blinken:** I do not have the numbers in front of me, but I think over the course of the administration, there must have been several thousand issued.

**The Chairman:** Okay. So the question is then should we not have surged more significantly? I know you said you put up to 50 individuals. But knowing that you were preparing for a contingency of the worst-case scenario, should not back in March there have been a more significant surge to process SIVs and determine the entire universe of who needed to be taken out?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, I believe we did surge those -- those resources. As I said, we quadrupled the number of people in Washington doing processing of SIVs, and this is at a critical stage in the processing, as I think many members know. The most important stage in many ways is

the so-called Chief of Mission approval. That is the stage at which SIV applicants are actually deemed eligible under the criteria established by Congress for the program.

And by the way, those who apply, those who actually get Chief of Mission approval, the washout rate is about 40 percent historically. That is because it turns out that many people who apply do not qualify under the criteria set by Congress, or they are unable to get the documentation -- I think this was alluded to -- to prove that they had worked faithfully and loyally for the United States.

There are some situations where people were committing fraud in order to get into the program, maybe for understandable reasons. But the point is we have a very lengthy process, 14 steps, multiple agencies involved. We worked to try to streamline that. I think there is more work that we would like to do going forward to do that, but the bottom line is we did significantly surge our resources to that, particularly to the Chief of Mission approval process, quadrupling them.

And ultimately, we went from 10 to 50 to now, I believe, 61 or 62 working on that stage of things. We doubled the resources we had in Kabul, all in an effort to expedite. And we did. We went from 100 visas a week to 1,000 visas a week. But what was not anticipated was the collapse in 11 days of the Afghan government and the Afghan military.

**The Chairman:** Let me ask you this. There have been numerous press reports over the past week about a new or refined process for the State Department to lead efforts in coordination with the

Department of Defense to work with outside groups to evacuate American citizens and Afghan allies left behind in Afghanistan. Can you tell us exactly what these new U.S. Government-led efforts are? How coordination with outside groups and individuals is being handled, by who? What is the nature of the State-DOD cooperation? Give us a sense of that.

**Secretary Blinken:** Sure. We have within the Department, led by our former Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass, who went back to Kabul to the airport to help lead the evacuation efforts, he is leading an effort to manage, coordinate, all of the ongoing efforts to bring people who wish to leave Afghanistan out. And that includes, among other things, a coordination with the many outside groups, as well as Members of Congress, who are working themselves heroically to help in this effort.

I met, myself, with about 75 veteran's organizations a couple of weeks ago, given the extraordinary efforts that veterans, either individually or as groups, are doing to help. And we want to make sure that we are as coordinated as we possibly can be on these efforts to make sure that we know who is doing what, what assistance we can provide, and to make sure that we are working together going forward.

We have many other people working on this task force. Some dedicated to American citizens, others focused on SIVs and other Afghans at risk. Others focused on coordinating with different groups, including Members of Congress.

**The Chairman:** Let me give you one -- my final minute. I would like to give you an opportunity to set the record straight on one point. Several commentators have suggested that had the Department moved forward with the Crisis Contingency and Response Bureau proposed by the Trump administration as it was walking out the door, it would have been able to respond better to the Afghan situation.

But it is my understanding that that bureau had not been stood up yet when you decided to curtail the proposal nor, as proposed, did it actually add any additional resources or capabilities to those that State already had. It was a bureaucratic movement not creating or getting rid of actual capabilities, just a new organizational chart. And in that bureaucratic result, potentially creating damage to the Department's operations, not solving them. Is that a fair statement?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is a fair statement, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Okay. If it is not the CCR, then what is the answer?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, here again, to your point, with regard to the CCR, whether it became a bureau or not, there was no change in the assets that we already had at hand to work on these efforts. And the focus of this group, either in its existing organizational structure or had it become a bureau, which, among other things, it did not because there were congressional holds across the aisle on this effort.

The previous administration, nonetheless, went through and tried to move it forward. We decided that we needed to review it. We did the review. And as you described very -- very accurately, we found that this would add no assets to what we already had at hand. It would simply create a different bureaucratic structure.

But having said that, again, this was -- this is something designed primarily for individual extractions, medical emergencies. These men and women who are part of our operational medical unit are remarkable and do incredible work, but not the kind of work that would have been applicable to the large evacuation that we had to conduct in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

**The Chairman:** Senator Risch?

**Senator Risch:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I can tell you, I have listened to you and a handful of other people try to put the best face on it as possible. And I can tell you that the temperature of the American people is not there with you and that I am not talking from a partisan basis. This goes both ways.

You know, there is not enough lipstick in the world to put on this pig to make it look any different than what it actually is. So somebody need -- we need -- the American people want to know who is responsible for this. So let us start with this. Who is responsible? Who made the decisions on this? Was it the President of the United States?



**Secretary Blinken:** Ultimately, the President makes the decisions. That is correct.

**Senator Risch:** Did he in this case?

**Secretary Blinken:** As in every case, ultimately, decisions that can only be decided by the President are decided by the President.

**Senator Risch:** Well --

**Secretary Blinken:** Now, of course, to be -- to be specific, Senator, there are hundreds, thousands of decisions every single day that go into a situation as complex as this one. The big strategic decisions, those are decided by the President. The tactical operational decisions are made by different agencies, agency heads, agency officials.

**Senator Risch:** Well, I am more interested in the top decision-making. Look, we have all seen this. We saw it as recently as yesterday. Somebody in the White House has authority to press the button and stop the President, cut off the President's speaking ability and sound. Who is that person?

**Secretary Blinken:** I think anyone who knows the President, including members of this committee, knows that he speaks very clearly and very deliberately for himself. No one else does.

**Senator Risch:** Well, are you saying that there is no one in the White House that can cut him off? Because yesterday that happened, and it has happened a number of times before that. It has been widely reported that somebody has the ability to push the button and cut off his sound and stop him from speaking. Who is that person?

**Secretary Blinken:** There is -- there is no such person. Again, the President speaks for himself, makes all of the strategic decisions informed by the best advice that he can get from the people around him.

**Senator Risch:** So are you unaware that this is actually happening? Because it happened yesterday at the Interagency Fire Center. It was widely reported. The media has reported on it, and it is not the first time it has happened. It has happened several times.

Are you telling this -- are you telling this committee that this does not happen? That there is no one in the White House who pushes the button and cuts him off in mid sentence?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Risch:** So this did not happen yesterday nor on the other occasions where the media showed the American people that his sentence was cut off in mid sentence?

**Secretary Blinken:** No.

**Senator Risch:** Are you saying that did not happen?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I really do not know what you are referring to. All I can tell you is having worked with the President for now 20 years, both here on this committee and in over the last 9 months at the White House, the President very much speaks for himself.

**Senator Risch:** Well, let us take a different attack. He does speak for himself, but what happens when somebody does not want him speaking? You are telling us you do not know anything

about this that somebody cuts him off in mid sentence? Is that what you are trying to tell this committee? Because everybody here has seen it.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I am telling you based on my own experience with the President over the last 20 years, anyone who tried to stop him from saying what he wanted to say, speaking his mind, would probably not be long for their job.

**Senator Risch:** Let us turn to the dissent cable that you received in July. Are you willing to give a copy of this dissent cable that you got from two dozen diplomats regarding the imminent catastrophic collapse in Afghanistan, are you willing to give a copy of that to this committee?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, this dissent channel is something that I place tremendous value and importance on. It is a way for people in the State Department to speak the truth, as they see it, to power. And these cables, I have read every single one of them, of the dissent channel cables that we have gotten during this administration. I have responded to every single one. I factored what I read and heard into my thinking and into my actions.

But the legitimacy of the channel, the ability for people to be able to with confidence share their thoughts, share their views, even when they run counter to what their seniors have said or the policies being prescribed, it is vitally important that we protect that channel, protect its integrity. And it is designed by its very regulations only to be shared with senior officials in the Department.

And what I do not want to see is some kind of chilling effect going forward that says to those who would think of writing a cable in the future that, oh, this will, you know, get out widely, be distributed in ways that would have that -- that would have that chilling effect.

**Senator Risch:** Do you admit that you received a dissent cable in July signed by two dozens diplomats that warned about the imminent catastrophic collapse that was coming in Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I certainly received this cable in mid July. I read it. I responded to it. I factored its contents into my thinking.

And what the cable said broadly was two things. It did not suggest that the government and security forces were going to collapse prior to our departure. It did express real concerns about the durability of that government force after our departure, and it focused on the efforts that we were making, particularly on the SIV front, to try to expedite moving them out.

And in fact, a number of the recommendations, the very good recommendations it made were already entrained. Others were not. But one of the ones that was entrained was the establishment of Operation Allies Refuge. We received the cable on July 13. That operation was actually put into force on July 14. It had already been planned for some time, and this was an effort to expedite the identification and relocation of SIVs, actually putting them on planes, which, as you know, is not part of the program. Actually relocating them and working to establish transit sites so that we could put them there while we finished processing them.

**Senator Risch:** Well, you see that is the problem with us not having access to that cable. You are telling us that, but we have been told by others that it was significantly different than what you are saying. Also we really would like to see the response to that because I think history is going to be interested in that particular cable and your response to it.

I will save my next question for the next round. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. And Senator Cardin, I have asked Senator Cardin to, in addition to his questions, preside for a few minutes since I have a hearing that I have to just go to.

Thank you.

**Senator Cardin** [presiding]: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, thank you so much for being with us today. And thank you during the Afghan evacuations for almost the daily briefings you had for all members of the United States Senate and keeping us totally informed as to the events unfolding.

Now I contrast that to what happened during the Trump years, where we were not kept informed at all about the negotiations between the Trump administration and the Taliban, that we had no briefings or information at all in regards to the summit meetings between the United States and North Korea, or the United States and Russia. Where our committee could not conduct the oversight that is so important, as you have pointed out, working with the executive branch in a check and balance for the unity of our country.

So I thank you very much for the way that you have kept us engaged and informed as decisions have been made.

As you pointed out, the Biden administration was dealt a very difficult hand on the withdrawal from Afghanistan. We all recognize we needed to withdraw. The options were extremely limited.

The mistakes made by previous administrations, we have talked about it. But I think we need to understand that many of us did not support the 2002 campaign to go into Iraq. And one of those reasons was that we wanted to complete the mission in Afghanistan when we had a chance to do it when the Taliban was diminished after our military came in, after the attack on our country.

But instead, we went into Iraq, which was not engaged in the 9/11 activities, and we never finished Afghanistan, a mistake made by the Bush administration.

Now we have already talked about the Trump administration and setting a deadline and releasing prisoners and moving forward with the reduction of troops when there was really very little options that the administration had. It does not negate the information that was made available to you about the strength of the Afghan security forces and the Ghani administration's will to stick with it in Afghanistan.

And I think many of us are interested in knowing how intelligence got that so wrong, and the contingency plans are ones that we really do want to review because it seems to us there had to be

better ways to secure passage into the airport than what ultimately happened. But considering the hand that you were dealt, considering the crisis that developed, evacuating 124,000 was a miraculous task. So we congratulate all that were involved in the evacuation of so many people under such a short period of time under such difficult circumstances.

I want to get to where we are today. During this process, the State Department was very open to all Members of Congress -- Democrats, Republicans -- as we filtered information in to you about vulnerable people in an effort to get them out of Afghanistan. Today, our offices are still being deluged by requests to help people that are in Afghanistan. NGOs are working very aggressively.

Can you share with us the process that you are using in order to filter information about Americans that are still in Afghanistan who want to leave, those that apply for SIV status, and those Afghans that are at risk? How do we transmit that information, and what process is in place so that we can try to get these people out of Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, thank you, Senator.

As I noted, we have established a task force focused entirely on relocation to help those who wish to leave Afghanistan, whether there be any remaining American citizens, whether it is SIV applicants, whether it is Afghans at risk, whether it is the nationals of our partner countries, get out. And that involves a number of things.

It involves, for the American citizens, case management teams. Five hundred individuals whose task is to be in constant contact with any remaining American citizens who wish to leave, and that is what they are doing.

It also includes, together with our Legislative Affairs Office, being in constant contact with you, as well as with outside groups who have identified and are trying to help people who seek to leave. This here is the sum total of cases brought to us by members of this committee, just this committee, that all of you or many of you have been working, and we are deeply grateful for those efforts, for this information. It ensures that when you send us the information, we put it into our database if it is not already there. We make sure that we are able to track it. We make sure we are able to coordinate with you.

And I recognize that especially in the early going, during the evacuation itself, some of the feedback was lacking. We were trying to do all of this in real time, making sure that we took in the information that you were providing and acting on it. And in some cases, we did not get back to people to say here is what we have done, and we have been working to make sure that we get back to everyone. I think we have 26,000 inquiries from Congress. We have responded to 21,000 or 22,000 of them.



**Senator Cardin:** So we still have the categories of reporters that work for us that are still in Afghanistan. We have women officials -- that were officials in Afghanistan that are at risk. We have NGOs that worked with us in Afghanistan, their employees that are at risk.

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Cardin:** So you are saying we still have an opportunity to work with you to get that information to the sources that you are using to try to arrange for their exit from Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, absolutely. We very much invite that, and we want to make sure that we have as best possible a unified, coordinated list so that we know what everyone is working on, and we can track and we can help. Or we can take on depending on the --

**Senator Cardin:** And can I get your best guess on the numbers? At one point when we first started, we thought there might be somewhere around a little less than 100,000 of U.S. citizens, SIVs, and Afghans at risk that wanted to leave. Obviously, that number was low. We have already evacuated over 124,000.

Do we know how many U.S. citizens are in Afghanistan that want to exit today? How many are in SIV status that want to exit? And how many Afghans at risk we want to help?

**Secretary Blinken:** On the American citizens who wish to leave, the number is about 100, and it is very hard to give a real-time number at any given moment because it is very fluid, by which I mean this. Some people -- and we are in direct contact with this group.

Some, for very understandable reasons, are changing -- changing their mind from day to day about whether or not they want to leave. Others continue, even now, to raise their hands and say I am an American citizen in Afghanistan, someone who had not identified themselves before. And again, I think, as all of you know very, very well, we do not require, as a country, our citizens to register or identify themselves to our embassies in any country in the world when they travel there or if they reside there.

**Senator Cardin:** Do you have the numbers for SIV and for --

**Secretary Blinken:** So the SIV numbers, that we are tabulating right now because we are trying to account for everyone who has come in. Some people remain in transit countries. Other people are now in the United States.

We are putting all of those numbers together to determine -- but the overwhelming majority of Afghans who have come out of Afghanistan, thanks to our evacuation efforts, are in one way or another Afghans at risk. Some will be SIV applicants. Others will be P1 or P2 applicants. Others will be in none of those categories, but Afghans at risk. We are breaking down all of those numbers, and we should have a breakdown for you in the next couple of weeks.

**Senator Cardin:** Thank you. I look forward to seeing that.

Senator Rubio?

**Senator Rubio:** Thank you.

Mr. Secretary, in your statement, I think that the most troubling thing is the following quote from you. "Even the most pessimistic assessment did not predict the government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained." I back that up by saying you also cite General Milley, who said there was no indication that there would be a rapid collapse of the Afghan army and government.

You know, for much of last year, I was the acting chairman of intelligence. I am now the vice chairman of intelligence. I have been tracking this very, very closely. And just going back to the beginning of this year, I can just -- obviously, I cannot quote the titles of the pieces, but let me suffice it to say that there are numerous pieces that would be categorized as "It is going to hit the fan."

And, but let us just for a moment put that aside, okay? Because I think any analysis of those pieces would have led anyone to that conclusion. Putting that aside for a moment, we had every reason, we had every reason to believe and to plan for the rapid collapse of the Afghan military and the Afghan government.

At the beginning of 2020, by all admissions, we had a really -- already really bad status quo in Afghanistan. Okay, we had a small footprint, but we had a strong commitment to air support, and that sustained the Afghan security force's ability to resist the Taliban. The security forces of Afghanistan were suffering 10,000 casualties a year. The Taliban was suffering casualties, too, but they enjoyed safe haven in Pakistan. They were able to go there to rest, to refit, to train, to recruit.

And so, in summary, even before the withdrawal, we had a terrible status quo. The security forces, a small number of U.S. forces continued to die. We had U.S. losses as well. I want to mention that. But the Afghan government was still fractious and corrupt, and the Taliban had an unchallenged safe haven in Pakistan.

Or put another way, and paraphrasing your own words from your opening statement, if after 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, and training, there is not enough for the Afghan government or the Afghan security forces to become more resilient or self-sustaining, what did we think was going to happen as that support began to be removed?

What did we think was going to happen when that terrible status quo was changed? It does not take some exquisite piece of intelligence or some brilliant analysis to conclude that if you radically change an already bad status quo, by removing U.S. and NATO forces, by ending enablers and air support, the status quo was going to collapse in favor of the Taliban.

This is not an argument in favor of staying. I think that ship has sailed, okay? Because I know a lot of time has been spent on justifying the withdrawal. We are not debating the withdrawal. What I am arguing is we had a terrible status quo as is. By your own admission, the Afghan government, even after billions of dollars and 20 years, was not self-sustaining, was not resilient. We should have known that as we began to draw down support we were going to see the potential for a collapse, and that is what all these pieces pointed to as well.

So it is concerning that no one saw all of this and concluded that there was no evidence or no reason to believe that there could be a rapid collapse. More to that point, we began to see clear signs weeks ago that this is where it was headed. Without air strikes, the Taliban now began to mass and maneuver, going from intimidating these small Afghan outposts to actually getting them into quitting. We were seeing Afghan outposts begin to quit.

They went -- the Taliban could now were -- they went from surrounding these small provisional -- provincial capitals to surrounding major cities, with 5,000 to 8,000 Taliban fighters. This is weeks before. By the way, this is at the same time as, I believe, on July 8 President Biden was still giving this naive optimistic prediction about the fighting capabilities of the Afghan forces and so forth.

We could see them meticulously focused on the north. You could see that they were methodically and carefully splintering the sporadic remains of any sort of resistance. Weeks before the fall of Kabul, you could see the Taliban was on the verge, was headed towards doing something they had not done before. They were going to isolate Kabul from the north, cutting off all their supply routes.

So we knew before -- we knew weeks before that we were headed for a Taliban control of the north, all the traditional routes of Taliban encroachment on Kabul were nearly sealed, the south and the east. Kabul faced the prospect of no fuel. The Afghan government faced the prospect of being

unable to mount any viable opposition and sustained defense. What did we think was going to happen? All of those things were in place at the time.

And I think the most concerning part of it is that if we did not have an analysis that looked at all this, this was not a failure of intelligence. This was a failure of policy and planning. We had the wrong people analyzing this. Someone did not see this. Either someone did not see this or someone did not want to see this because we had established this we wanted to be out by September 11 so that we could have some ceremony arguing that we got and pulled out of Afghanistan on the anniversary of 9/11.

The fact of the matter is where it leaves us now, on top of all the other things that have been mentioned here, from a geopolitical perspective, is not a good place. I think China and Russia and Iran, they look at this botched withdrawal, and what they see is incompetence that they think they might be able to exploit, may lead to miscalculation.

I think the Europeans, our allies, who had very little say, if any, or control certainly over the timing and the execution of all this, they are now, number one, have to be wondering about our reliability, the credibility of our defense agreements with them. But they also have to be really, really upset at the prospects of a massive refugee crisis landing right on their borders here very soon.

And India, and I know that there was an announcement today there will be a meeting of the Quad fairly soon, which is a good development, except that in the Pacific region, if you are India, you

are looking at this and saying if the United States allowed Pakistan to unravel their standing -- the Pakistani role in all this, and I think multiple administrations are guilty of ignoring it. The Pakistani role in enabling the Taliban is ultimately a victory for those pro-Taliban hardliners in the Pakistani government. They have to be looking at this and saying if the United States could have a third-rate power like Pakistan unravel its aims, what chance do they have of confronting China?

So I think this leaves us in a terrible situation. But I go back to the initial point. I do not know how it is possible if, in fact, the people in charge of our foreign policy did not see all of these factors and conclude that there was a very real possibility of a very rapid collapse, then we have got the wrong people making military and diplomacy decisions in our government.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I am happy to respond briefly in the time that we have. As you know from your own expertise and leadership on these matters, there are constant assessments being done. And in this particular case, assessments being done of the resilience of Afghan security forces, of the Afghan government, and different scenarios established, from worst case to best case to everything in between.

And ultimately, the preponderance of the intelligence and assessments land someplace, and there are always going to be voices, and critically important that we listen to all of them, who may be talking about exclusively the worst case, some best case, some in between. Here is what I can say in this setting, and we can take this up as well in other settings.

Back in February, the assessment of the -- the overall assessment of the community was that after a complete U.S. military withdrawal, that could potentially in the worst-case scenario lead to the Taliban capturing Kabul within a year or two. So that is back in February, and that was more or less where things stood in the winter and into the spring.

By July -- and you are exactly right that the situation was deteriorating as the Taliban continued to make progress on the ground throughout the summer. In July, the IC indicated that it was more likely than not that the Taliban would take over by the end of the year, the end of this year. That said, we, the intelligence community, did not say that the country-wide collapse of all meaningful resistance would be likely to occur in a matter of days.

And you referenced Chairman Milley, as I did earlier. Nothing that he saw, that I saw, that we saw, suggested that this government and the security force would collapse in a matter of 11 days.

And you are right that I think we need to look back at all of this because, to your point, we collectively over 20 years invested extraordinary amounts in those security forces and in that government. Hundreds of billions of dollars, equipment, training, advice, support. And based on that, as well as based on what we were looking at real time, again, we did not see this collapse in a matter of 11 days.

But it is important that we go back and look at all of this.

**Senator Cardin:** The time has expired.



**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you.

**Senator Cardin:** Senator Shaheen?

**Senator Shaheen:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Secretary Blinken, for appearing before the committee today.

I appreciate and share the frustration of my colleagues over the challenges with the evacuation, over the situation of Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and the Taliban's treatment of women and girls and other minorities. But I also agree with your assessment and that that has been given by several others that where we were when we got to that evacuation was because of the failure of both Democratic and Republican administrations.

And I want to know where that outrage was when year after year for 10 years, starting with Senator McCain, I and others in the Senate tried to get more Special Immigrant Visa applicants through the process so that they could leave Afghanistan, leave the threat, and come to the United States. And there were a few Republicans in the Senate who blocked us year after year from getting more SIV applicants to the United States.

And I want to know where that outrage was during the negotiations by the Trump administration and former Secretary Pompeo, when they were giving away the rights of women and girls and when Secretary Pompeo came before this committee and blew off questions about what they were doing to pressure the Taliban to have women at the negotiating table for that peace treaty.

So I think there is a lot of regret and a lot of recriminations to go around, and the important thing for us to do now is to figure out how we can work together to address those people who still need to be evacuated from Afghanistan and also to ensure that we can do everything possible with the international community to help protect the human rights of the women and girls who remain in the country and those minorities.

So, Mr. Secretary, that is where I am going to put my effort. I do think we need an accounting. That is important for history and for us going forward, but let us stop with the hypocrisy about who is to blame. There are a lot of people to blame, and we all share in it.

Now, Mr. Secretary, as you know, I was one of those who was opposed to our withdrawing from Afghanistan. I am not going to revisit that. But a lot of my concerns were around the rights of women and girls if Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Taliban.

So I want to ask you now, and you have been very specific on briefing calls that you share the concern, and I recognize that you believe it is a priority for this administration to do what you can to protect the rights of women and girls. So can you talk specifically about what steps the Department is taking to provide for the safety of women and girls and how we are trying to rally the international community behind that effort?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes. Thank you, Senator.

And let me just start by thanking you personally for your leadership for a long time now on these issues, both on the SIVs and the work that we have actually been able to do to try to improve the program, but more work needs to be done, as well, of course, as on women and girls. From advancing women, peace, and security and that agenda to ensuring that there is an equal playing field for women and girls, you have made a huge difference.

And I have to say over the last 20 years, we have made a difference, collectively, in Afghanistan. And possibly the biggest difference we made was for women and girls. Access to education, access to healthcare, access to work and opportunity. All of that was as a result of many of the efforts that we made and that this Congress made and supported, including with very, very significant assistance.

This is -- this is hard. I was in Kabul after the President announced his decision. I met with women leaders from the then-parliament, NGOs, a lawyer, human rights defenders, listened and heard from them about their concerns about the future. Just the past couple of weeks when I was out in Doha and then in Ramstein, I talked to young women and girls who we had evacuated and heard from them, both their gratitude for having been evacuated, but also their deep concerns, more than deep concerns about the future for the women and girls who remain in Afghanistan.

So, with that bearing in mind, we have done a few things, and this is where we really want to work closely with you and with every member. One, we have worked to rally the international

community to set very clear expectations of the Taliban going forward, to include the expectation that it will uphold the basic rights of women and girls, as well as minorities.

And that is visible in the statement that more than 100 countries have signed at our initiative. It is also in a U.N. Security Council resolution that we initiated and got passed. And I know people say, oh, it is a statement or a Security Council resolution, it does not matter. Well, in the case of the Security Council resolution, just to cite one example, there are significant sanctions from the United Nations on the Taliban. There are travel restrictions on the Taliban. And the idea that if the Taliban is in violation of the Security Council resolution that we established, it will get any relief just on that alone, the U.N. sanctions or travel restrictions, I think that is pretty clear that that will not happen. That is just one point of leverage.

We have been working to make sure that the international community speaks with one voice and acts together, including on this. That is one.

Second, we want to make sure that assistance continues to flow. Humanitarian assistance, including assistance that is directed at the special needs of women and girls. We are doing that consistent with our sanctions, and we are able to do that by working through NGOs and the U.N. agencies.

Now I do not want to sugarcoat this because we know that while the Taliban seeks and will probably support and protect basic humanitarian assistance through these agencies like for food and

medicine, it may be a different story when it comes to things that are directed specifically at women and girls. So we are going to be very focused on that and trying to make sure that that assistance can go through, that it is monitored effectively, including by the agencies doing it. And I had spent some time talking with the head of the United Nations effort on this in terms of having a clear monitoring mechanisms for this and to carry that forward.

Next, we will soon appoint, at my direction, a senior official responsible for focusing and marshaling all of our efforts on support for women, girls, and minorities in Afghanistan. I think it is very important that we have a focal point in the U.S. Government at the State Department whose responsibility is to carry forward this agenda, working closely with you in the weeks and months ahead.

**Senator Shaheen:** Well, thank you very much. I am out of time, but can you share with us who that official is as soon as they are appointed?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, of course.

**Senator Shaheen:** Thank you.

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you, Senator.

**The Chairman** [presiding]: Senator Johnson?

**Senator Johnson:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, if I were just to read your testimony, not having watched any news, I would literally think this was a smashing success. But I do read the news, as most Americans do, and we realize this was a complete debacle. And I think what concerns me the most among many things is that detachment from reality. It is the same denial of reality, for example, on the border. A self-inflicted wound. A crisis created by President Biden's policies that have completely thrown open our borders, and yet the administration denies that we have a problem at the border.

So let me -- I have got a number of questions. First of all, approximately, what is the dollar value of the equipment that has been left behind that now the Taliban controls? What is the dollar value of that?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I believe the equipment provided over the last 20 -- well, little less than 20 years, 15 years, is about \$80 billion. Of that equipment that remains, as you know, it was given -- some of it was handed over to the Afghan security forces --

**Senator Johnson:** I understand.

**Secretary Blinken:** -- and of course, some of that is now in the hands of the Taliban.

**Senator Johnson:** So I was also struck by your comment that in your testimony that even the most pessimistic assessment did not predict the government would collapse as quickly as it did. But you just in your testimony said that the realistic predictions before the complete withdrawal was that it was going to collapse by the end of this year.

So the administration continued with their plans of withdrawal, of evacuation, of surrender, knowing the Taliban would be in control of \$80 billion worth of sophisticated equipment at the end of that. Correct? I mean, did that -- did that ever --

**Secretary Blinken:** That --

**Senator Johnson:** Did that discussion ever come up in terms of maybe that would not be a good idea, leaving all that equipment behind as we bug out of Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** That assessment came in July. Much of the equipment -- and again, I will defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon, who are more expert in this than I am. Much of that equipment was made inoperable. Other pieces of equipment will become inoperable because there is no ability on the part of the Taliban to maintain it. None of it, to the best of my knowledge, poses a strategic threat to us or to any of Afghanistan's neighbors. What we are looking at are --

**Senator Johnson:** Okay. So we have an oversight letter. We would like response on that.

Let us just quick talk about the decision to close down Bagram. I mean, again, the President says this was, you know, unanimously decided by the military. But is it not true that the President decided what the troop level would be, a very minimal troop level? The President decided that we would keep the embassy open, and it had to be protected. He forced the military's hands, right?

In the end, it was his decision. It was not the military's decision to close Bagram.

**Secretary Blinken:** The President makes the strategic decisions. When it comes to the actual drawdown, the retrograde, to use the technical language, those were decisions made by his military commanders. He sought their best advice, and that is what was carried out, including the timing of the decision to leave --

**Senator Johnson:** Okay. Another troubling piece of your testimony. You said when the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it. Josep Borrell, the foreign affairs chief for the European Union, his statement on the surrender is that it is "a catastrophe for the Afghan people, for Western values and credibility, and for the developing of international relations."

The Wall Street Journal summarizes it quite nicely in their piece, just the title, "How Biden Broke NATO: The Chaotic Afghan Withdrawal Has Shocked and Angered U.S. Allies." Again, that is detachment from reality that our NATO allies are onboard with this thing. They are not.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator --

**Senator Johnson:** That is not what we are hearing.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I went to NATO well before the President's decision, along with Secretary of Defense Austin, and spent the day with all of our NATO allies listening to them, their views, their prescriptions, their ideas for what we should do moving forward in Afghanistan. I shared some of our initial thinking at that point.



We factored in everything we heard from our allies into our own decision-making process.

When the President made --

**Senator Johnson:** Just like you planned for --

**Secretary Blinken:** When the President made the --

**Senator Johnson:** Just like you planned for every contingency. Okay, I got it.

**Secretary Blinken:** If I could -- if I could continue?

**Senator Johnson:** But now, listen, it is bureaucratic-speak. I have some questions. So, again, my concern is detachment from reality. So as we are -- as we surrendered, as we are evacuating, as we are bugging out, we are hearing all these soothing comments from the administration. This is almost like a well-oiled machine here. We have got flights just leaving and 124,000 people being evacuated.

We heard something completely different. So tell me what is wrong about what I had heard. First of all, prior to the Taliban providing perimeter security, there was no security, and basically, tens of thousands of the Afghans flooded into the Kabul airport. Correct?

**Secretary Blinken:** There was perimeter security around the airport established by our --

**Senator Johnson:** But you had -- but we literally had tens of thousands of people.

**Secretary Blinken:** We -- we did not --

**Senator Johnson:** We did not know who these people were. It was not like people we invited in that were Special Immigrant Visa holders. Correct?

[Crosstalk.]

**Secretary Blinken:** We controlled the airport. We did not control the city. We controlled the airport. Sorry for speaking over you.

**Senator Johnson:** But again, so we had tens of thousands of people in Kabul airport. The reports we were getting on the ground is many did not have -- had no form of ID whatsoever. When I went to Fort McCoy, I asked the commanding general -- again, all the -- every contingency planned for. I asked the commanding general, when did you first find out that your mission would be as an intake facility for the Afghanistan refugees? He said 10 days ago.

I asked the commanding general. I asked the representative for the Department of State, as well as from Department of Homeland Security. Do we know that every refugee that you have received so far -- and there was only 1,000 at that point in time -- but do we know that they at least have some form of ID? And we did not.

We are hearing all these assurances that we are getting biometrically screened, you know, a 14-step plan. I asked the head of Northern Command, he was at Fort McCoy, describe those steps to me, and what are we screening them against? I mean, are ISIS terrorists? Are Al Qaeda terrorists? Have we biometrically screened them in the past that we can compare them to a database?

What is that 14-step process in detail? Not just 14 steps. Tell me, describe to us in detail how are we keeping this Nation safe from such a chaotic situation.

**Secretary Blinken:** So, Senator, the 14-step process refers to -- specifically to the Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and there is a lengthy process --

**Senator Johnson:** So how about for the other 124,000 people?

**Secretary Blinken:** So, yes. So to come to your point, Senator, a couple -- a couple of things. We arranged, as you know, transit countries so that any Afghan coming out of Afghanistan would initially go to a transit country where we could initiate the screening, the vetting, the background checks. We surged Customs and Border Protection officials to those transit points, as well, of course, as other security law enforcement agencies to do these checks with biometric, biographic, other information that we have.

Then as people are cleared in these transit points, they then come into the United States, but they are not being resettled immediately. They are going, once they land at Dulles or in Philadelphia, they are then being sent to military bases, where the checks continue and are completed.

**Senator Johnson:** But again, what checks? We need specifically what the checks are going to be.

**The Chairman:** The time of the Senator has expired. I am sure you can follow up for the rest of your questions.

Senator Coons?

**Senator Coons:** Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, for this hearing.

And thank you, Secretary Blinken, for your service and your testimony today.

We have, I am sure, lots of opportunities to look backwards at the 20 years of our engagement in Afghanistan and at decisions. But I had hoped this committee would rise above the temptations of partisan politics and use this hearing to consider the urgent questions still before us, and I hope we will get a few minutes to focus on this, Mr. Secretary.

How do we get the remaining American citizens, legal permanent residents, and those Afghans who served alongside us or worked with and for us and who are most at risk out of Afghanistan? How do we make sure Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorists again and deal with the Taliban? What leverage do we have in doing so and to also make sure humanitarian aid gets into Afghanistan? And most urgently, how do we support and resettle those Afghan refugees whom we have evacuated to third countries and that much smaller population that has reached the United States?

So let me just start with my thanks to the State Department, to the employees in Kabul and Qatar, and the D.C.-based task force that has worked with the evacuation repatriation of Americans and Afghans, and to the many Delawareans and Americans whom I have heard from. Former

military folks who served in Afghanistan, former diplomats, and development professionals eager to help.

And I look forward to continuing to coordinate with you and with the agencies of our Government, advocacy groups, and other partners on resettlement efforts. I am glad that the former Governor of Delaware Jack Markell has been asked to step forward and help coordinate this resettlement effort.

And I was encouraged today to see Welcome.US launch a broad, multi-faith, bipartisan national organization, co-chaired by three former Presidents -- Bush and Obama and Clinton -- and dozens and dozens of faith groups and nonprofits to welcome Afghans to the United States.

So let me just start with a question about visa status. Senator Sullivan and I wrote a bipartisan letter in mid August, urging expanded eligibility for the SIV program. I am interested in how you are working to expand eligibility under the existing visa programs to include family members and to support those the U.S. Government supported and worked alongside, but who were not direct employees?

I want to start, if I could, Mr. Secretary, by asking you just "yes" or "no" questions about three groups that other Senators have mentioned.

**Secretary Blinken:** Sure.

**Senator Coons:** There is about 550 employees and family members from Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, who were not evacuated. Is the Department prioritizing their evacuation?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Coons:** And the Department committed to evacuating our partners from NED, the National Endowment for Democracy and the IRI. Are those also being prioritized?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, they are.

**Senator Coons:** And our partners from the American University of Afghanistan as well?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Coons:** And so if you would take the 4 minutes we have got left and explore with me how do we ensure safe passage across land borders, whether into Tajikistan or Pakistan, safe and regular flights out of Afghanistan, whether from Mazar-i-Sharif or Kabul? And how do we get documents into the hands of those who do not have identity documents, either because they were destroyed in our embassy or they destroyed them themselves out of fear of the Taliban? And how do we make sure that we are providing the financial support needed for the whole group of refugees who, after thorough vetting, ultimately reached the United States?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, thank you very much, Senator. Those are all very important questions, and let me try to respond briefly to them, and we can take on the details after this session if need be.

First, we needed and we have established a clear expectation from the Taliban about allowing people to continue to leave the country, to include American citizens, green card holders, Afghans who have -- who are properly documented with a visa, including specifically those who worked in some capacity for the United States.

And not only do we have that understanding in public statements by the Taliban, of course, it is built into everything we have done with a large coalition of countries in terms of setting an expectation and making very clear that the failure to fulfill that expectation will have significant consequences, which we can get into.

Second, very important to actually make sure that there are ways to travel freely from the country. We made an intensive effort before we left to understand and share with Qatar and Turkey, the countries that stepped up to do this, what was necessary to make sure that the airport in Kabul could continue to function. And ultimately not -- to have charter flights and then commercial flights going in under international civil aviation organization standards.

We did intensive work. We brought the American contractors back in the midst of the evacuation who had been running the airport to work that, and we handed off a very detailed plan, which is now being implemented.

Third, the land crossings. We have worked with Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan on this to make sure that as we moved people out of Afghanistan, they would facilitate their crossing into their countries. We would have consular officials surged in the necessary places to handle people coming out in that fashion.

And now, to your very important point about documentation -- and this is something that maybe we can take offline -- we are working on a mechanism and a means by which -- and there are multiple ways of doing this, to make sure that people who do not have the necessary document, for example, a visa, from us, a physical visa, to get that to them. And I prefer to go into more detail on that in another setting.

**Senator Coons:** Understood. If I might, just as a closing question, you were asked at the outset sort of what are the factors we weigh as we decide the future of our relationship with the Taliban? And we are in this difficult situation. Many of recognize the Taliban is a terrorist organization that has done horrific things within Afghanistan in the past, yet we need to have some working relationship with them to secure the safe passage out of thousands of people who we still care deeply about.



A number of American citizens with Delaware ties who I have been in contact with did not leave because their families were still in Afghanistan, and there are clear measures that they should be expected to meet that you laid out in your opening statement. What do you think will be the most important aspects of our leverage to ensure the Taliban perform in ways that we would accept, and what do you think will be the turning point at which we will make decisions with our allies to take sharper and harsher measures against the Taliban?

**Secretary Blinken:** So, simply put, the nature of the relationship that the Taliban would have with us or most other countries around the world will depend entirely on its conduct and actions, specifically with regard to freedom of travel as well as to making good on its counterterrorism commitments, upholding basic rights of the Afghan people, not engaging in reprisals, et cetera. These are the things that not only we, but countries around the world are looking at.

And there is, I think, significant leverage that we and other countries hold when it comes to things that the Taliban says it wants but will not get if it does not act in a way that meets these expectations. For example, we talked a little bit before about the existing U.N. sanctions on the Taliban -- these are significant -- as well as travel restrictions.

There is now a new Security Council resolution that we initiated setting out the expectations for what the Taliban has to do. If it is not -- if it is in violation of that resolution, it is hard to see any

of these U.N. sanctions being lifted, travel restrictions being lifted, and indeed, additional sanctions could well be imposed.

Similarly, the foreign reserves of Afghanistan are almost exclusively in banks here in the United States, including the Federal Reserve. Other banks, about \$9 billion. All of that has been frozen. There are significant resources as well that are in the international financial institutions that Afghanistan normally would have access to. Those, too, have been frozen.

Over the last 20 years or so, the international community has provided about 75 percent of the Afghan government's annual operating budget. That, too, has been frozen.

So among many things that the Taliban says it seeks, both basic legitimacy and basic support, the United States, the international community has a hand on a lot of that, much of that, most of that. And so we will have to see going forward what conclusions the Taliban draws from that and what its conduct will be matching these basic expectations that we have set.

Thank you.

**Senator Coons:** Thank you.

**The Chairman:** Senator Romney?

**Senator Romney:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary, for taking time to answer our questions today.

I would like to associate myself with the comments that Senator Rubio made about planning for a potential immediate collapse of the Afghan government and security forces. It seemed that as the Taliban was running the table throughout Afghanistan that the prospect of them continuing to run the table by coming into Kabul was a significant probability that should have been planned for.

In your view, Mr. Secretary, has the Taliban abandoned their sympathy and collaboration with groups like Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network? Do they continue to have the same aim, and are they of like spirit? Or has that -- has that relationship been severed?

**Secretary Blinken:** The relationship has not been severed, and it is a very open question as to whether their views and the relationship has changed in any kind of definitive way. I think it is fair to say two things.

One, whatever the Taliban's views on Al Qaeda, they do know that the last time they harbored Al Qaeda and it engaged in an outwardly directed attack, an attack on our homeland, certain things followed, which I believe it would have an interest in not seeing repeated. So whatever their views on Al Qaeda, there is a strong disincentive built in to allow it to engage in outwardly directed attacks, which the assessment of the intelligence community is they are not currently capable of doing.

ISIS-K, the other main group, that is a different thing, as you know, because the Taliban and ISIS-K are sworn enemies. And in fact, over the last 5 or 6 years since the emergence of ISIS-K, the fight has actually been between the Taliban and ISIS-K, with the Taliban taking most of the territory

that ISIS-K sought to hold onto in Afghanistan. The question there, I think, is less whether they have the will to deal with ISIS-K and more whether they have the capacity.

**Senator Romney:** Given that response, I know that previously the position of the administration and the State Department was that the 2001 AUMF no longer played a role of significance. But given the developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's ongoing collaboration with and sympathy with Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network and like-minded groups, is it not appropriate for the State Department to revisit your recommendation that we abandon the 2001 AUMF?

**Secretary Blinken:** I think, Senator, we need to look to make sure that we have all the authorities that we would need for any potential contingency, including the re-emergence as a threat of Al Qaeda or the further emergence of ISIS-K as an outwardly directed threat. If we do not have those authorities, we should get them. Whether that means relooking at those authorizations or writing new ones, which I think would be the most appropriate thing to do, if necessary, we need to look at that.

**Senator Romney:** I appreciate your willingness to change your point of view in part because of the conditions that have developed in the most recent weeks. Nothing wrong with conditions leading to a change in perspective.

I, for one, thought some years ago that we should withdraw from Afghanistan. The conditions that I saw in the ensuing years convinced me that I was wrong, and I, like Senator Shaheen, was one of those that felt that President Trump was wrong to enter into an agreement to withdraw. I thought President Biden was wrong to enter into an agreement -- or to continue with that agreement to withdraw. And of course, I was appalled by the disastrous withdrawal process itself.

For us today, however, I guess I would like to focus more on the moral stain of leaving people behind and understand what we can do to make sure that we are not leaving people behind. I understand we are down to a small number of Americans. It is hard to know exactly how many are left behind.

But in terms of legal permanent residents, is your priority just as high to get them out as it is to get out citizens? Or is there a different level of commitment for a legal permanent resident's return to the United States relative to a citizen?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, our number-one priority is American citizens, and that has, I think, long been the case. In this situation in Afghanistan, in this emergency evacuation in Afghanistan, we did everything we could as well to make sure that legal permanent residents, green card holders would also identify themselves to us. We do not -- like with American citizens, we do not know at any given time how many there are in any given country around the world. And to make available resources to help them.

But our number-one priority is any remaining American citizens who wish to leave.

**Senator Romney:** I did not realize there is a secondary level of priority then for a legal permanent resident. If that is the case, how many of them approximately? So we do not know the exact number, but how many legal permanent residents are we convinced are still in Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** We do not have an exact number, but it is in the thousands.

**Senator Romney:** A round number? Pardon?

**Secretary Blinken:** In the thousands.

**Senator Romney:** In the thousands. Likewise, in terms of SIV holders or SIV applicants, or people who worked with us that have been our partners through the years, how many of them approximately are still in Afghanistan that want to come to the United States?

**Secretary Blinken:** So this is what we are doing an accounting of right now based on two things, based on the pipeline of applicants as it existed before the evacuation and then looking at those who we were able to evacuate. We do not have those numbers yet because as we have moved to evacuate people, a number of them are still at transit points around the world. Others that --

**Senator Romney:** But it would be tens of thousands?

**Secretary Blinken:** So, realistically, two things. One, we talked about this a little bit earlier. But of the applicants in the program, the -- and as I said, we inherited about 18,000. About half of

those, and this remains more or less the case now, are at a point where it is before the Chief of Mission has given his or her approval that they are, in fact, eligible for the program.

**Senator Romney:** I understand.

**Secretary Blinken:** So we focused on the --

**Senator Romney:** I was looking for a number, and I guess the question I was leading to was this, which is given the fact that the SIV process was so slow and not undertaken during the Trump years in a significant way, you sped it up. That is great. Although you knew that there was no way you were going to get all these people out in time --

**Secretary Blinken:** Let me put a finer point on it.

**Senator Romney:** -- given the rapid collapse of the Afghan security forces. And you said yesterday that you inherited a date, but in fact, you did not inherit the date. The date was May 1, and you pushed it to August 31. Why did you not push it much later so that we would have been able to process the SIV applicants, as well as those who had worked with us that had not yet applied?

I do not understand why a date was actually not inherited, and a date was not selected that would be sufficient to actually remove people from the nation in a way that would be in keeping with our moral commitment to honor our citizens, our green card holders, as well as those who have worked us over the years.

**Secretary Blinken:** Two things, if I may? First, we took some risks in terms of what the Taliban would do or not do after May 1 in pushing beyond May 1. And we, of course, worked this very hard because --

**Senator Romney:** It is a risk with other people we took.

**Secretary Blinken:** It is a risk --

**Senator Romney:** The risk was on people we care for.

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, just to be clear, if I could? The military told us that in order to do its retrograde, its drawdown from Afghanistan in a safe and orderly way, it needed 3 to 4 months. That is why we pushed to move beyond May 1 and to get to the end of August, early September.

Second, to your point, which is an important one and a good one, our expectation was that beyond August 31, beyond the military drawdown, the government, the security forces were going to remain in control of Kabul, of the major cities. Our embassy was fully planned to remain up and running. We were leaving about 600 military behind to make sure that we could secure the embassy so that it could continue to operate.

We had robust programming planned, to include continuing to bring out anyone who wished to leave on notably -- notably SIVs. So that was very much the plan and the expectation.

What was not -- what we did not anticipate was that 11-day collapse of the government and security forces. That is what changed everything.



**The Chairman:** Thank you. Senator Murphy?

**Senator Murphy:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for spending so much time with us.

I think what links our failures in Iraq and Afghanistan is that they are both fundamentally failures of hubris, believing that we can control things and influence events on the other side of the world that are beyond our control or influence. You know, America can be a force for good in the world, but there is a limit to what we can achieve, and so there has been decades-long magical thinking with respect to what is in our control and what is outside of our control.

As it turns out, it was not within our control to be able to stand up an American-style democracy, an American-looking military in Afghanistan that was going to be able to protect the country from the Taliban. But we spent 20 years trying to achieve it.

And so, Mr. Secretary, you covered some of this in your opening remarks, but I wanted to ask you a series of questions to try to level set for the committee the situation you inherited, right? What was in your control, what was outside of your control? And then to look at the events of the last 30 to 40 days with that same lens. What was in your control, what was outside of your control?

I think these are "yes" or "no" answers. Some of it you covered in your testimony, but I think it is important to get it on the record.

So, Mr. Secretary, if President Biden had chosen to breach the agreement that President Trump had signed with the Taliban, would the Taliban have restarted attacks against U.S. troops and bases?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Murphy:** As you said in your opening testimony, by the time the administration took office, the Taliban was on the outskirts of several provincial capitals. If President Biden had chosen to breach the agreement between President Trump and the Taliban, would the Taliban have begun offensives on these urban centers?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Murphy:** So if the Taliban had begun a siege on these cities and resumed attacks on U.S. troops, would 2,500 troops have been enough to keep the country from falling to the Taliban?

**Secretary Blinken:** No.

**Senator Murphy:** Would double that number have been enough? Do we know how big our force would have had to have gotten?

**Secretary Blinken:** I think it was the assessment of our military leaders not to put a number on it, but significant additional U.S. forces would have been required, both to protect ourselves and to prevent the onslaught from the Taliban against the provincial capitals and ultimately against Kabul.

**Senator Murphy:** So it was not a decision between leaving and the status quo? This was a decision between a significant commitment of new U.S. resources to the fight or the continuation of a withdrawal plan?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Murphy:** Okay. Let us talk about the last month. So once the Afghan government and military disintegrate all at once, it seems to me it was pretty predictable and understandable that there would be panic on the ground amongst the Afghan people. So could it be expected that a few thousand U.S. troops and diplomats on the ground at the time would have been able to prevent this panic?

**Secretary Blinken:** No.

**Senator Murphy:** Much has been made about these dramatic, heartbreaking scenes at the airport. Were 2,500 or 5,000 troops enough to stop the Afghan people from rushing to the airport? It created this security nightmare for you, but was there any way for the limited number of personnel that were there to prevent individuals from rushing to the airport?

**Secretary Blinken:** No. They could control the airport, as we did. They could establish a basic immediate perimeter around the airport, as we did. But they could not control what happened beyond that perimeter.

**Senator Murphy:** And so let us talk about that perimeter. Others say, well we should have controlled a bigger perimeter. We should have taken back over parts of Kabul to secure the passage of Americans and Afghans to the airport. I mean, let us say you had quadrupled the number of troops you had there. Let us say you had 10,000 troops there.

Without the Afghan military or a functioning government, would that have been enough to retake Kabul, to be able to secure the passage of everyone to the airport?

**Secretary Blinken:** I do not want to profess to be a military expert. So I would really defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon on that, but I can say that I think safely say that it would have taken a substantial number of forces to try to retake the city or establish a much broader perimeter. And of course, if that was ultimately opposed by the Taliban, in a sense it would have defeated the purpose because anyone outside that perimeter would not have been allowed to get through it to come to the airport, among other things.

**Senator Murphy:** Right. So once the Afghan military collapses, it disintegrates, we do not have enough troops to retake Kabul. And we are in the position of having to rely on the Taliban, or at least communicate with the Taliban, to make sure that we get individuals to the airport?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Murphy:** Okay. I just think this is important to put on the record in a clear and concise way because we have to have a reckoning in this country about what we can accomplish and

what we cannot accomplish. It is extraordinary that this administration got 130,000 people out of Afghanistan, given those circumstances, given the situation that they inherited, that you inherited in January of this year.

And my worry, Mr. Chairman, is that the malady that we suffered for the last 20 years, this idea that it was just a bad plan, that it was the failure of execution as to why we could not succeed in Iraq or Afghanistan, is plaguing us again today. That right now we are having a conversation as if if we just had a better plan, if we just executed better, we could have avoided these scenes at the airport. We could have guaranteed the easy and safe passage of everyone into that facility.

It is heartbreaking what happened. It was impossible for Americans to watch. But if we just simply leave today believing that if we had planned better, if we had better execution, we could have avoided this panic and confusion, I think we are just inviting another Iraq, another Afghanistan in the future.

Finally, Mr. Secretary, just quickly expand on your point about the message that it sends to China, this idea that the Chinese would love it if we stayed another 10 or 20 years, and why this is not a sign of weakness and, in fact, this is an ability for you and the national security infrastructure to be able to reorient resources toward fights that we actually can win?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, I think, Senator, you have put it very well. In my assessment and the assessment of many others, as I said, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China, like

Russia, or adversaries like Iran and North Korea, would like better than for us to have re-upped the war, doubled down on it, and remained bogged down in Afghanistan for another year, 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, with all of that dedication of resources, all of that energy and focus on that, as opposed to the challenges that we have to face today.

And I might add, this committee has done, I think, a very good job on on trying to refocus us on, notably the competition from China. So I think that would have been -- doubling down on this war after 20 years, after nearly \$2 trillion, after 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, and not to preserve the status quo that existed before May 1, that would have been one thing. But to be in the situation where the war with us was restarted, the Taliban attacking our forces, attacking our partners and allies, going on an offensive across the country to retake the cities, that would have required a doubling down on the war.

And the bottom line is this. We were right to end the war. We were right not to send a third generation of Americans to Afghanistan to fight and die there. And I believe we were right in the extraordinary efforts that were made to make sure we could bring out as many people as possible. And now we have an obligation to make sure that we continue to do that and, of course, to guard against the re-emergence of any threats coming from Afghanistan.

**Senator Murphy:** Thank you.

**The Chairman:** Senator Portman?

**Senator Portman:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I appreciate the fact you are having this critical hearing today.

I must say I am going to change what I was going to talk about based on the last interaction. Thank you for being here. I wish General Austin were here because Secretary Austin could answer many of the questions that just were posed.

I have a lot of respect for my colleague, Senator Murphy, as he knows. But this was not a choice between either a dangerous escalation of the war, which has just been laid out, or a precipitous, chaotic withdrawal that embarrassed us around the globe. To say that it was not a sign of weakness the way we left, I mean, I do not know who you are talking to. But if you are talking to our allies in NATO, they will say it was a sign of weakness.

If you are talking honestly to our adversaries, they will certainly say it is a sign of weakness, as will terrorist groups around the world. So I hope the lesson we learn here is not that this was the right way to leave. I hope the lesson we learn here is that there was a better way to leave. If the decision was made to pull out, it should not have been a precipitous, chaotic, and unfortunately deadly departure.

This afternoon, I will be speaking on the floor about Max Soviak. He is a Navy corpsman who was one of the 13 American soldiers, sailors, and Marines who were killed on the wall, trying to help others escape from the tyranny of the Taliban. He should never have been put in that position. It

was an impossible position for our troops, for your diplomats, and the impossibility that they faced was due to our policy decisions.

There was an alternative. Bagram Air Base, I mean it was shut down in the middle of the night with no notice to anybody. It was a surprise. I have talked to people who know a lot more about the military side of this than I do who tell me that, yes, the Afghan troops were a disappointment, but that is partly because they were used to having Americans provide that close air support. And if they had had that, they could have pushed back against the Taliban.

I think we will hear that from your military. I think if General Austin were here, we would hear this.

But we just left, like just pulled out all the military underpinnings. So without the cover, literally, of close air support and other military support, yes, it became extremely dangerous and chaotic. And we left a lot of people behind.

Senator Romney has asked you to give him some numbers, and you said you are still working on that. Here are the numbers that I have, the best that I have. As the ranking member on the Homeland Security Committee, we pushed and pushed and pushed. Eighteen thousand applicants for SIV. We got 705 out.

You said earlier the overwhelming number of people who were at risk got out. I do not think that is true.



**Secretary Blinken:** If I could, sir, just to --

**Senator Portman:** No, let me -- let me just finish giving you the numbers that I have. We think about 30,000 at-risk Afghans were evacuated out of an estimated 60,000. That is the best numbers we can come up with because we cannot get good numbers from the administration. But that is the best estimate.

So that is true that we left people behind who had stood with us and helped us. Obviously, American citizens were left behind. Green card holders were left behind. But thousands of people who stood with us and helped us. And then let us ask about who came.

Earlier, there was discussion about what kind of vetting has taken place. The best numbers we have is that about three-quarters of the people who were evacuated were not green card holders, were not American citizens, were not SIV applicants, were not P1 or P2 visa holders. So about three-quarters of these individuals may not have qualified in this sense.

Now you say that they are being vetted. Good. They should be. And you know, nobody knows because we cannot get good information from the Department of Homeland Security, from the State Department, and others. But from the start, many of us have said what we do there needs to be based on conditions on the ground.

Quite frankly, the President's decision was not based on conditions on the ground. That is why it was a disastrous withdrawal. That is why it put so many people at risk. It should have been

an orderly withdrawal under the cover of superior U.S. and NATO military force. We did have 2,500 troops there, but we had 7,500 NATO troops with us, too.

Again, many of their commanders were shocked at what happened because they were surprised because there was not good coordination. There was a lack of coordination with the people who had stuck with us. I talked about Bagram. There was also a lack of integrated interagency planning. Of course, we have seen this in terms of how the chaotic withdrawal occurred.

These were preventable problems, and they put our military and your diplomats in this impossible situation. They did the best they could, and I commend them for that. In an impossible situation, it is amazing what they were able to perform. But it was so rushed and so chaotic that, again, we did not get the right people out. And many who did get out seemed not to fall into any of the categories that we are concerned about.

So now what do we do? Let us look forward, as was suggested by Senator Coons, and I agree with that. You said that you do not believe that it will be a platform for terrorism going forward, that the current government, the Taliban government has said that they will fight back against terrorists.

Do you believe that the Haqqani Network and particularly the new Secretary of the Interior who is a wanted terrorist, based on your administration's assessment, do you believe that that is indication that they are going to fight back against terrorists?

**Secretary Blinken:** The question, Senator, from our perspective and our partners' perspective is whether the Taliban will make good on commitments to ensure that Afghanistan is not used as a place for outwardly directed terrorist attacks. And they have made commitments, but we are not relying on those commitments. We are going to make sure that we have in place the ability to detect any re-emergence of that threat and to be able to do something about it if it does re-emerge, something that we can talk about in more detail in another setting.

**Senator Portman:** Is the Haqqani Network considered a terrorist group?

**Secretary Blinken:** It is.

**Senator Portman:** Is it true that the interior minister is a leader of the Haqqani Network?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is accurate.

**Senator Portman:** I just think, sadly, we have shaken the foundations of a lot of our alliances, and we have work to do. And I think we have demonstrated weakness and made the world more dangerous as a result.

Let me ask you about one specific question. Well, I guess my time has expired.

**The Chairman:** The time of the Senator has expired.

**Senator Portman:** I will follow up with regard to some of the international financing questions in a letter we sent to Secretary Yellen from Senator Rubio and myself regarding foreign assets.

**Secretary Blinken:** Good. Thank you for that.

**Senator Portman:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. Senator Merkley?

**Senator Merkley:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I want to turn to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. The World Food Program observed that half the children under 5 are acutely malnourished in the country, that 14 million individuals in Afghanistan are on the brink of starvation, that 31 of 34 provinces are at risk of losing their health services entirely, and that only 1 percent of the country is vaccinated. This is a fairly accurate description of the challenge for both food and for healthcare?

**Secretary Blinken:** It is. The humanitarian situation is dire.

**Senator Merkley:** Thank you. And the U.S. just participated in an international conference in which \$1.1 billion was pledged in humanitarian relief from a variety of nations, including an additional commitment by the United States.

NGOs, nongovernmental organizations, that often are essential for providing aid are very concerned about a legal pathway to do so because in 2002, the Taliban was listed as a specially designated global terrorist organization under the International Economic Emergency Powers Act, and it does not have a humanitarian exception.

Previously, when we faced this situation in Yemen, the Treasury Department stepped in to create a legal pathway. And a number of Senators have written to Secretary Yellen and with copies to you and to Samantha Powers saying let us use that same pathway here in which the Office of Foreign Asset Controls issues a general license, creating kind of legal insulation providing humanitarian assistance. Are you engaged in a conversation about how to create a legal pathway to provide humanitarian assistance?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, we are. We have issued one initial license, as you know. The Treasury issued about 10 days ago. And we are looking at what other authorities might be needed to make sure that humanitarian assistance can flow as best possible in Afghanistan.

**Senator Merkley:** Great. Thank you. That is absolutely essential, and I think we have a significant responsibility. We have the chaos of war in combination with the pandemic and general disruption in the country, and it is a moral responsibility to provide assistance.

I am going to ask to enter into the record the letter from September 2 that the Senators and Members of House sent to the administration.

**The Chairman:** Without objection.

[The information referred to follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]

**Senator Merkley:** Thank you.

So as provincial capitals started to fall, and we had 9 provincial capitals fall in 6 days, there was a lot of discussion about whether the government of Afghanistan would direct a reconsolidation of forces to essentially consolidate protection of the territories still held, which was shrinking. Did the government of Afghanistan take key strategic military decisions to consolidate its forces?

**Secretary Blinken:** It did not, and this was a source of tremendous frustration across the administration from the President on down. As the summer went on and we saw the Taliban moving across the country, we repeatedly pressed the Afghan government to do just what you described, which is to consolidate its forces and to defend what was essential to defend and what could be defended. Not to extend itself across the entire country, which it did not have the full capacity to do?

And unfortunately, that consolidation and the plan that we urged on them for how to effectively defend the major cities never took shape.

**Senator Merkley:** What was the response of the government or from President Ashraf Ghani about why they chose not to consolidate their forces to protect the areas they controlled?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, in -- at different moments, there were different responses. At some point, I think initially the response was, oh, we cannot -- we cannot be seen to be giving up on any part of the country. Never mind that, you know, over the last 5 or 6 years, the amount, the part of the

country by population controlled by the government of Afghanistan, if you go back to 2014, 2015, went from about 60 percent to, at the end of last year, about 48 percent.

So this was happening, to some extent, outside the cities, of course, relentlessly. Slowly, but relentlessly. But then, as we pressed and pressed and pressed on them, the response was, yes, we will do it. But they did not.

**Senator Merkley:** Well, we have seen over a number of years we had the challenge of the elections that were considered illegitimate by a portion of the country. We had Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani kind of facing off against each other and creating paralysis, great difficulty appointing key ministers to key positions.

As we analyze and try to understand the rapid collapse, was there essentially a failure to create an effective decision-making capability within the Afghanistan government?

**Secretary Blinken:** I think there are a number of factors, and this is something that I hope we all look at, going back really over the last -- over the last 20 years at various key points. Certainly, there was a lack of unity in the government. It was comprised of different -- different groups, different factions. And despite, again, very significant efforts to get them to act in a unified way, they could not or would not.

Second, I think in terms of their effectiveness, there are obvious serious concerns that manifested themselves. And third, one of the endemic problems that we have had over the last 20

years that we have not been able to effectively address is pervasive corruption. And that has so many consequences.

One of the consequences, though, is that if you are being asked to fight and put your life on the line for a government, for an institution that is corrupt, that is a pretty hard decision to make. And so I think, as we saw with many Afghan forces and soldiers fighting very, very bravely and giving their lives. But institutionally, the military collapsed in totally unanticipated ways in the course of 11 days.

I think as we go back and look, one of the things we have to look at is the impact that this pervasive corruption had in terms of giving the institution the will to fight for the country.

**Senator Merkley:** Absolutely. And in those final days as the provincial capitals were falling, President Ghani refused to acknowledge that there were falling capitals. It was almost like a world in which he was disengaged. And then the finance minister resigned and said he was leaving the country for family reasons, but it was taken as a symbol of the government on the verge of collapse. And then, shortly thereafter, President Ghani fled himself. I think it was August 15 -- Sunday, August 15.

And did we have forewarning of this beginning of the cabinet to essentially flee the country, and how did we respond to that?



**Secretary Blinken:** We did not. On Saturday, as it happens, I spoke to President Ghani. We were working on a plan to have a transfer of power to a Taliban-led, but more broadly representative government to include many of the different actors in Afghanistan, working on that in Doha.

I was calling President Ghani to make sure that he would support that. That was critical. He told me he would, but he said if the Taliban would not go ahead with it, he would -- and I am paraphrasing here -- fight to the death. That was Saturday. He left Afghanistan the next day on Sunday.

**Senator Merkley:** Thank you.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. For the awareness of Senators, there is a vote going on. There is a subsequent vote going on as well. It is my intention to try to continue through the process, but I just wanted to make members aware.

Senator Paul?

**Senator Paul:** I have advocated for an end to the Afghan war for over a decade. I am glad it is finally over. But never in my worst nightmares could I have imagined that an administration would leave and leave \$80 billion worth of weaponry to the Taliban, dozens of planes and helicopters, thousands of armored carriers, hundreds of thousands of automatic weapons. And worst of all, 13 of our brave young men and women.

Never in my worst nightmares did anyone conceive of such a colossal incompetence.

Abandoning Bagram Air Force Base will be remembered as one of the worst military decision in our history.

Holding no one accountable, having everyone circle the wagons and say, hey, we all agreed abandoning Bagram Air Force Base was a great idea, this is going to be remembered by the people.

Holding no one accountable for letting the base go, it will be remembered.

To add insult to injury, this week you have now released \$64 million in aid to Afghanistan. Do we not have some prohibition against giving aid and comfort to the enemy?

Now the argument from the Biden administration is, oh, we are giving it to charities, and it is for the good of the people, for poor people and for women. Well, the Taliban has a history of taking this. Throughout their governance, they would take the money. This was a big complaint we had when they were in power the last time.

They now have \$80 billion worth of weapons, 350,000 automatic weapons. Do we really -- are we really naive enough to believe that we are just going to keep sending charity to Afghanistan and they are not going to interrupt it? I think that is a foolish notion.

The \$64 million, though, is the tip of the iceberg. There is still about \$10 billion out there that was designated for the Afghan government. Can you pledge today without equivocation that the Biden administration will not release any of this money to the Taliban?

**Secretary Blinken:** Absent the Taliban making good on the commitments and expectations of the international community that I have outlined previously, that is correct.

**Senator Paul:** Maybe we could deduct a few for the weapons they took?

**Secretary Blinken:** So, Senator, on the -- on the weapons, again I will defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon who are more expert in this. You are right that about \$80 billion worth of weaponry has been provided over the course of the last 15 or 16 years. Much of that, the significant weaponry -- planes, helicopters -- is actually inoperable, will soon become inoperable because it cannot be maintained.

In terms of the strategic threat that that weaponry poses, it does not to us or to Afghanistan --

**Senator Paul:** But you cannot say you are not going to give them the money. If they behave, you are going to give them the money. Why do we not subtract the \$80 billion from the \$10 billion you are going to give them? Then they are minus 70 still.

I mean, really, the fact that you are entertaining good behavior that they will get more money I think is a big mistake and a naive notion that we are going to somehow change this Stone Age philosophy by giving them more of our money. We have sunk trillions of dollars over there. This is our chance to have a peace dividend. Let us quit sending good money after bad.

The guy the Biden administration droned, was he an aid worker or an ISIS-K operative?

**Secretary Blinken:** The administration is, of course, reviewing that strike, and I am sure that a full assessment will be forthcoming.

**Senator Paul:** You do not know if it was an aid worker or an ISIS-K operative?

**Secretary Blinken:** I cannot speak to that, and I cannot speak to that in this setting, in any event.

**Senator Paul:** So you do not know or will not tell us?

**Secretary Blinken:** I do not know because we are reviewing it.

**Senator Paul:** Well, see, you would think you would kind of know before you off somebody with a Predator drone whether he is an aid worker or he is an ISIS-K. See, the thing is, this is not just you. It has been going on for administration after administration.

The Obama administration droned hundreds and hundreds of people, and the thing is, is there is blowback to that. I mean, I do not know if it is true. But I see these pictures of these beautiful children that were killed in the attack. If that is true and not propaganda, if that is true, guess what? Maybe you have created hundreds or thousands of new potential terrorists from bombing the wrong people.

So you have got to know who you -- we cannot sort of have an investigation after we kill people. We have an investigation before we kill people.

We have got plenty of bombs. We can bomb almost anything we want from anywhere in the world. Maybe we should have bombed the helicopters and the planes that we left behind. I mean, even though you said you did not know any of this and was all surprised, once they took all of our stuff, we should have said you have got 20 minutes to get out of it because we are going to blow it all up.

Then you would have sent a message of strength. Instead, we bombed somebody who we are not sure whether it was an aid worker or an ISIS-K operative. See, that is not sending a signal of strength, and in the end, there will be more blowback from it. If you killed an aid worker on accident, I mean, do you think we are better off because of that?

You really could have acted in a position of strength, but you could have made the basic decision -- the basic, fundamental decision that really ruined the whole thing for you was a military decision to abandon Bagram Air Force Base before you left, before the Americans were out.

Anybody can argue, and you may have a point, that it happened more quickly than we thought it was going to happen. Okay, that is an honest mistake. Still a huge mistake. And when people make judgment mistakes in the military, they ought to be relieved of their post.

But leaving Bagram Air Force Base I think is an unforgiveable sort of mistake. It is going to be remembered in history. But if you do nothing about it, you leave all these people in place and say, oh, well, we all agreed. It is like then maybe everybody needs to go.

I mean, but really it was a terrible mistake, but releasing money to the Taliban will add insult to injury. It will be terrible for the memory of the 13 soldiers who died in the end, who were the final soldiers to die in this war, if you end up giving money to the people that had been ruining the Middle East and Afghanistan for decades.

I hope you will not release the money, and I think it would be a big mistake.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. I understand Senator Schatz is with us virtually?

**Senator Schatz:** Yes, Mr. Chairman.

**The Chairman:** And before Senator Schatz begins, I am going to ask Senator Kaine to preside so I can vote and come back.

Thank you.

**Senator Schatz:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for appearing before the committee. I want to sort of zoom out a little bit. The defense establishment, political appointees, so-called think tank experts, defense contractors are complaining loudly about tactics because it is their strategy that failed. They are complaining about how America's longest war ended because they did not want it to ever end, and they are mad because they think we should be an occupying force indefinitely, and they know that position is untenable so they dive into tactics.

They want to talk about holding onto Bagram for longer or sending forces into Kabul. They will not acknowledge the fundamental mistake was that we invaded a country in Central Asia without a good understanding of its people, its history, or of its culture.

After 20 years, trillions of dollars spent, and training of hundreds of thousands of Afghan security forces, the Afghan government reinstated was no more capable of being a referee in a civil war than before we invaded. That is not the fault of our service members or diplomats. It is the fault of policymakers who set unrealistic goals.

And so the basic question I have for you, Mr. Secretary, is: What are the lessons of the last 20 years of war?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, Senator, I think you actually summed it up extremely well, and I would say two things, just to put a fine point on it.

We went to Afghanistan for one reason, and that was to deal with the people who attacked us on 9/11, to bring them to justice, and to the best of our ability make sure that that would not happen again from Afghanistan. And we largely succeeded in that effort a long time ago with bin Laden being killed in 2011 and Al Qaeda, in terms of its capacity to conduct attacks on the homeland from Afghanistan, vastly degraded to the point where it is currently assessed that it does not have that capacity.

Somewhere along the way, with the best of intentions, we also sought to remake the country and, in effect, to use military force to remake another society. And I think to your point and the point that Senator Murphy and others have made, whatever our intentions, that is probably something that is beyond our capacity. And the net of that is that we were there for 20 years. We lost 2,461 Americans, 20,000 were killed -- were injured, excuse me. About \$2 trillion were spent in direct and indirect costs. That is the equivalent of about \$300 million every single day for 20 years on average.

And to those who say, well, yes, but you arrived in a place where the expenditures in terms of people and resources were sustainable. Well, that is simply not the reality that we faced because, as we have discussed, given the deadline established for the removal of U.S. forces by the previous administration, the choice we had was either to go through with that and withdraw our forces or to re-up the war, to escalate, to send in more forces, more loss of life, more loss of resources indefinitely.

And to what end, to what result in terms of having something sustainable in a government or in security forces that could protect the country and uphold basic rights. So I think those lessons are important. They are profound, and I hope that all of us together will reflect on those and other lessons that we have learned, both in what we have done tactically, including in this administration, as well as what we have done strategically across many administrations over 20 years.

**Senator Schatz:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary.



I am worried about reports that we are seeing about acts of violence against journalists, women, and girls and the Taliban targeting minority groups like the Hazara people, groups who have a brutal history of committing violence against them are probably going to get worse.

So what are we doing to ensure physical access for the NGOs that service these constituencies?

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you, Senator.

These reports, which I have also seen, whether in media reporting, in videos and other reports, are deeply, deeply disturbing. And I think whether it is us or whether it is many other countries around the world that we have been working to organize and to focus, this, of course, violates the basic expectations that we have of a Taliban-led government in terms of its need to not abuse these rights, but to uphold them.

So we are working to make sure that we are all both speaking with one voice and acting together when it comes to using the influence and leverage we have with the Taliban to insist that it meet these expectations. Second, when it comes to humanitarian assistance and other kinds of support, besides providing that support to NGOs, to the United Nations and its agencies, we are doing whatever we can to help ensure that those agencies and those NGOs are able to operate, pressing directly and indirectly on the Taliban-led government to ensure their ability to do that and their protection.

But this is very much a moving picture and something we are very focused on right now and in the days and weeks ahead.

**Senator Schatz:** One final question. I understand -- I understand this is not the main thing. I understand there are people who remain in mortal danger. But from your standpoint, the Department of State, you have got to be a little worried about morale for those people who have dedicated the better part of 20 years to this effort.

And so what can we do, not what can we say, but what can we do on behalf of the Foreign Service, especially at a time when we need to building back our diplomatic corps?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, thank you for raising that, Senator, because it is -- you are exactly right, and it is very, very important to me, and it is very, very important institutionally.

I spent time with all of our returning diplomats from Afghanistan, either personally or virtually depending on where they were, and spent a lot of time listening to them, hearing them, and trying to address the concerns that they have. And to your point, we have so many people who have invested their work, their careers, their lives in Afghanistan, developed relationships, a deep love for the country, and this is very challenging, painful for many of them.

And of course, those who participated in the evacuation itself who were literally at the gates at the Kabul airport side by side with these extraordinary men and women in uniform, doing that work,

including the 13 who lost their lives who were killed in the terrorist attack. I had officers who were literally serving next to them up to a couple of hours before that attack, knew them by first name.

And so the impacts, both over 20 years and more immediately, with our people who were there literally pulling people in to safety, helping to talk people in, to walk people in, officers around the Department who stood up and volunteered to help in some way. And many of them who ran into HKIA, to the airport, to help get people out.

So we are spending time talking to them, listening to them, and also providing them the support that some of them may need, including emotional support --

Senator Kaine [Presiding]: Mr. Secretary, if I can ask you to sum up, we are over time, and there are still eight Senators who want to ask questions.

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Schatz:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Senator Kaine:** Senator Barrasso? Thank you, Senator Schatz.

**Senator Barrasso:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, President Biden has described the evacuation from Afghanistan as an extraordinary success. His words, "extraordinary success." This has to be the lie of the 21st century.

It is dishonest. And if he believes it, it is delusional. America can no longer ever say we leave no American behind because Joe Biden did. And by your own testimony and your words this morning, there are still about 100 Americans trapped behind enemy lines.

We have heard a lot about the 13 U.S. service members who died a couple of weeks ago. One was Rylee McCollum of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. He was 20 years old, signed up for the Marines on his 18th birthday.

His wife Gigi, expecting a baby. The baby was delivered just yesterday, a baby girl. I stood with Rylee's family and his then-pregnant wife on Friday in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, as his remains were brought back in a flag-draped coffin from Afghanistan. Never made it back home alive, as a result of this administration's failures. People in Wyoming view this as having lost one of their sons, one of their children, and it is a devastating loss. And they really do believe it is the administration who should hold the blame for what has occurred.

But this withdrawal, and you have heard it from other Senators on both sides of the aisle, has been an epic failure. No planning, no strategy. It was cobbled together at the last minute, disorganized. It did not have to be this way.

I am thinking back to your confirmation hearing. I raised a number of questions and concerns about your record on foreign policy failures in Syria, in Libya, in Iran. I said these botched decisions have serious consequences. I said I believe they embolden terrorist organizations around the globe.

I said your decisions in the past have put lives of men and women who serve our Nation at risk because of these failures, and I said I think it would be a grave mistake to confirm a Secretary of State who has a demonstrated track record of repeatedly making the wrong decisions when it comes to American foreign policy and national security. And the actions I have seen from you over the last 7 months have proven my assessment to be correct.

The Biden administration's missteps are numerous. Failed to start evacuation operations until the fall of Kabul in August, despite announcing the withdrawal in April. Failed to heed the warnings of a collapse of the Afghan government and security forces in spite of warnings. Failed to prepare for a rapid Taliban takeover. Failed to adapt the politically motivated deadline for withdrawal to the situation taking place on the ground because you were so focused on the calendar on the wall.

Failed to keep Bagram Air Force Base, a place I visited about eight or nine times. The U.S. military base with two runways that could be used to help evacuate civilians. And we just heard failure to prevent a vast arsenal of weapons from getting into the hands of the Taliban.

I mean, it seems the most egregious, though, that I hear about in Wyoming and people all across the country are most offended by is abandoning American citizens, as well as abandoning our allies in Afghanistan. Senator Portman went over the numbers. The Washington Post called it a "moral disaster." I think it is a moral disgrace.

You nearly dislocated your shoulder, though, patting yourself on the back for the great job you have done. I mean, just yesterday you stated, "We did the right thing by our citizens in working feverishly to get every one of them out."

But you did not get every one of them out. You have admitted again and again we are talking about over 100 Americans. The top priority must always be getting all Americans home safely. And now with no U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, the Americans that President Biden left behind, instead of going on national TV and saying we will not take the troops out until every American is out, their options for escaping are dwindling.

So I am trying to put this all together to say how did we end up here? In April, the President made the decision to announce everyone would be out by August 31. May 8, there was a rehearsal of concept, which is a dress rehearsal for withdrawal.

I know that the National Security Council was there. The Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Homeland Security, they were all there. My understanding is that you did not attend. Is that true?

**Secretary Blinken:** My Deputy responsible for the operation was there.

**Senator Barrasso:** I know where you were. I think you should have been here instead. I understand in late June the State Department was getting nervous because the military drawdown was moving on schedule, but not the civilian drawdown. You were running behind.

I understand State Department was talking to the Defense Department to slow down the pace of military withdrawal, calling actually for "tapping the brakes" on military withdrawal. Is that not true?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I am not going to get into any internal deliberations or discussions that we had. We worked on this together every step of the way.

**Senator Barrasso:** In July, you got more warnings at the State Department things were getting bad. When did the State Department formally make the request to the Department of Defense for military-assisted evacuation, the noncombatant evacuation operation? Because that is a Secretary or Ambassador job.

**Secretary Blinken:** The -- the NEO was being planned, if necessary, throughout the spring and summer. We revised the plans on a number of occasions, and ultimately, when the government and security forces unexpectedly collapsed in the 11 days, the NEO went into effect.

**Senator Barrasso:** So middle of August?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Barrasso:** And why did you wait so long?

**Secretary Blinken:** Because we had a government and security forces in place that, by every estimate, would be able to protect the city, protect Kabul, protect the other provincial capitals certainly through the year.

**Senator Barrasso:** So yesterday, you testified that the Taliban has been designated a terrorist organization. I want to be very clear on this because that is what you said yesterday. "The Taliban has been designated a terrorist organization."

Does this administration believe the Taliban is a terrorist organization?

**Secretary Blinken:** It is designated under one of the designations, and any engagement that we have will be purely for the purposes of advancing our interests.

**Senator Barrasso:** Under one of the designations?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, a specially designated terrorist --

**Senator Barrasso:** When does this administration plan to list the Taliban as a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization?

**Secretary Blinken:** A specially designated terrorist organization, that is correct.

**Senator Barrasso:** And you testified this morning about the SIV washout rate. I think you said about 40 percent that they do not qualify --

**Secretary Blinken:** Before the Chief of Mission approval, that is correct.

**Senator Barrasso:** So what percentage of the Afghan population that left Afghanistan as part of our U.S. evacuation efforts, what percentage of those were vetted before they actually got on the airplanes?

**Secretary Blinken:** Before they got on the airplanes --



**Senator Barrasso:** Yes.

**Secretary Blinken:** -- to leave Kabul? Certainly not -- most of them were not. That is exactly why we established transit points in countries through negotiations with those countries to make sure that before anyone came to the United States, they would be vetted by the different law enforcement and security agencies. So we established agreements with well more than a dozen countries.

**Senator Barrasso:** So who were you letting on the planes? Anybody that showed up?

**Secretary Blinken:** Well, initially, as you know, there were people who managed to flood the airport. We had to do an immediate assessment of those. We had to make sure we could clear people out of the airport so that the flights could come in, go out.

But no one came to the United States without being checked somewhere else first to make sure that they do not pose a security threat.

**Senator Barrasso:** My time has expired. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I would just have to say I spent time overseas last week talking to our NATO allies at a security conference, as well as with NATO individuals. And I will tell you, our enemies are emboldened, and our allies are enraged.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chairman** [presiding]: Senator Booker?

**Senator Booker:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here, and thank you for allotting so much time and taking every single question posed to you.

I want to first maybe just pick up with what my friend and colleague asked. Could you characterize the Americans that are still there? I know there are a lot of them that did not necessarily want to come back. There were -- there is a whole array of different reasons. Could you give us a better understanding of those that have remained and what their circumstances are?

**Secretary Blinken:** Certainly. Senator, as we have noted, starting back in March, we issued 19 separate messages to any American citizen who was registered with the embassy, urging them to leave Afghanistan. To avail themselves of commercial flights that were running, offering assistance if they needed it, because we knew it was a very volatile security environment.

And as especially when we went, started the ordered departure of our embassy on April 27, it is also very incumbent upon us to make sure that we are making clear to any American citizens that they should take the opportunity to leave.

By the time of the evacuation, despite these 19 separate messages, there were still somewhere around 5,000 or 6,000 American citizens left in Afghanistan. And as we have noted earlier, we never know, whether it is Afghanistan or any other country around the world, at any given moment how many American citizens are there because they are not -- no one is required, when you travel abroad, when you reside abroad, you are not required to register with the embassy or with anyone else.

Many people do. Many do not. But we made a massive effort to try to determine how many people were there. So the reason -- to get to your point, the reason that despite all of these warnings, despite the environment people remained is because for virtually all of them Afghanistan was their home. They have lived there for years, for decades, for generations.

Their extended family was there, and it is the most wrenching of all decisions to have to decide whether or not to leave the place you have come to know as home.

**Senator Booker:** I wanted to ask that because I wanted to give more texture to this complex situation. This is not that there were people there -- there were many people that fall into the category of not being abandoned by our country but have made the conscious choice to stay in country. Correct?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Booker:** You have been -- I have only been here 8 years, but I will say to you and your staff, you have been the most responsive State Department team that my office has dealt with. We have brought many, as you know, people to your attention, both American citizens and Afghans, who wanted to get out, have worked with us to many different degrees of success. And I am grateful for that.

I have now witnessed with my senior Senator, we went to our joint base and saw the facilities being done for those who have met extreme vetting and have made it to the United States, what is

going on with the 13,000 expected in New Jersey and the 65,000 to 70,000 is America at its best. I meant for military personnel and State Department talking to me about this being some of the proudest work they have ever done, and I think Americans should be aware of that and what is going on. We are a great nation, and this is a reflection of those words on the Statue of Liberty.

I want to pick up, though, on the situation as it is. I think it was Senator Merkley who brought up the concerns about humanitarian interests, humanitarian crisis that is really boiling over there. And I want to just get you to reiterate that you issued one license, but we really need more. Correct?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes, I understand that, and that is exactly what we are looking at. We want to make sure that all the authorities exist to provide that humanitarian assistance, including by not just our own NGOs, but others as well.

**Senator Booker:** And it is a strategic situation. We know we control significant resources the Afghan government has been relying on to run basic services. This is a strategic leverage that we have over the Taliban to continue to try to pressure them into honoring human rights, honoring the rights of women, countering some of the terrorist concerns that we have, and it is very important.

However, given what we understand, without those resources there are going to be continued humanitarian suffering. As the New York Times reported, the World Food Program is estimating about 40 percent of Afghans' crops are going to be lost. There is going to be tremendous hunger as the price of wheat expected to go up 25 percent.

The World Food Program's own food stock is expected to run out by September. And so this is tremendous suffering that will come. It is going to be exacerbated by climate change. We can literally see issues of starvation hitting the general population.

I guess, if you can give me specifically what assurances has the Biden administration been able to secure from the Taliban as it is to humanitarian access, and how is the State Department working with international partners? Because it is not just our responsibility to coordinate and provide near-term and long-term assistance for those Afghans who have ended up in locations without the proper support mechanisms?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes. First, you are exactly right I think to draw a distinction between basic humanitarian assistance to respond to what is a crisis among so many Afghan people. By the U.N.'s estimates, well over 50 percent are in need of humanitarian assistance. We have had a drought. We have had horrific economic conditions. We have had COVID, everything piling on to one of the poorest countries on Earth to begin with.

So when it comes to food, when it comes to medicine, when it comes to the basics, we, the international community, irrespective of anything else, ought to be able to provide that, provided that we can do it knowing that the assistance is going to get to the people who need it and not diverted or used in any other -- in any other way.

We have longstanding mechanisms and arrangements in place, including with leading NGOs, including with the U.N. agencies to do just that, as well as very clear monitoring mechanisms to make sure even in an environment that we do not control, that assistance gets to the people who need it. And I spent time with the head of the U.N. agency responsible for that to make sure that that is what is happening.

We are coordinating with dozens of countries on this. The U.N. is playing a lead role. They just had a donor's conference to make sure that everyone else is feeding into this as well.

**Senator Booker:** I just want to end by saying thank you to many of the State Department personnel still in that region as well as here in the United States that are working through this crisis.

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you.

**The Chairman:** Senator Rounds I understand is with us virtually.

**Senator Rounds:** Yes, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, sir.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for your willingness to appear before the committee and to answer questions on the Afghanistan withdrawal. I understand you have been there for almost 3 hours now. I appreciate your persistence in this.

Mr. Secretary, my staff has been working very closely with yours on the issue of Afghan Special Immigration applications, or SIVs, some of which have been initiated for over 3 years. As you

are aware, I sent a letter to you last week that outlines my concerns, and I spoke to Deputy Secretary McKeon 3 weeks ago.

Due to the preparation for the hearing, I received updates on three of the five SIV cases my staff has been working for months on. I sincerely appreciate the efforts of your staff to get me this information, which I provided last night to the South Dakota veterans who requested my help. And for that, I want to thank you.

I would, however, like you to be aware of my concern pertaining to a key reason that has hamstrung my efforts to assist SIV applicants. This is the Department's position stated to my staff on multiple occasions that it is precluded by law from providing updates or noting any potential defects in applications.

Mr. Secretary, if true, this would prevent Members of Congress from executing oversight and constituent service responsibilities, specifically when they are advocating in support of an applicant. It would also, incidentally, violate the Department's own foreign affairs manual.

Will you commit to me today that you will review the Department's procedures and fix this unacceptable procedure?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, I am happy to review that. And let me say, first, thank you.

Thank you, thank you for the work that you and your team and staff have done to help folks in need

and to make sure that we had the information that we needed to try to be helpful and to get people out. I am really grateful for that and grateful for the work that we have been able to do together.

We will certainly review all of these procedures. There are requirements either built into the law, privacy concerns, et cetera, that may have to be addressed. But we should look at everything.

**Senator Rounds:** Well, Mr. Secretary, I think this is important enough to where we will follow up, and hopefully, within a time certain, we will be able to come up with what changes need to be made, either statutorily or within the rules process, to clarify this because this should not be that hard to be able to stay in contact and to make those communications back and forth between your Department and Members of the United States Senate.

Our adversaries, Mr. Secretary, are celebrating the departure of U.S. troops, and they most certainly are celebrating the creation of a power vacuum. Most certainly, they are also prepared to take this opportunity and use it to their advantage. China has announced last week that it will send \$31 million worth of aid to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. There have also been reports that they are looking at Bagram Air Base for their own use.

The Russian embassy in Afghanistan has remained open, and the ambassador met with Taliban leadership after the takeover. Pakistan is considering the Taliban government as a partner to counter India, and the Iranian president openly called this an American military defeat and is considering working with the Taliban.



Did the administration consider all of these foreign policy implications before such an abrupt withdrawal? And if they did, does the Department have a strategy to counter our adversaries' malign influence in the region?

**Secretary Blinken:** We certainly did. We factored everything into the decisions we made, including the impact that it might have on the neighboring countries, regional countries, and others with various interests in Afghanistan.

A number of the countries that you cited have a whole series of different interests in Afghanistan, to include making sure that it is not a place for terrorism directed against them, to ensure that it is not a source of drugs flowing out into their countries, to make sure that it is not a source of potential refugees flowing out into the countries as well. So all of those things are in play, and countries are looking to take steps that they need to take to protect some of their basic interests.

At the same time, we have established across more than 100 countries and in the U.N. through a Security Council resolution basic expectations of the Taliban-led government. And if those expectations are not met and other countries are aiding and abetting so that the Taliban is able to not fulfill those expectations, there will be consequences for that, too. And --

**Senator Rounds:** Well, Mr. Secretary, if I could, what I am really curious about is do you have a strategy that you established? Did you have enough time before this withdrawal to actually establish a strategy, knowing that there would be a void in Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** The work that we have done to bring together across dozens of countries, very active contact groups, looking as we work together across these countries with NATO, the EU, as well as the U.N., we have a collective strategy on the way forward, and we are working that as we speak.

**Senator Rounds:** But does our country, do we have -- do we have a strategy that if this has been laid out and based upon the need to move out as quickly as we did, did you have time to actually establish a strategy to take care of what will be this power void? And I understand that you have been there now for almost 3 hours, but simply to say that you are working on it with our -- with our other countries seems to me, looks to me like we need our own strategy here, and it does not sound like you are in a position to share with us that that strategy actually exists today.

**Secretary Blinken:** I am happy, Senator, to follow up with you and to share both our thinking and more of our work on that. But we have organized several dozens countries that are collectively working --

**Senator Rounds:** Mr. Secretary, and my time is getting --

**Secretary Blinken:** -- working on and implementing a strategy both --

**Senator Rounds:** My time is getting short.

**Secretary Blinken:** Oh, I am sorry. Go ahead, Senator. Go ahead.

**Senator Rounds:** What I hope is that if you would, whether it be in a classified setting or publicly, if you could share with us in the next week to 10 days what that strategy is. And if it needs to be in a classified setting, I would ask the chairman to provide us with the opportunity.

But most certainly, I think it is important that we have a strategy to combat what will be a void in Afghanistan, which is a void now and most certainly is something that we should be in better position, I believe, than what it sounds like you are able to articulate today.

Mr. Chairman, I would suspect that my time is up at this point.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. Senator Markey?

**Senator Markey:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thank you for your -- thank you for all of your work and all of your colleagues' as well.

President Biden was right to end the United States' longest war. If leaving Afghanistan was ever going to be clean and easy, one of the President's three predecessors would have done so. If we have learned anything from our 20-year war in Afghanistan, it is that it is easier to get into a war than to get out of one.

However, given the amount of second-guessing and arm-chair quarterbacking that I have seen over the last month, I fear that we have not learned anything. We must re-imagine a national security

policy that prioritizes diplomacy and stops endless, undefined military engagements before they can begin.

And I want to be sure that Americans at home understand the position President Biden was placed in. President Trump's deal with the Taliban exchanged a halt in Taliban offensives against our troops for a commitment that we would leave the country by May of this year. President Trump, with the support of his national security team and many Republican Members of Congress, negotiated this deal without the participation or buy-in of the Afghan government.

President Biden faced a choice of having to break that deal, essentially restarting the war in Afghanistan and risk increased attacks against U.S. troops or to get our troops home as promised. But President Trump, of course, did not leave an actual plan to evacuate all of those who should have been taken out of Afghanistan, and President Trump's vision without a plan is and was a hallucination.

So that left it then ultimately to the Biden administration, which did its best in order to effectuate that agreement, which President Trump, in fact, made. And President Biden ultimately was right to follow through on that commitment to end our country's longest war, one that claimed so many military lives, so many tens of thousands of Afghan civilian lives, and saddled U.S. taxpayers with \$2 trillion worth of debt over the last two decades.

And the tremendous cost of war hit home in its final chapter, as our armed forces and diplomats executed one of the largest airlifts in U.S. history. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

Yesterday, Senator Warren and I both attended the funeral service for U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant Johanny Rosario-Pichardo in Lawrence, Massachusetts. One of 13 American heroes who lost her life on August 26 in that suicide bombing, as she was guiding Afghan women and girls to safety at the Kabul airport's Abbey gate.

The work of Purple Heart recipient Sergeant Rosario and others during Operation Allies Refuge saved thousands of innocent lives, and we have to ensure that our own commitment to help the Afghan people endures past the takeoff of that last U.S. military transport plane 2 weeks ago. But we honor her, and we honor all of those who gave their lives and sacrificed in Afghanistan.

And every member of this committee I think has to agree that we have to ensure that there is humanitarian aid that goes into Afghanistan to help those who are in need. We spent \$300 million every single day to conduct the war in Afghanistan, roughly equivalent to what we spent this entire year in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan.

Mr. Secretary, I sent a letter with four of my colleagues today asking for the administration to ensure that the money previously allocated or requested for Afghan war efforts be repurposed to assist Afghans in need. Could you give your view as to what should happen with that funding now

that the defunct Afghan defense and national security forces are not there to receive this funding, in terms of ensuring that we avert further humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan?

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you, Senator, and I got your letter. We are looking at all of that.

We want to make sure in the first instance that we are making good on our own contributions to the humanitarian assistance that the Afghan people need. We did that again yesterday at the pledging conference organized by the United Nations. We are going to continue to look at the needs going forward and to look at what we can do effectively to make sure that assistance is getting to the people who need it, not diverted, of course, to the Taliban-led government and making sure that agencies, whether the U.N. or NGOs, can operate safely and effectively in Afghanistan.

**Senator Markey:** Thank you. And as the last planes left, many international relief organizations stayed behind. We owe it to them not to create red tape and free them from the risk of sanctions. Are you working with the Treasury Department to issue a general license so that these groups' lifesaving work can continue?

**Secretary Blinken:** We are working on the necessary licensing authorities. As you know, we issued one license, the Treasury did, a couple of weeks ago. We are looking to see what additional authorities may be needed to make sure that humanitarian assistance can get in there freely.

**Senator Markey:** Thank you. I think that is very important, and I think telescoping the timeframe to get that completed is very important.

And just about every major refugee assistance group has called for lifting the level to 200,000 people as refugee admissions into our country. What is the administration's view on that 200,000 person goal in order to ensure that we deal with the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, as you know, we have already significantly lifted the refugee cap from its historic lows that were in place when we -- when we took office. And of course, we are assessing whether there are going to be additional needs.

Having said that, the work we are doing now to bring Afghans in need were vetted and checked into this country, including support we need from Congress on that, will not for the most part tap into the refugee cap. There are other means and mechanisms by which we are looking to bring people in to ensure, with your support, that they are given the assistance that they would get were they coming in as refugees, but not actually cutting into the existing cap or any future cap.

**Senator Markey:** Thank you, and thanks for all your great work. I just would hope the 200,000 is the goal. The resettlement agencies are pointing toward that number, and I think it is a number that we should all strive to meet in order to just be sure that these individuals not only survive, but thrive in their new environment.

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Thanks for all your great work.

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you, Senator.

**Senator Kaine** [presiding]: Senator Hagerty?

**Senator Hagerty:** Thank you, Senator Kaine, Ranking Member Risch, Secretary Blinken.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator.

**Senator Hagerty:** Before I start, I would just like to acknowledge a young man, Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss. Ryan is a Tennessean, one of the 13 service members who lost his life at the airport in Kabul, trying to rescue and save others. My heart goes out to he and his family and the tragic loss associated with this evacuation.

And regarding this evacuation, I agree with Senator Barrasso. For President Biden to call this an extraordinary success is beyond the pale when we leave Americans, when we leave our allies, when we leave those that have helped us behind.

And I have also just been over to visit with our allies in the U.K. and in NATO, and their sense of surprise and enragement is palpable. We have a very significant failure that is taking place here, a failure of global proportion. And it has placed our allies in the position of questioning America's resolve, of questioning our Nation's integrity, and frankly, they put us in a situation where they are questioning whether we are a reliable partner.

Our reputation as a nation, I think, has been put at risk as a result of the failed evacuation here. And our job now is to get to the bottom of this failure as a committee, this failure that has left the world a more dangerous place for the United States, for our allies, for those that depend on us. It has



also armed our enemies like never before, and it has emboldened our strategic adversaries. There must be accountability.

Secretary Blinken, my office and other congressional offices have heard rumors regarding potential Cabinet resignations over the situation in Afghanistan. So I want to ask you, have you submitted your resignation regarding this issue?

**Secretary Blinken:** I have not.

**Senator Hagerty:** The lack of accountability here, the lack of accountability in this administration is shocking to me. I would like to turn to another question regarding the intelligence that we have relied upon.

In an internal report given to the State Department by Embassy Kabul on August 16, there was warning of a breach at the Kabul airport, and it said, I quote, "A breach cannot be fully prevented at current force levels."

Mr. Secretary, did you see that report?

**Secretary Blinken:** I am sorry. Can you tell me the date again, Senator?

**Senator Hagerty:** August 16, a report given to Embassy Kabul, an internal report from Embassy Kabul to the State Department saying that a breach at the airport cannot be fully prevented at current force levels.

**Secretary Blinken:** I cannot tell you whether I saw that specific report, but that is exactly why the President had on standby 6,000 forces to be able to deploy immediately into Afghanistan, into the airport in case the airport was in jeopardy, and that is exactly what we did.

**Senator Hagerty:** Well, this -- the force levels being insufficient I think was a significant reason for concern, something that in a plan of action I think should have been accounted for certainly earlier.

And going to the NEO plan, I would like to cover that with you for a few minutes. The noncombatant evacuation operational plan for Afghanistan would be a plan on how we evacuate American civilians from a foreign country should a dangerous situation arise.

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Hagerty:** Prior to turning over the Bagram Air Base on July 2, did the NEO plan to evacuate Americans have the Bagram Air Base as a critical element of its strategy?

**Secretary Blinken:** The critical element for any evacuation was actually the airport in Kabul, known as HKIA. Because, as you know, Senator, Bagram is about 40 miles from Kabul. To the extent that the population that you are seeking to evacuate is mostly in Kabul, the airport by far most convenient to them would be the airport in Kabul, HKIA.

**Senator Hagerty:** A civilian airport in a neighborhood that is much more difficult to protect than an airway -- airport the size of Bagram with two runways and the ability to land and lift off,

significant airlift capacity. I am frankly quite shocked that our NEO plan would have had no inclusion of the Bagram Air Base, but if I understand you correctly, it did not include Bagram?

**Secretary Blinken:** The plan focused on the airport in Kabul.

**Senator Hagerty:** I wonder how the evacuation plan was updated, Mr. Secretary, as things began to change on the ground. What was the process that you deployed there?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, through the course of the spring and summer, we reviewed all of these plans, different contingencies, including the NEO plan. Of course, the element that no one anticipated, as we have discussed on numerous occasions, was the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan security forces in the space of about 11 days.

Having said that, we had plans in place to do the two critical things that we did. We were able to evacuate our embassy, all its personnel, destroy sensitive materials, get people to the airport in 48 hours and in many cases much less than that.

Second, as I mentioned, the President ordered that there be a standby force in place to make sure that HKIA, the airport in Kabul, was secured. Planes could come in, planes could take off, and we had a secure facility. And we did that in the course of about 72 hours.

**Senator Hagerty:** Back to the NEO discussion. In an August 14 briefing, the Pentagon spokesman John Kirby denied that there was an NEO operation in Afghanistan at that point. But 2 days later, on the 16th, he belatedly admitted there was a NEO operation going on.

And so I am curious, Mr. Secretary, what date did the administration actually decide to execute the NEO plan, and when did they begin to actively evacuate all Americans and allies?

**Secretary Blinken:** I believe, Senator, it was triggered by the collapse of the government and the security forces.

**Senator Hagerty:** Who would have made the decision to execute the NEO?

**Secretary Blinken:** Ultimately, the President would be asked for his decision, approval to do that, based on the recommendation of the different Government agencies involved.

**Senator Hagerty:** Is that what happened in this case?

**Secretary Blinken:** I believe that is right. Yes, sir.

**Senator Hagerty:** You know, oversight is not a simple check the box exercise. It requires getting to the bottom of what has come to be the greatest U.S. foreign policy disaster, at least in my lifetime. And Mr. Chairman, we need more hearings on this Afghanistan withdrawal failure.

I would also like to say this. Leadership requires owning one's mistakes, and leadership requires introspection and a commitment to achieve what is right. What we have witnessed here has been a failure of leadership. What it is has been a press-driven spin cycle. It is one that has deflected blame, and it is one that shamed us as a nation. It is time to leave.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, if I could just say briefly in response?

**Senator Kaine:** Please be brief, if you would.

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes. I am responsible for the decisions I make. I am responsible for the actions of my Department. I am responsible for learning any lessons that flowed from those decisions or those actions, and I am also responsible to holding myself accountable to you and through you to the American people, which is exactly what I am doing here today, what I have been doing these past weeks in repeated conversations and briefings with Members of Congress, both the Senate and the House, and what I will continue to do going forward.

And we can all draw our own conclusions from that. I respect yours. I may disagree with them. But that is exactly the process that I am engaged in and that we are engaged in, and we will continue to do that going forward.

**Senator Hagerty:** Well, my constituents expect that sort of accountability as well, particularly the veterans that serve in Tennessee and across the Nation that have reached out to me that are absolutely heartbroken about what has gone on. There has been loss of life. There has been loss of treasure.

We have now armed terrorists at a level that I have never expected. Our allies are more proximate to this threat than we are. They could not have been more frustrated with me when I spoke with them. They are concerned that we now have a threat level that we have never seen before, and we have got to find ways to work together with them to address that.

And I will look to you for accountability on that as we move forward, Mr. Secretary.

**Senator Kaine:** Mr. Van Hollen?

**Senator Van Hollen:** Thank you, Senator.

Mr. Secretary, welcome, and I recognize what a huge undertaking it is to airlift every American out of Afghanistan and work to get some of our closest Afghan partners out of harm's way after 20 years of American presence and troops in Afghanistan.

The United States Government conducted the biggest airlift in our history, over 120,000 people. And I understand and want to thank all the people who were involved in that.

That said, I really urge you to have the State Department surge more people to this process to help the remaining Americans out of Afghanistan, to help others, legal permanent residents and others. Mr. Secretary, I have with me a list of a lot of the constituent cases that are on our office. I am going to give it to you and your staff. If I could just get your commitment that you will get back to us on these cases?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Thank you. Because we have had your help, we have one case of a 2-year-old American citizen, and we have been working with you on that. We also have cases of 15 legal permanent residents and a number of our close Afghan partners. And at this point, the system at the State Department and DHS is overwhelmed. We are just getting back from responses without any feedback as to the state of the case. So I really urge you to keep at that.

I must say I guess I should not be surprised. But as Senator Shaheen said, the level of hypocrisy in this room and this Congress is staggering. You know, we should have more hearings on what happened in Afghanistan, starting with the decision to divert huge amounts of U.S. troops and resources to Iraq in one of the biggest strategic blunders in modern American history, where it is a clear matter of record that Iran has been the biggest beneficiary of that decision.

And let us fast forward now to the Trump administration. I did not oppose the decision of the Trump administration to open up negotiations with the Taliban. Everybody in this room, I suspect, recognized there was no military solution to this conflict, that there had to be a political solution. So I supported opening up that process.

Mr. Secretary, is it not a fact that the Trump administration asked the Pakistani government to release three top Taliban commanders as part of that process?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** And one of them is the person who is now number two, Baradar, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** He is the person everybody saw in those photos in Kabul, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Right. And there was another senior commander released, and they began the discussions in Doha?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** They did not include the Afghan government, did they?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Right. And they, in fact, essentially ordered, pressured the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Many of those fighters involved in the attack on Kabul today, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** Yes.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Okay. Now let us see what the negotiation was. Here was the negotiation. I supported the beginning of it. The United States will leave by a date certain, May of this year, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** Correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** You cannot attack American forces, but you can attack Afghan forces with impunity, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** That is right. And so we pick a date, we say to the Taliban you can attack Afghan forces, and then we say, okay, now let us negotiate the future of Afghanistan. Is that not the way it was set up when you walked in?



**Secretary Blinken:** That is essentially correct, yes.

**Senator Van Hollen:** There is a saying in Afghanistan that foreigners have the watches, we have the time. And so the Trump administration, through those negotiations, set it up perfectly for the Taliban. Green light to attack the Afghan forces. No discussion going forward.

And then is it not true that the former President criticized President Biden for not pulling out our forces earlier?

**Secretary Blinken:** I believe that is accurate.

**Senator Van Hollen:** I think he said we have got to stick to our May timetable. So President Trump, "stick to our May timetable," and by the way I am handing you negotiation where I have already said we are getting out, and I have said go ahead and attack the Afghan forces. And now we are going to talk about the future.

So that is the hand you have been dealt. Let me talk to you a little bit about the future, and I am glad you brought together the ministerial meeting with our NATO partners, with surrounding countries. This will never work if the surrounding countries do not participate and others in the region. You had both Pakistan and India at the table, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Okay. Now I am very much in the mode, and I know you are, too, you watch what they do, not what they say, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** Exactly.

**Senator Van Hollen:** The Taliban clearly have new PR people. They also recognize that their actions they have to take in order to get any kind of support whatsoever from some of the Western countries, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is correct.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Okay. So I have heard you testify today to some of those conditions, free and safe passage for people who want to leave, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Okay. Access by international humanitarian organizations directly to the Afghan people, not through any Taliban, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** Right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Protection of girls, women, and minorities.

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** This is going to be one, obviously, we have to keep a very close eye on.

Fourth, you cannot use the territory of Afghanistan as a base for future terrorist attacks, whether it is Al Qaeda or anybody else, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** And a more inclusive government because, right now, we have a government comprised of Taliban, including two members of the Haqqani Network, you know, one of who is wanted for questioning and for violent activities.

So my question to you is that was a really important first step because we want everybody on the same page, meaning our close partners and surrounding countries, right?

**Secretary Blinken:** That is right.

**Senator Van Hollen:** All right. What -- do you have that buy-in from all the partners around the table that we will act in unison?

**Secretary Blinken:** We do have that buy-in. We have that buy-in not only from the meetings we have. We have that buy-in in the statements that many countries have signed onto. We have that in a U.N. Security Council resolution that we initiated, and critically, we have moving forward established an ongoing group of countries and institutions that are going to work together to track this, to continue to make sure we are speaking with one voice and acting in unison.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Got it.

**Secretary Blinken:** Now there are countries that may be outliers in this -- in this effort. Some of them have been referenced to include -- to include China, to include Russia, to include Pakistan, and that is something that we are being very vigilant about as well.

**Senator Van Hollen:** Well, I know time is up, but I would just -- I think a number of those countries, at least Pakistan, like India, like the others, have an interest in preventing chaos and civil war in Afghanistan.

**Secretary Blinken:** They do.

**Senator Van Hollen:** And obviously, we asked them to release prisoners that they had locked up, Taliban prisoners. So, you know, obviously, we have to keep an eye on the ISI, I get that. But let us all work together to achieve the goal of a stable Afghanistan that protects the rights of its people.

Thank you.

**Secretary Blinken:** Appreciate that.

**The Chairman** [presiding]: Thank you. Senator Cruz?

**Senator Cruz:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here.

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator.

**Senator Cruz:** President Biden and the Biden administration have presided over the worst foreign policy catastrophe in a generation. Americans across the Nation are horrified. Our servicemen and women, our active duty military are angry, they are disillusioned, and they are frustrated.

Our enemies across the globe are emboldened, which makes the world more dangerous today for America, and our allies are dispirited. Ever since the disaster began unfolding in Afghanistan, we

have seen the Biden administration making political excuses. We have seen Democrats on this committee explaining at great length how everything that happened in Afghanistan is Trump's fault. It is all Trump's fault.

Mr. Secretary, Joe Biden is the President of the United States. Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States. You are the United States Secretary of State. Just like Jimmy Carter owns the disaster of the Iran hostage crisis, you own this.

The Biden administration caused this disaster. It was caused by two things. Number one, ideological naivete and extremism. Repeatedly, Mr. Secretary, in this hearing and also on multiple conference calls over the last month, you keep saying things like the steps the Taliban needs to take to be welcomed into the community of civilized nations.

Mr. Secretary, they do not want to be welcomed into the community of civilized nations. They are terrorists who want to murder us. This administration does not understand that. Joe Biden does not understand that.

But sadly, that ideological extremism was combined with manifest incompetence. There were four decisions this administration made that I think were utterly indefensible. Number one, abandoning the Bagram airfield, giving it to the Taliban. That is a decision that 100 years from now will be studied at war colleges as a colossal strategic mistake, giving up two secure airfields,

necessitating an evacuation from a dense urban environment, a commercial airport, which led tragically to the suicide bombings and murders that killed 13 American servicemen and women.

Had we been evacuating from Bagram with a secure perimeter, the odds are quite high that attack either would not have happened or if it had happened, it would have been far less severe in its consequences.

Secondly, the Biden administration giving the Taliban a list of Americans and of Afghans we wanted out. Third, the decision to leave Americans behind. Hundreds of Americans, perhaps more, perhaps thousands; thousands of green card holders; tens of thousands of Afghans who assisted the U.S. military, the Biden administration abandoned them and left them behind.

And fourth, leaving billions of dollars of American military equipment that the Taliban will now use to threaten our lives. Earlier in this hearing, you said about that equipment, "None of it poses a strategic threat to us or their neighbors." That does not pass the laugh test. When you are looking at the Taliban potentially having 64,000 machine guns, 33 Black Hawk helicopters, 16,000 night vision goggles, we will see American blood spilled because of these colossal mistakes.

Now abandoning Bagram was not your call. It was the Pentagon's and the White House's ultimately. But I want to ask you flat out, did the State Department give the Taliban a list or multiple lists of Americans and/or Afghans that we wanted out?

**Secretary Blinken:** Those reports and the idea that we would do anything to endanger our citizens or anyone else at a time when we were trying to save their lives is flat-out wrong. Let me --

**Senator Cruz:** So I would just like a "yes" or "no," did you give them a list?

**Secretary Blinken:** Let me be very clear, Senator, if I may, please? Thank you.

In limited instances where we were seeking to get a bus or a group of people through a checkpoint, we gave a manifest to the people at the checkpoint to demonstrate that those people were expected to --

**Senator Cruz:** Roughly how many names were on the list you gave?

**Secretary Blinken:** Does not matter because they all --

**Senator Cruz:** Dozens, hundreds, thousands, give us some order of magnitude.

**Secretary Blinken:** This happened in a handful of situations where to get through --

**Senator Cruz:** Dozens? So is it your testimony it was not hundreds? I want to understand.

Did you give them thousands of names?

**Secretary Blinken:** No, we did not.

**Senator Cruz:** Okay. Hundreds?

**Secretary Blinken:** I am not going to put a number on it, but it was -- again --

**Senator Cruz:** Why not? This is a hearing to discover. How many names and how many of those individuals you gave the Taliban the name to have been targeted for torture or murder?

**Secretary Blinken:** Senator, by definition, these were in limited instances with a bus or a group of people to get them through a checkpoint. They got through the checkpoint.

**Senator Cruz:** So not only did you fail to evacuate Americans and green card holders who were there, but you also brought in tens of thousands of Afghans who had wholly inadequate vetting, bringing many of them to the United States. And one of the things that has done is that has brought in a humanitarian crisis to America.

Child marriage and domestic abuse tragically are widespread in Afghanistan. According to the World Health Organization, more than half of the women in Afghanistan are married as child brides, and 90 percent of women are subject to domestic abuse, 90 percent.

On August 27, according to public reports, you distributed internal documentation highlighting numerous instances at intake centers of sexual abuse in which much older, grown Afghan males appeared with children, young children, claimed they were their brides, claimed they were their wives, and the document said the State Department urgently requested guidance. That was your word, "urgently."

Subsequently, the Department of Homeland Security said that it showed the desperation of families that they were willing to give little girls to grown men to be subject to sexual abuse and child wives. My question is as follows. Did you receive that urgent guidance? How many children have



been subject to sexual abuse? What have you done to rescue young children from illegal and abusive relationships after being brought to America by the State Department?

**Secretary Blinken:** Across the entire Government, everyone involved in the evacuation effort, whether it is at a transit point in one of the countries that we negotiated with, whether it is here in the United States at Dulles or Philadelphia or the military bases, we have all of our officers at extreme vigilance to look for and to deal with any cases or concerns that arise --

**Senator Cruz:** Did you receive the urgent guidance, and how many child brides have you seen?

**Secretary Blinken:** I do not know the specific guidance you are referring to. I am happy to look at it.

**Senator Cruz:** So was there not urgency to discover if children are being abused?

**Secretary Blinken:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**The Chairman:** The time of the Senator has expired.

**Secretary Blinken:** We could detect and deal with many cases, and there have been, to my knowledge, a limited number of cases where we have separated people because we were concerned that they were --

**Senator Cruz:** How many?

**Secretary Blinken:** Cases I am aware of? A handful.

[Gavel sounding.]

**The Chairman:** Senator Kaine, you have the last word today.

**Senator Kaine:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Risch.

Secretary Blinken, thank you for the time that you have spent with us today. It is an important hearing, and there will be many more. I am going to a second one in the Armed Services Committee in about 2 hours, and I expect over the course of the next weeks, there will be many. And I am just going to really speak from the heart to kind of set out what I am thinking at a very important moment, a complicated moment.

I am the father of a Marine. I come from a State that is very, very heavily affected by the wars of the last 20 years. It was one of the States that was attacked on 9/11. And in the weeks of August and early September, this is basically what I have done. I have watched Afghanistan on television. I have talked to active duty and veterans. I have talked to you and other colleagues.

I have visited the Pentagon for the Pentagon employees' commemoration of the 9/11 attack. I went to Arlington on 9/11 to go to the fire station where the relief effort was spearheaded. I have also gone to Fort Lee, as you have, to see the incredible work that is being done to help Afghans who have stood with us integrate into American life.

I have been to the Dulles Expo Center to see these families that have traveled halfway around the world, still traumatized, but looking forward to a chapter where they can be free. And I have a

lot of emotions. And so let me just tell you what they are. They are sadness, and they are anger, and they are pride, and they are relief.

Sadness. I am saddened by the unnecessary deaths of the 3,000 or so who were killed on 9/11. I am saddened by the deaths of more than 7,000 U.S. troops. I am saddened by the deaths of more than 8,000 American contractors. I doubt there has been a war in the history of the United States where more contractors died than troops, but this global war on terror is one such war.

I am saddened at the deaths of 400,000 innocent civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. I am saddened at those who are now going to have to live under Taliban rule. I am particularly saddened for the families of the 13 troops who were killed. To lose a child in any circumstance is horrible, and war is horrible. But in the last days of a war, in the last days of a war that has been declared over and is winding down, I do not know how that wound could ever heal for a parent. And yet those 13 died to save the lives of about 120,000 people who will have the chance to live in a freer and better society because of their heroism.

I am angry. I am angry at the terrorist impulse. I was angry about it on 9/11/01, the urge to destroy with the planes flying into buildings and killing people indiscriminately -- young, old, American, and other nationalities, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, no religion. That indiscriminate urge to destroy, to blow up a demolition vest at the Kabul airport and kill 13 American troops and hundreds of your own countrymen and women. For what? That angers me.

I am angered that after 20 years of American investment in an Afghan security force dramatically larger than the Taliban, dramatically better equipped than the Taliban, that security force just melted away and failed. And the one thing I would be a little bit critical of you and the administration is the same point that Senator Romney was making earlier and Senator Rubio. The notion that General Milley said that nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days, I just do not think that is true.

I know it was not the consensus opinion, and I know it was not the most likely possibility. But the possibility of a collapse was not zero percent, and it was not 1 percent. And it probably was not 10 percent. It was probably, based on what we have been hearing in this committee and others have, too, that was always a fairly -- it was a possibility that had to be grappled with.

And I guess one of the questions that I will get into over coming weeks is if the administration really said nobody could see this coming, then that probably suggests that the contingency planning for something that was a real possibility was not all that it should have been.

My anger at the collapse of the security force, we have got to get into it, and we have to decide did we train them wrong? Did our equipping them lead to corruption? Were they good fighters that lacked confidence in their own military and civilian leadership? Did we want things for Afghans that the Afghan leadership did not want for themselves?

We had good intentions about what we might have wanted in Afghanistan, but let us face it. We cannot get 30 percent of Americans to get a vaccine. We cannot get 30 percent of Americans to acknowledge the results of a presidential election. Do we really think that we can determine what the culture of another country should be?

I am proud. I am proud of those who served in so many different ways, from first responders who ran into the buildings on 9/11, to this generation of Americans, many of whom did not come from military families necessarily, but who volunteered to serve.

And not just serve once or twice, but this is the only generation, I believe, of the American military that has seen five, six, seven, eight, nine deployments again and again and again. Injured, wounded, carrying some invisible scars that will affect the rest of their life. I am proud of their service.

I am proud of the country and my Virginians for what they are doing in welcoming Afghans here. The outreach from Virginians to my office, from our Vietnamese community, we want to help Afghans settle. From churches, where do we donate? How do we give to resettlement agencies?

When I visited Fort Lee and Dulles, to hear the Afghans express their appreciation to the United States and, even in the midst of their trauma and their anxiety about the next chapter, to be excited about the opportunity to live in a place not under Taliban rule and have an opportunity for

better lives for their children, I am proud that even amidst all of the challenge that is the way they look at us.

And I am proud of the military who are there who say I have been deployed five times. This mission is the most important mission I will ever undertake.

But the last thing -- and Mr. Chair, if you might indulge me because I may go another 30 seconds past -- I am relieved. No one has said this yet. I am relieved that a child born at Inova Fairfax today is not born into a nation at war. Some will challenge my characterization because the world is a dangerous place, and American troops are deployed all over the world. And there is risks, and there is threats. But we have been a nation at permanent war for 20 years.

We were never supposed to be that nation, never. Never. We were never supposed to be that nation. I heard a college student at George Washington say recently, "I know nothing of war --" because with an all-volunteer army, she does not have to -- "but all I know is war." "All I know is war."

President Biden had the courage to say this Nation is not a nation that should be permanently at war. It is going to take a while for people to wrap their head around the notion that though there are serious threats for us everywhere, we are not a nation now that is at war, ground wars in the Middle East. It is going to take people a while to get used to it.

Some people will resist it. Some people will want to say, no, we have got to be on the front edge of our feet and be on permanent war footing at all moments for now into infinity. But I am relieved. I am relieved that for the first time in 20 years, children being born in this country today are not being born into a nation at war.

I yield back, Mr. Chair.

**The Chairman:** Thank you. Let me move and place into today's hearing record a statement on Afghanistan from recently exiled Afghan women leaders and human rights defenders that urges the United States to continue to support women's groups across Afghanistan as central drivers of change.

**[The information referred to follows:]**

**[COMMITTEE INSERT]**

**The Chairman:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for your testimony. You have been here over 3 1/2 hours. I think the interest, every member of the committee was present and had an opportunity to ask questions, and you give substantive answers.

I will just close by saying while the focus today has been the present administration's decisions, this is going back 20 years. And as someone who sat here as a staff director of this committee, as someone who was at the NSC at one time, as someone who was an Assistant Deputy Secretary when -- and now the Secretary, I think you might join me in saying that over the last 20 years at different times, Congress has been misled.

Assessments were definitely overly rosy, to say the best. And if we are not to repeat the past, we need to learn from it, and that is what the committee's ultimate pursuit will be.

The record of this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Thursday. And with the thanks and respect of the committee for your participation, this hearing is adjourned.

**Secretary Blinken:** Thank you.

**[Whereupon, at 1:35 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]**