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Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
THE CONCLUSION OF MILITARY OPERATIONS
IN AFGHANISTAN AND PLANS FOR FUTURE
COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

Tuesday, September 28, 2021

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U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m. in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jack Reed, chairman of the committee, presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

Chairman Reed: Let me call the hearing to order.

First, an administrative action. Since a quorum is now present, I ask the committee to consider a list of 2,993 pending military nominations. Included in this list is the nomination of General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, U.S. Air Force, for a reappointment to the grade of general, and to be Commander of U.S. Transportation Command. All of these nominations have been before the committee for the required length of time.

Is there a motion to favorably report this list of 2,993 pending military nominations to the Senate?

Is there a second?

Female Voice: Second.

Chairman Reed: All in favor, please say aye.

[Chorus of ayes.]

Chairman Reed: The motion carries. Thank you.

Good morning. The committee meets today to discuss the end of American military operations in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years of war, enormous sacrifice by American and coalition military, diplomatic and intelligence personnel and vast U.S. investment, the Afghan state has failed and the Taliban has taken control. We need to understand why and how.
As part of this hearing, we will seek to understand the factors that contributed to the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country and the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. While there is a temptation to close the book on Afghanistan and simply move on to long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia, we must capture the lessons of the last two decades to ensure that our future counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere continue to hold violent extremists at bay.

I know that much of this hearing will focus on our final months in Afghanistan. I think it is equally important, however, that this committee takes a step back and examines the broader two-decade mission that shaped the outcome we face today. Our withdrawal this summer and the events surrounding it did not happen in a vacuum. The path that led to this moment was paved with years of mistakes, from our catastrophic pivot to Iraq, to our failure to handle Pakistan's support for the Taliban, to the flawed Doha agreement signed by President Trump. The members of this committee and the witnesses before us have overseen chapters of war that spanned four presidential administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and we owe the American people an honest accounting. I hope that this hearing will be frank and searching, so that future generations of Americans will not repeat our mistakes.
Our witnesses today are Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense; General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff; and General Frank McKenzie, Commander of U.S. Central Command. I welcome each of you and thank you for your many years of service.

I also want to commend and thank our military men and women for their heroic efforts to evacuate more than 124,000 American citizens, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and other at-risk Afghans over 17 days in chaotic and perilous conditions -- a remarkable accomplishment. We especially honor the brave American service men and women who were killed and wounded while selflessly protecting those seeking safety.

So how did we get here? There are countless decisions and factors that could be pointed to, but I would highlight a few that clearly paved the way.

Early in the war, we did achieve our original counterterrorism objective of significantly degrading Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Over time, however, that mission morphed into convoluted counterinsurgency and nation building. While the U.S. presence in Afghanistan drew down significantly over the last few years, the lack of a defined strategy continued to erode the mission.

One of the clearest inflection points was the ill-fated decision to go to war in Iraq. Just as we began to achieve
momentum in Afghanistan, the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq drew critical resources, troops and focus away from the Afghan theater. Our best opportunity in Afghanistan was squandered and we were never able to get back on track.

Throughout the war, we were also unsuccessful in dealing with Pakistan's support to the Taliban. Even as American diplomats sat down with Pakistani leaders and our forces cooperated on counterterrorism missions, the Taliban enjoyed sanctuary inside Pakistan with time and space to regroup.

More recently the Taliban's resurgence can be tied to the flawed Doha agreement, which then-President Trump signed in 2020. This deal, negotiated between the Trump administration and the Taliban without our coalition allies or even the Afghan government present, promised the end of the entire international presence in Afghanistan, including contractors critical to keeping the Afghan Air Force in the fight, with virtually no stipulations. The Taliban, with momentum on the battlefield and no incentives to honor the Doha agreement, used the final year of the Trump administration to boldly escalate violence and begin its faithful March toward Kabul.

Despite colossal efforts over multiple administrations, both Democratic and Republican, we were unable to help build an Afghan government capable of leading its people nor an
Afghan security force capable of defeating the Taliban.

Afghan soldiers fought bravely in the face of massive casualties, but faced with the loss of American military support and hamstrung by corruption within, they were unable to stand on their own against Taliban forces.

Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, you have each led troops in combat in Afghanistan, commanded at the theater level, and advised our nation's top leaders on our Afghanistan strategy. You have played significant roles throughout this war, and I hope that you are forthcoming in your answers today.

To begin, I would ask that you provide an accounting of the intelligence and other key assessments that factored into your judgments about the viability of the Afghan government and Afghan forces and how those trends changed over time. I would like to know any lessons you have identified for how we can more effectively work by, with, and through partner nation forces in the future.

Additionally, I would like to understand what factors you attribute to the Taliban's success and whether we missed indicators and warnings of their imminent takeover.

Finally, while we have transitioned our military from Afghanistan after largely achieving our counterterrorism objectives, we must continue to ensure that Afghanistan can never again be used as a base for terrorist groups to
conduct operations against the United States and our allies.
We must remain vigilant about these threats and ensure that we establish an effective counterterrorism architecture moving forward. To that end, I would ask that you update the committee on your plans for over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations.

The United States faces new and evolving threats around the world. To overcome them we must first understand what went wrong to our mission in Afghanistan and learn from those missteps. We owe it to the American people.

I want to thank you again for being here this morning. And I look forward to your testimony.

Now, before I turn to the Ranking Member Inhofe, for the benefit of my colleagues, because we have two rounds of open testimony and a closed session following, I will strictly enforce the 5-minute limit allowed for each member. I intend to recess at 1:00 p.m. for lunch and promptly resume at 1:30 p.m. I would again remind my colleagues that there will be a classified briefing immediately following the open session in SVC-217, the office of Senate Security.

Again, before I turn to Ranking Member Inhofe, I want to note that the rules of the committee state that witness testimony should be sent to the committee 48 hours in advance, and it is customary that, at the very latest, testimony arrives the afternoon before the hearing. I am
disappointed that the statements of our witnesses were not sent to the committee until late last evening, giving Senators and the staff very little time to review. I hope that when these witnesses appear again before this committee, they will follow the committee rules and customs.

Now, let me turn to Ranking Member Inhofe.
STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES INHOFE, U.S. SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let us make sure that everyone understands that the 5-minute limit does not affect opening statements.

Let me stay it a little bit stronger, the statement that was made by our chairman, that there is no reason in the world that they waited until late last night to send this information to us. All these members, they want to be well informed, and they did not have that opportunity.

I want to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to our servicemembers and our veterans. Our men and women in uniform bravely volunteer to go into harm's way for one reason: to keep their fellow Americans safe. They represent our very best.

I especially want to recognize those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and their families. On August 26th, we were reminded so painfully of what we ask our troops and their families to do. They laid it all on the line for this country. Those 13 men and women died trying to evacuate their fellow Americans and at-risk Afghans from Kabul under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

So I want to be perfectly clear. The frustration on this committee about the chaotic and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan is not, and should never be, directed towards
our troops. It was President Biden and his advisers who put them in that situation. Even worse, this was avoidable. Everything that happened was foreseeable. My colleagues on this committee and the commanders in charge, we saw it coming. So we are here today to understand what happened and why that advice was ignored.

General McKenzie, you said in February, before the President decided to fully withdraw from Afghanistan, quote, "You have to take a conditions-based approach." You expressed your concern, quote, "about the actions that the Taliban have taken up until this point," meaning that the Taliban was not constraining Al Qaeda, as it had agreed to do so under the conditions-based agreement that it signed with the Trump administration, that it was a conditions-based statement, in position.

Around the same time, General Miller, who was then the commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, advised his chain of command to keep approximately 2,500 troops in the country. He warned that the Taliban might otherwise take over.

General McKenzie, you offered a similar warning when you last testified before this committee in April, right after the President made his decision to withdraw. You said, quote, "My concern is the ability of the Afghan military to hold the ground that they are on now without the support that they have been used to for many years."
Throughout the spring, we saw many districts quickly fall to the Taliban, many without firing a shot. This is why I urged President Biden in June to rethink his approach and maintain a small force in Afghanistan in order to prevent the collapse we ultimately saw. It was also why the members of this committee, on both sides of the aisle, spent months urging the administration to evacuate Americans and our Afghan partners sooner.

But President Biden and his advisers did not listen to his combat commander, he did not listen to Congress, and he failed to anticipate what all of us knew would happen. So in August, we all witnessed a horror of the President's own making. Afghans died as they desperately gripped onto departing flights. The Taliban is in a stronger position than it has been since 9/11. The terrorist Haqqani members are now in senior government positions. We went from "we will never negotiate with terrorists" to "we must negotiate with terrorists." You know, in the years that I have been here, we have heard over and over again, "you do not negotiate with terrorists," and now it is required.

Worst of all, 13 brave Americans were killed in the evacuation effort. Three days later, the Biden administration said that it struck an ISIS operative, but, in fact, it killed 10 Afghan civilians, including 7
children. And then, President Biden concluded the drawdown by doing the unthinkable -- he left Americans behind.

The men and women who served in uniform, their heroic families, and the American people deserve answers. How did this avoidable disaster happen? Why were Americans left behind?

President Biden's decision to withdraw has expanded the threat of terrorism and increased the likelihood of an attack on the homeland. The administration is telling the American people that the plan to deal with these threats is something called over-the-horizon counterterrorism, and that we do these types of operations elsewhere in the world. That is misleading, at best, and dishonest, at worst.

There is no plan. We have no reliable partners on the ground. We have no bases nearby.

The Afghan government is now led by terrorists with long ties to Al Qaeda, and we are at the mercy of the Pakistan government to get into Afghanistan airspace. Even if we can get there, we cannot strike Al Qaeda in Afghanistan because we are worried about what the Taliban will do to the Americans who are still there, and Americans are still there.

The administration needs to be honest. Because of President Biden's disastrous decision, the terrorist threat to American families is rising significantly, while our
ability to deal with these threats has been declined decidedly.

We will have another hearing with expert witnesses on Thursday -- that is just 2 days from now. We understand Undersecretary of Defense, Colin Kahl, has agreed to testify in that hearing. So today is really just a start.

In conclusion, I would just like to say this. President Biden made a strategic decision to leave Afghanistan which resulted in the death of 13 U.S. servicemembers, the deaths of hundreds of Afghan civilians, including women and children -- that is what terrorists do -- and left American citizens surrounded by the very terrorists who attacked us on 9/11, and they are still there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Well, thank you very much, Senator Inhofe.

Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley, the Doha agreement -- excuse me. We want to give you an opportunity to have opening statements, as I have been reminded. So, General Austin, you are recognized.
STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE LLOYD J. AUSTIN III,
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Secretary Austin: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent draw down in evacuation operations in Afghanistan. I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie, who I know will be able to provide you with additional context.

I would like to make a few points before turning it over to you and to them, and first I want to say how incredibly proud I am of the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces, who conducted themselves with tremendous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the draw-down and the evacuation.

Over the course of our nation's longest war, 2,461 of our fellow Americans made the ultimate sacrifice, along with more than 20,000 who still bear the wounds of war, some of which cannot be seen on the outside. And we can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year, when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war. And we can debate the decisions, over 20 years that led us to this point. But I know that you agree with me that one thing not open to debate is the courage and the compassion of our servicemembers, who, along with their families, served and
sacrificed to ensure that our homeland would never again be
attacked the way it was on 9/11.

I had the chance to speak with many of them during my
trip to the Gulf region a few weeks ago, including the
Marines who lost 11 of their teammates at the Abbey Gate in
Kabul on the 26th of August, and I have never been more
humbled and inspired. They are rightfully proud of what
they accomplished and the lives they saved in such a short
span of time.

In fact, I would like to talk to you a little bit about
that issue of time. The reason that our troops were able to
get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a
contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities of a
non-combatant evacuation as far back as this spring.

Indeed, by late April, 2 weeks after the President's
decision, military planners had crafted a number of
evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered Central Command
to make preparations for potential NEO. And 2 weeks later I
began pre-positioning forces in the region to include three
infantry battalions. And on the 10th of August, we ran
another tabletop exercise around a non-combatant evacuation
scenario. We wanted to be ready and we were. In fact, by
the time that the State Department called for a NEO, leading
elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit were already
on the ground in Kabul. And before that weekend was out
another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82nd Airborne.

But let us be clear. Those first 2 days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside the airport. But within 48 hours, our troops restored order, and process began to take hold. Our soldiers, airmen and Marines, in partnership with our allies and partners and our State Department colleagues, secured the gates, took control of airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people they would be manifesting onto airplanes.

They and our commanders exceeded all expectations. We planned to evacuate between 70,000 and 80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000. We planned to move between 5,000 and 9,000 people per day. On average, they moved slightly between more than 7,000 per day. On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes. And not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems. It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in 17 days.

Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and
screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside Afghanistan. And we are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave. And we did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in a Special Immigrant Visa program. We take that seriously, and that is why we are working across the interagency to continue facilitating their departure. Even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

And tragically, lives were lost: several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day; 13 brave U.S. servicemembers and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26th; and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29th.

Non-combatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations, even in the best of circumstances, and the circumstances in August were anything but ideal. Extreme heat, a landlocked country, no government, a highly dynamic situation on the ground, and an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat.

In a span of just 2 days, from the 13th to the 15th of August, we went from working alongside a democratically elected longtime partner government to coordinating warily with a longtime enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment, and it proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.
We learned a lot of other lessons too, about how to turn an Air Force base in Qatar to an international airport overnight and about how to rapidly screen, process, and manifest large numbers of people. Nothing like this has ever been done before and no other military in the world could have pulled it off, and I think that is crucial.

Now I know that members of this committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield and how real is our over-the-horizon capability, and why did we not start evacuations sooner, and why did we not stay longer to get more people out? So let me take each in turn.

Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as 5,000 U.S. troops in harm's way just to operate and defend it, and it would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned, and that was to protect and defend the embassy, which was some 30 miles away. That distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram even for counterterrorism purposes meant staying at war in Afghanistan, something that the President made clear that he would not do.

As for over-the-horizon operations, when we use that term we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective and fairly common operations. Indeed, just...
days ago, we conducted one such strike in Syria, eliminating a senior Al Qaeda figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult, but absolutely possible, and the intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources and not just U.S. boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations, we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause a very collapse of the Afghan government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk. And as I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and our pre-positioning of forces.

And as for the mission's end, my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission. The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September, and as you know, we faced grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. Staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees we could get out.

Now as we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself and pause to think about the lessons that
we have learned over the past 20 years: Did we have the
right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we
put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan
institutions, an army, an air force, a police force and
government ministries?

We helped build the state, Mr. Chairman, but we could
not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan army that we
and our partners trained simply melted away, in many cases
without firing a shot, took us all by surprise, and it would
be dishonest to claim otherwise.

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths, that we
did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor
leadership in the senior ranks. That we did not grasp the
damaging effect of frequent and unexplained rotations by
President Ghani of his commanders. That we did not
anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that the
Taliban commanders struck with local leaders in the wake of
the Doha agreement. And that the Doha agreement itself had
a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers.

And finally, that we failed to grasp that there was
only so much for which, and for whom, many of the Afghan
forces would fight. We provided the Afghan military with
equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them. Over the
years, they often fought bravely. Tens of thousands of
Afghan soldiers and police died. But in the end, we could
not provide them with the will to win, at least not all of them. And as a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that.

But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it. They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, and they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

Now our servicemembers and civilians face a new mission, helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives and new places, and they are performing that one magnificently as well. I spent time with some of them up at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst just yesterday. I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, their courage, and professionalism, and I appreciate the support that this committee continues to provide them and their families. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Austin follows:]
Senator Reed: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. General Milley, I believe you have a statement.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL MARK A. MILLEY, USA, CHAIRMAN OF
THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

General Milley: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe,
thank you for the opportunity to be here with Secretary
Austin and General McKenzie to discuss Afghanistan. As you
mentioned up front, we submitted matters for the record, a
lengthy statement of this cut-down oral version, and I know
it got to you late.

During the past 20 years, the men and women of the
United States military along with our allies and partners
fought the Taliban, brought Osama bin Laden to justice,
denied Al Qaeda sanctuary, and protected our homeland for
two consecutive decades. Over 800,000 of us in uniform
served in Afghanistan. Most importantly, 2,461 of us gave
the ultimate sacrifice, while 20,698 of us were wounded in
action, and countless others of us suffer the invisible
wounds of war. There is no doubt in my mind that our
efforts prevented an attack on the homeland from
Afghanistan, which was our core, original mission. And
everyone that has served in that war should be proud. Your
service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop
numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded
equipment from Afghanistan. At the peak, in 2011, we had
97,000 U.S. troops, alongside 41,000 NATO troops in
Afghanistan. Ten years later, when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha agreement with Mullah Baradar on 29 February 2020, the United States at 12,600 U.S. troops, with 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors. This has been a 10-year multi-administration draw down, not a 19-month or 19-day NEO.

Under the Doha agreement, the U.S. would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon Taliban meeting certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban and eight conditions applicable to the United States. While the Taliban did not attack U.S. forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any -- any other condition under the Doha agreement.

And perhaps most importantly, for U.S. national security, the Taliban has never renounced Al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them. We, the United States, adhered to every condition.

In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal, without meeting specific and necessary conditions, risks losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, damaging U.S. worldwide credibility, and could precipitate a general collapse of the ANSF and the Afghan government, resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or general civil war. That was a year ago. My assessment
remained consistent throughout.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders, then-Secretary of Defense Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November, recommending to maintain U.S. forces at a level between about 2,500 and 4,500 in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reduction. Two days later on 11 November 2020, I received an unclassified, signed order directing the United States military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan no later than 15 January 2021.

After further discussions regarding the risks associated with such a withdrawal, the order was rescinded. On 17 November, we received a new order, to reduce levels to 2,500 plus enabling forces no later than 15 January.

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 U.S. troops, 5,400 NATO troops, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan, with a specified task of train, advise, and assist, along with a small contingent of counterterrorism forces. The strategic situation at inauguration was stalemate.

The Biden administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April. During this process, the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of us, the CENTCOM commander, General McKenzie, the U.S. 4A General Miller, and myself were all given
serious consideration by the administration. We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. The cost, benefit, risk to force, and risk to mission were evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President announced his decision, and the U.S. military received a change of mission to retrograde all U.S. military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 600 to 700 to protect the embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, and also to assist Turkey to maintain the Karzai International Airport, and transition the U.S. military to an over-the-horizon counterterrorism support and security force assistance.

It is clear, it is obvious, the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms we wanted with the Taliban now in power in Kabul. Although the NEO was unprecedented, and is the largest air evacuation history, evacuating 124,000 people, it came at an incredible cost of 11 Marines, one soldier, and a Navy corpsman. Those 13 gave their lives so that people they never met will have an opportunity to live in freedom. And we must remember that the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization, and they still have not broken ties with Al Qaeda.

I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It
remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power, or if the country will further fracture into civil war, but we must continue to protect the United States of America and its people from terror attacks coming from Afghanistan. A reconstituted Al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility, and those conditions to include activity in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months. That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect at the American people.

Strategic decisions have strategic consequences. Over the course of 4 Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, 7 chairmen, 10 CENTCOM commanders, 20 commanders in Afghanistan, hundreds of congressional delegation visits, and 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned. Two specific to the military that we need to take a look at, and we will, is did we mirror image the development of the Afghan National Army, and the second is the rapid collapse, unprecedented rapid collapse, of the Afghan military in only 11 days in August.

However, one lesson must never be forgotten. Every soldier, sailor, airman, and Marine who served there in Afghanistan for 20 consecutive years protected our country from attack by terrorists, and for that, they should be
forever proud, and we should be forever grateful.

Thank you, Chairman, and if I could, I know that there are some issues in the media that are of deep concern to many members on the committee, and with your permission, I would like to address those for a minute or two. Again, I have submitted memorandum for the committee to take a look at.

Chairman Reed: You may proceed.

General Milley: Mr. Chairman, I have served this nation for 42 years. I have spent years in combat, and I have buried a lot of my troops who died while defending this country. My loyalty to this nation, its people, and the Constitution has not changed and will never change as long as I have a breath to give. My loyalty is absolute, and I will not turn my back on the fallen.

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart, General Li, with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense guidance, the policy dialogue system. These military-to-military communications at the highest level are critical to the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers that are armed with the world's most deadliest weapons.
The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency. The specific purpose of the October and January calls were generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an attack on them by the United States. I know, I am certain, that President Trump did not intend to attack the Chinese, and it is my directed responsibility, and it was my directed responsibility by the Secretary, to convey that intent to the Chinese.

My task at that time was to de-escalate. My message, again, was consistent -- stay calm, steady, and de-escalate. We are not going to attack you.

At Secretary of Defense Esper's direction, I made a call to General Li on 30 October. Eight people sat in that call with me, and I read out the call within 30 minutes of the call ending. On 31 December, the Chinese requested another call with me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia Pacific Policy helped coordinate my call, which was then scheduled for 8 January, and he made a preliminary call on 6 January. Eleven people attended that call with me, and readouts of this call were distributed to the interagency that same day.

Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I personally informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White
House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call, among other topics. Soon after that, I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller, where I briefed him on the call.

Later that same day on 8 January, Speaker of the House Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process. She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained to her that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority, and he does not launch them alone, and that I am not qualified to determine the mental health of the President of the United States. There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place, and I repeatedly assured her that there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized, or accidental launch.

By presidential directive and Secretary of Defense directives, the chairman is part of the process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command, and I know that. However, by presidential directive and DoD instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my legal statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

After the Speaker Pelosi call I convened a short
meeting in my office with key members of my staff to refresh all of us on the procedures which we practiced daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of Speaker Pelosi's phone call. At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself in the chain of command. But I am expected, I am required, to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed on military matters.

I am submitting for the record a more detailed and unclassified memoranda, that I believe you all now have, although late, and I welcome a thorough walkthrough on every single one of these events. And I would be happy, in a classified session, to talk in detail about the intelligence that drove these calls. I am also happy to make available any email, phone logs, memoranda, witnesses, or anything else you need to understand these events.

My oath is to support the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and I will never turn my back on that oath. I firmly believe in civilian control of the military as a bedrock principle, essential to the health of this republic, and I am committed to ensuring that the military stays clear of domestic politics.

I look forward to your questions, and thank you,
Chairman, for the extra time.

[The prepared statement of General Milley follows:]
Chairman Reed: Thank you, General.

General McKenzie, I understand you do not have a statement. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Sir, I will waive my statement in order to get us back on schedule.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, General.

Secretary Austin, the Doha agreement represents direct negotiations with terrorists, and not just negotiations but an agreement with them that excluded the Afghan government and the allies we have been fighting with us now since 9/11. It set a fixed departure date with conditions, as has been indicated, were not really followed consistently by the Taliban. As you considered, in April, what to do, did the intelligence suggest to you that reneging on the departure of the troops would lead to significant attacks against American and allied military forces?

Secretary Austin: Chairman, to my recollection, the intelligence was clear that if we did not leave in accordance with that agreement, the Taliban would recommence attacks on our forces.

Chairman Reed: And they would include the blue-on-green attacks and any other means they could use to attack American forces.

Secretary Austin: That is correct, Chairman.

Chairman Reed: So the choice was, in many respects,
was, were we going to incur additional casualties indefinitely in Afghanistan? That is one way to look at it. Is that fair?

Secretary Austin: That is correct, Chairman. You certainly would have to take additional measures to be able to defend yourself if the Taliban recommenced their offensive operations against us.

Chairman Reed: Now, General Milley and General McKenzie, did the Doha agreement affect the morale of the Afghan forces, i.e., was there a sense now that even though it was months away, that the United States was leaving since we had agreed to leave?

General Milley: I will let Frank talk the details, but my assessment is yes, Senator, it did affect the morale of the Afghan security forces.

Chairman Reed: General McKenzie?

General McKenzie: Sir, it is my judgment that the Doha agreement did negatively affect the performance of the Afghan forces, in particular by some of the actions that the government of Afghanistan was required to undertake as part of that agreement.

Chairman Reed: And one of the critical issues was the agreement to withdraw contractors, which are basically the engine that maintains the air force of Afghanistan and many other logistical operations. And that was just as critical
as the troop departure, I would assume.

General McKenzie: Chairman, it was. We had plans in place to try to conduct those operations from over the horizon. They were not as effective as having contractors on the ground, on site with the aircraft.

Chairman Reed: The momentum appeared to be shifting to the Taliban. Indications were their penetration or parts of the country in the northern sectors, particularly which traditionally opposed the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, but that started -- to be fair, that started long before Doha. There are some commentators who have suggested since 2014, the Taliban have been surrounding provincial capitals, insinuating themselves into the politics of the local communities, striking bargains. Is that your impression too, General McKenzie?

General McKenzie: Sir, I think it is a good assessment that from 2014 on, the Taliban did pursue that strategy, and they had some success. Now, the government of Afghanistan also had success holding onto centralized urban areas and population centers, but the Taliban pursued a distinct strategy and had some success with it.

Chairman Reed: Now, General -- excuse me, Secretary Austin, you did provide your best military advice to the President regarding the situation in Afghanistan, and has been recounted several times through multiple meetings, and
he received advice from many different quarters. Do you feel that you had the opportunity to make your advice very clear?

Secretary Austin: I do, Chairman. As I have said before, I always keep my advice to the President confidential, but I am very much satisfied that we had a thorough policy review, and I believe that all of the parties had an opportunity to provide input. And that input was received.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much.

Senator Inhofe.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It was 2 weeks ago that we had a closed, classified hearing. We had General Miller's recommendation at that time. Well, let me first of all just mention that during your confirmation process, you committed, and I am speaking now to General McKenzie and General Milley, to give me your honest and personal views of this committee, even if those views differed from those of the administration, and I am confident that you will be doing that.

During this hearing that we had, it was emphasized to us, from General Miller, that he was recommending the 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. Now, we did not receive the documentation from your offices, I say to the witnesses today, until, well actually, 10:35 last night. So there
really was not time to get into a lot of the details, but I would ask General McKenzie, did you agree to the recommendation that General Miller had two weeks ago?

General McKenzie: Senator, again, I will not share my personal recommendation to the President, but I will give you my honest opinion, and my honest opinion and view shaped my recommendation. I recommended that we maintain 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, and I also recommended earlier in the fall of 2020 that we maintain 4,500 at that time. Those are my personal views. I also have a view that the withdrawal of those forces would lead inevitably to the collapse of the Afghan military forces, and eventually the Afghan government.

Senator Inhofe: Yes, so I understand that. And General Milley, I assume you agree with that in terms of the recommendation of 2,500?

General Milley: What I said in my opening statement and the memoranda that I wrote back in the fall of 2020 remained consistent, and I do agree with that.

Senator Inhofe: This committee is unsure as to whether or not General Miller's recommendation ever got to the President. You know, obviously, there are conversations with the President, but I would like to ask, even though General McKenzie, I think you have all made this statement. Did you talk to the President about General Miller's
recommendation?

General McKenzie: Sir, I was present when that discussion occurred, and I am confident that the President heard all the recommendations and listened to them very thoughtfully.

Senator Inhofe: So one of the recommendations that was made by the three of you would be the recommendation that originally was made by General Miller two weeks ago.

During the August 18th interview on ABC, George Stephanopoulos asked President Biden whether U.S. troops would stay beyond August 31st if there were still Americans to evacuate. President Biden responded, and this is a quote, "If there are American citizens left, we are going to stay to get them all out." This did not happen. President Biden's decision resulted in all of the troops leaving, but the American citizens are still trying to get out.

How many American citizens, is your opinion, are still there? Just go down the line, each one of you. Anyone?

Secretary Austin: Senator, I would defer to the State Department for that assessment. That is a dynamic process. They have been contacting the civilians that are in Afghanistan, and again, I would defer to them for definitive numbers.

Senator Inhofe: Go ahead. Others?

General Milley: Same as the Secretary just said.
There were numbers at the beginning of this whole process with the F-77 report out of the embassy, and we know that we took out almost 6,000, I guess it is, American citizens. But how many remain --

Senator Inhofe: Okay. Do all of you agree that Secretary of State Blinken, when he made his analysis as to how many people would be here, would still be there, he talked about the 10,000 to 15,000 citizens left behind, and then evacuated some 6,000. That would mean a minimum of 4,000 would still be there now. Would anyone disagree with that? By your silence, I assume you agree.

Secretary Austin: I have no -- I personally do not believe that there are 4,000 American citizens still left in Afghanistan, but I cannot confirm or deny that, Senator.

Senator Inhofe: So you think Secretary of State was probably wrong in his analysis?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you. And just for the record, the Chair and the Vice Chair/Ranking Member have each abided by the 5-minute rule, so fair is fair.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie for being here this morning. And Secretary Austin and General Milley, thank you for your effort to put into some historical perspective what happened in Afghanistan, and for
recognizing the incredible service and sacrifice of the
troops who served there.

General Milley, in a hearing before the Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense in June, I explicitly
raised concerns about the plight of at-risk Afghans due to
our withdrawal, and I asked about the Department's plans to
evacuate them. Now you indicated today that you thought we
might be facing the kind of desperate situation that we saw
in Kabul, but your response at that time was that, quote,
"Lots of planning was ongoing," and this is in-quote, "and
the State Department was leading efforts pertaining to
evacuating our Afghan partners." And you explicitly told
the committee that in your professional opinion, you did not
see Saigon 1975 in Afghanistan. So I am just trying to
figure out why we missed, or from a public perception, it
appears that we did not anticipate the rapid fall of
Afghanistan and Kabul, and the rise of the Taliban, and the
way we saw it play out on television. And what did we miss?

General Milley: I think, Senator, we absolutely missed
the rapid 11-day collapse of the Afghan military and the
collapse of their government. I think there was a lot of
intelligence that clearly indicated that after we withdrew,
that it was a likely outcome of a collapse of the military
and collapse of the government. Most of those intelligence
assessments indicated that that would occur late fall,
perhaps early winter, Kabul might hold till next spring. It
depends on when the intel assessment was written. So after
we leave, the assessments were pretty consistent that you
would see a general collapse of the government and the
military.

While we were there, though, up through 31 August,
there is no intel assessment that says the government's
going to collapse and the military's going to collapse in 11
days, that I am aware of, and I have read, I think, pretty
much all of them. And even as late as the 3rd of August,
and there is another one on the 8th of August, et cetera,
they are still talking weeks, perhaps months, et cetera.

General McKenzie can illuminate on his own views on the
same topic. He gave his assessments at the same time. And
although General Miller did, in many, many assessments, say
rapid, fast, hard for collapse, he also centered into the
October-November time frame as opposed to August.

Senator Shaheen: So how do we avoid that happening
again?

General Milley: I think the key, Senator that we
missed, frankly, we had some indicators, but we did not have
the full wholesome assessment of leadership, morale, and
will. There were some units, and I do not want to say
negative things about these guys, the 60,000, 70,000 of the
Afghan service that were killed in action over the last 20
years, and many units did fight at the very end. But the vast majority put their weapons down and melted away in a very, very short period of time. I think that has to do with will, leadership, and I think we still need to try to figure out exactly why that was. And I have some suggestions, but I am not settled on them yet.

But we clearly missed that. I think one of the key factors we missed it for was we pulled our advisors off three years ago, and when you pull the advisors out of the units, you no longer can assess things like leadership and will. We can count all the planes, trucks, and automobiles, and cars, and machine guns, and everything else, we can count those from space and all the other kind of intel assets, but you cannot measure the human heart with a machine. You have got to be there.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you. Secretary Austin, I am about to run out of time, so you may want to respond to this on the next round, but one of the challenges with getting Special Immigrant Visa applicants out of Afghanistan has -- and this was not just a problem in the evacuation. This has been a historic problem that has gone over years -- has been having the documents that show they actually served with our military, and DoD has been cited as the major problem in getting those documents.

So again, how do we make sure that does not happen
again in some future conflict, where we need our partners on the ground to serve alongside of our military members? And I am out of time, so hopefully you will answer that. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Shaheen.

Senator Wicker, please.

Senator Wicker: Chairman Reed, before I ask my questions I have an objection. We have been having hearings in a classified setting on this, our first public hearing. And I am sorry Senator Kaine has had to step away, but in a previous hearing he expressed frustration in various hearings he had been to, and a frustration that I shared, that when the State Department is here and we ask them a question, they say, "Well, you have to ask the Defense Department that." And now today, again, Defense Department people are before us, and a question was asked, and the answer to Senator Inhofe as well, "You will have to ask the State Department that."

Senator Kaine gently but fatherly sent a message to the administration at our last classified hearing that we need to cut that out, that members of the Defense Department need to be ready for the questions that we have asked and that we are going to ask. And so I object to the continuation of that in this hearing today.

While I am at it, I would also point out, General
Milley, I appreciate your statement and I have read it, and I understand what you are trying to say. But further than what you mentioned, the allegation is that you told combatant commanders to report back to you. Our clear understanding is that you are not in their chain of command that they report directly to the commander in chief through the Secretary. And so to the extent that you told them to report to you, they were not in your chain of command.

Now, let me see if I can get one question in here, having taken two minutes to mention a very important objection. General Milley, in the fall of 2020, you said an accelerated withdrawal would risk substantial gains and damage U.S. credibility, and I want to ask our witnesses about U.S. credibility.

On July 8, President Biden said, "The likelihood there is going to be Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely." We now know he was advised actually this might happen. It turns out, it was completely untrue, that statement on July 8th.

Later in July, the President of the United States, President Biden, says, "I trust the capacity of the Afghan military, better trained, better equipped, and more competent in terms of conducting the war." President Biden was wrong on that. We told our interpreters, our drivers, our friends, the people who had had our backs during this
entire period of time that we would not abandon them, and
that is exactly what we did.

And in an interview, that has already been referred to,
on network news, President Biden says, and I quote, "If
there are American citizens left, we are going to stay and
get them all out." Two days later, the President of the
United States unequivocally said, "Any American that wants
to come home, we will get you home. We are going to stay
and get them out." The President of the United States, our
commander in chief, did exactly the opposite.

Now, I think you were right, General Milley, when you
advised that our credibility would be damaged. Our
credibility has been gravely damaged, has it not, General
Milley?

General Milley: I think that our credibility with
allies and partners around the world and with adversaries is
being intensely reviewed by them to see which way this is
-going to go, and I think that "damage" is one word that
could be used, yes.

Senator Wicker: Yes. And Secretary Austin, no question
that this sends a disastrous message to China and Russia.
What message does it send to our NATO allies and our other
allies around the world about not only our credibility, but
our national resolve?

Secretary Austin: Thanks, Senator. What the world
witnessed is United States military evacuating 124,000 people out of a contested environment in 17 days.

Senator Wicker: Well, you testified that that was a great accomplishment, our withdrawal and our evacuation.

What about our credibility?

Secretary Austin: As I engage my counterparts, I think our credibility remains solid. Clearly, Senator, there will be people who question things going forward, but I would say that the United States military is one that -- and the United States of America, people place great trust and confidence in. And relationships are things that we have to work on continuously, and we understand that and will continue to do that.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Wicker.

Senator Gillibrand, please.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am also very grateful to our servicemembers who committed so much over the last 20 years, and I do want to thank President Biden for taking the tough yet necessary step to stop and end an endless war, something that many of us have pushed for over the last decade.

There is obviously still a lot to do both overseas and here at home, such as ensuring that Afghan refugees are treated respectfully and responsibly, both on the DoD bases,
new lives in the United States. We also have the responsibility to our troops and to all Americans to make sure that we have a complete picture of what we did, accomplished, and happened over the last 20 years across all the administrations. We have to look back so that we can do better when we look forward.

One way to do better is to make sure Congress maintains and fulfills its constitutional responsibility. We have to put back into the hands of Congress the right and responsibility to declare war. What started as a mission to defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the perceived threat in Iraq expanded to 20 years of war in more multiple countries, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost, and trillions of dollars spent? This is why I introduced the War Powers Reform Resolution, so that Congress can take back this responsibility for the benefit of our servicemembers.

Congress must set clear and defined goals for the use of military force abroad, and place a limit to how long, where, and against whom we can continue military action without a new authorization, in order to finally put a stop to endless wars and prevent them in the future.

Second, there should be a comprehensive, rigorous, and objective audit on the war in its entirety. Over the last 20 years, the United States spent more than $2 trillion on the war in Afghanistan, and we lost thousands of American
lives and tens of thousands of Afghan civilians. I commend
the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
for its independent and objective oversight of the
Afghanistan reconstruction, but I do have questions beyond
that.

First, General Milley, in your testimony, you said and
you mentioned that there are many lessons to be learned.
What did you mean by that statement?

General Milley: Senator, thank you. I think there is
a series of strategic lessons to be learned, and I would
echo some of the ones that Senator Reed mentioned early on,
specific military lessons we have to take a hard look at.
The United States military was tasked, under the 2002 Bonn
Agreement, to train, man, and equip the Afghan army. The
Germans were required to train, man, and equip the Afghan
police. As we built that army and all of its components, I
think that one error we may have made over time is we made
them too dependent on technology, too dependent on our
capabilities, we did not take in the cultural aspects
perhaps as much as we should have, and we mirror-imaged, to
put it simply.

I think that is a big lesson. We are going to have to
take a hard look at it. And the result is when you pull
contractors, you pull troops. That, I think, is one of many
contributing factors to the rapid collapse. So that is a
big lesson. Another one is the intel lesson that we talked about. I think that is in the military realm as well as the intelligence community realm.

There are a lot of other lessons, legitimacy of the government, corruption of the government. Those sorts of things are all out there as to why that government collapsed as rapidly as it could, but those are for others to sort out. There is a specific set of military lessons we need to pull out within the military.

Senator Gillibrand: I have read various opinion pieces. I know everyone here is deeply disturbed that the trained Afghan military did not perform as expected. I would like your thoughts on if they had performed as expected, would we have seen a prolonged civil war? What is your estimate of what the impact of them actually fighting would have been?

General Milley: My estimate is if they had, you know, performed as we expected them to perform that the government would still be there. They would have probably lost significant chunks of territory, but Kabul would be there, and some of the major provincial capitals. But I would defer that, probably you would get a more granular view from that from General McKenzie.

Senator Gillibrand: General McKenzie?

General McKenzie: I think had the Afghan military
fought, we would have probably seen the approaches to Kabul
get into the winter, still under the control of the
government of Afghanistan. A lot of the outlying provinces
would not have been.

But I would just note that it was not so much the
collapse of the Afghan military as the collapse of the
Afghan government writ large. Those two things happen
together, and they were completely linked together. So when
you consider one, I think you have to think about the other.

Senator Gillibrand: Additionally, in retrospect, one
of the areas of debate has been whether we should have
started our evacuation earlier. And I recognize that the
Kabul government asked us not to start our evacuation early.
Can you speak to what you now know and whether it would have
been smarter or more effective if we had started evacuate
personnel a year in advance or six months in advance or any
time in advance?

Chairman Reed: Could I ask the Senator?

Senator Gillibrand: I apologize. I did not realize my
time was expired.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Senator Gillibrand: I will submit that for the record.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Fischer, please.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I too would
like to thank our military men and women for their
dedication to this country, for the sacrifices that they and
their families make in any theater of war, and make every
day for us.

But our exit from Afghanistan was a disaster and the
missteps that are already outlined had consequences that
struck close to home -- as a Nebraskan, Corporal Daegan
Page, who was one of the 13 servicemembers killed in action.
And we should not forget we have the policy discussions here
today, but let us remember the human sacrifice.

We also left American citizens behind. General Milley,
in your written testimony, you stated withdraw would
increase risks of regional instability, the security of
Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals, a global rise in violent
extremist organizations, our global credibility with allies
and partners would suffer, and a narrative of abandoning the
Afghans would become widespread. Would you agree that all
of these things that happened over the last eight weeks are
currently happening?

General Milley: I think in the main, yes, Senator,
most of those are probably happening right now.

Senator Fischer: And I hope that we see in the future,
military advice having more consideration by the
administration on what will happen from what you and General
McKenzie have said today.
General Milley: If I may, Senator, I can tell you with 100 percent certainty that the military voice was heard and it was considered.

Senator Fischer: It was considered, but not followed. Correct?

General Milley: Presidents are elected for reasons. They make strategic decisions, and --

Senator Fischer: I would say this committee, General, has always stressed that commanders on the ground should be listened to. Would you agree with that?

General Milley: I would, and I would tell you they were listened to. I think there is a difference between us having an opportunity to have a voice, and I think it is very important that the military has a voice, but I firmly believe in civilian control of the military, and I am required and the military commanders are required to give our best military advice, but the decision-makers are not required in any manner, shape, or form to follow that advice.

Senator Fischer: No, they are not, I agree with you about civilian control of this country, but I think it is also important to realize when we continue to see missteps by an administration that is costing lives.

Secretary Austin, it is being reported right now that the Biden administration reached out to Russia about using
Russian bases in the central Asian nations bordering Afghanistan to the north for our strike assets to fly out of over-the-horizon counterterrorism missions. Is that true?

Secretary Austin: Senator, this is an issue that I believe came up during a conversation that the President had with President Putin, where President Putin offered to provide assistance.

Senator Fischer: But have you reached out to the Russians asking specifically to use bases?

Secretary Austin: General Milley just recently had a conversation with his Russian counterpart.

Senator Fischer: So the reports are true that have been coming out today?

Secretary Austin: I can assure you that, you know, we are not seeking Russia's permission to do anything. But I believe and General Milley can speak for himself, but I believe that he asked for clarification on what that offer was.

Senator Fischer: I have a number of questions which I will need to get to with General McKenzie about over-the-horizon and the capabilities as we look to the future, and what is available there. But I think what we are seeing in the reports today about asking to use Russian bases, that is just another example that we see of the Biden administration, they have really left us in a terrible
position that we have to ask the Russians to be able to
protect the United States from terrorists, and we have to
ask them to use their installations.

    Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Austin: And I would just reemphasize,
Senator that we are not asking the Russians for anything.

Senator Fischer: But you are negotiating and trying to
get these bases to be able to use their installations,
because Afghanistan is a landlocked country, and when we
have explanations from the military and they give examples
for over-the-horizon, and use countries like Yemen and Libya
and Somalia, that does not take into consideration that
Afghanistan is landlocked. And we have to depend on
Pakistan to give us airspace to get there.

    Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Fischer.

    Senator Blumenthal, please.

Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. And I want
to express my hope that this hearing is just the beginning,
a first step in an in-depth analysis, going not just to the
last 10 weeks or even 10 months, but 10 years and longer
back, so that we can match the courage of the men and women
of America who have sacrificed during this 20-year war, all
of them and all of their families, not just in Afghanistan,
but around the world. And we owe them, veterans of America,
much more than we are giving them right now because they have earned it.

That in-depth analysis looking backward is essential, but I want to look forward right now to what is happening in Afghanistan with respect to Americans and our Afghan allies.

After our withdrawal, it was left to an unofficial network or coalition of veterans, NGOs, some government officials. I was involved in an effort through chartered planes and airports outside of Kabul to try to airlift on a makeshift, ad hoc basis, Americans and Afghan allies still there. They have targets on their back, their situation is increasingly urgent and desperate, and I have been frustrated by the lack of someone in charge, in lines of authority, a point person.

We need an evacuation czar, somebody who will provide a plan and supervise actions so that we can get out of Afghanistan the Americans that remain there. And I will tell you, we do not have an estimate on the number because nobody is in charge right now.

So let me ask you, Secretary Austin, who at the Department of Defense as overall responsibility with overseeing the effort to evacuate?

Secretary Austin: As you know -- well, first of all, Senator, thank you to you and your colleagues for all that you have done to continue to help get American citizens out
of Afghanistan.

The State Department, following the departure of the military, the State Department remained engaged and continued to work to get American citizens out. And as we have seen, some 85 American citizens and 79 legal permanent residents have departed via the Kabul airport. And so that work continues on.

The State Department set up a cell to continue this work and develop a mechanism. That cell is headed up by Ambassador Bass. As you may recall, Ambassador Bass was one of the senior counselors on the ground at HKIA as we were conducting the investigation.

I have a general officer that is a part of that cell and we have reached out to, or Ambassador Bass has reached out to veterans groups and others who may have information that can help us continue to contact and eventually, evacuate American citizens and LPRs.

So this work continues and we remain committed to continuing that work until we get out as many American citizens that are willing to come out.

Senator Blumenthal: Well, there was a point and you can call it the eye of the storm, when the Taliban had taken over the country, but really was not in charge, when we could have evacuated a great many more Americans and our Afghan allies, the translators and others, guards, security
officers. And I feel that the administration was on notice.

In fact, a group of us went to the White House in the spring and urge that there be a plan for evacuation. And unfortunately, the withdrawal prevented there from being anybody on the ground.

And in the wake of that withdrawal, there was a vacuum of leadership, and I would hope that there would be more effective action now to put somebody in charge and develop a plan, because we know that there are many Americans, whether it is green card holders or citizens, or others still there.

In Connecticut, we have a resettlement organization called IRIS. Chris George, who heads it, has told us of individuals who are still there, more than 40 in Kabul, and I am sure other organizations similarly know of such Americans who are still there. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Senator Cotton, please.

Senator Cotton: Thank you.

General Milley, it is your testimony that you recommended 2,500 troops, approximately, stay in Afghanistan?

General Milley: As I have said many times before this committee and other committees, I do not share my personal recommendations to the President, but I can tell you my personal opinion and my assessment, if that is what you
Senator Cotton: Yes, please.

General Milley: Yes, my assessment was, back in the fall of '20 and it remained consistent throughout, that we should keep a steady state of 2,500, and it could bounce up to 3,500, maybe, something like that, in order to move toward a negotiated gated solution.

Senator Cotton: Did you ever present that assessment personally to President Biden?

General Milley: I do not discuss exactly what my conversations are with the sitting President in the Oval Office, but I can tell you what my personal opinion was, and I am always candid.

Senator Cotton: Okay. General McKenzie, do you share that assessment?

General McKenzie: Senator, I do share that assessment.

Senator Cotton: Did you ever present that opinion personally to President Biden?

General McKenzie: I am not going to be able to comment on those executive discussions.

Senator Cotton: Did General Miller ever present that opinion personally to President Biden?

General McKenzie: I think it would be best to ask him. I believe that his opinion was well heard.

Senator Cotton: Secretary Austin, President Biden last
month, in an interview with George Stephanopoulos, said that no military leader advised him to leave a small troop presence in Afghanistan. Is that true?

Secretary Austin: Senator Cotton, I believe that --

well, first of all, I know the President to be an honest and forthright man, and secondly --

Senator Cotton: It is a simple question, Secretary Austin. He said no senior military leader advised him to leave a small troop presence behind. Is that true or not?

Did officer and General Miller's recommendations get to the President personally?

Secretary Austin: Their input was received by the President and considered by the President, for sure. In terms of what they specifically recommended, Senator, as they just said, they are not going to provide what they recommended in confidence.

Senator Cotton: I mean, it is shocking to me. It sounds to me like maybe their best military advice was never presented personally to the President of the United States about such a highly consequential matter.

Let me move on to another recommendation they are reported to have made. General Milley, Joe Biden has said that it was the unanimous -- the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs that we not maintain a military presence beyond August 31st. We have heard testimony to that effect
today as well. When was that unanimous recommendation sought and presented to the President?

General Milley: You are talking about the 31 August?

Senator Cotton: Yes, the 31 August deadline for getting --

General Milley: So on 25 August, I was asked to make an assessment and provide best military advice on --

Senator Cotton: I am sorry. My time is limited here. You gave me the answer to that I needed to hear. August 25th?

General Milley: Correct.

Senator Cotton: Kabul fell on August 15th.

General Milley: That is correct.

Senator Cotton: You were not asked before August 25th?

General Milley: On August 25th, I was asked to provide best military assessment as to whether we should keep military forces past the 31st.

Senator Cotton: Secretary Austin, was anybody asked before August 25th if we should keep troops at the Kabul airport?

Secretary Austin: The President tasked us to provide an assessment on whether or not we should extend our presence beyond August 31st. And as General Milley just said, we tasked them to make that assessment on the 25th, and he came back and provided his best military advice.
Senator Cotton: Secretary, Kabul fell on August 15th. It was clear that we had thousands of Americans -- it was clear to members of this committee, we were getting phone calls that we have thousands of Americans in Afghanistan behind Taliban lines on August 15th and it took 10 days to ask these general officers if we should extend our presence. I suspect the answer might be a little different if you were asking them 16 days out, not 5 days out.

Again, my time is limited. I want to move on to another matter. President Biden's botched evacuation screwed things up coming and going as it relates to Afghan evacuees. We left behind thousands of Afghans who serviced alongside of us who were vetted and approved to come here.

We brought out thousands who really have no particular connection, about whom we know nothing and cannot be effectively vetted. You now have female troops who have been assaulted. You have Afghan evacuees committing sex crimes at Fort McCoy. What are we to make of this? What steps are we taking to ensure that thousands of Afghans about who we know nothing are not going to be a menace to our troops and our military bases and into the communities into which they are about to be released?

Secretary Austin: Well, Senator, I am certainly aware of the allegations and I take the allegations very seriously. And I can assure you that our commanders at our
bases have what they need to be able to protect our troops
and our families that work and live at those bases. And I
am in contact with General VanHerck, the NORTHCOM commander,
who has overall responsibility for the operation on a
routine basis. And this is an area that he remains sighted
on.

Senator Cotton: All right, I have just got one final
question. General Milley, I can only conclude that your
advice about staying in Afghanistan was rejected. I am
shocked to learn that your advice was not sought until
August 25th on staying past the August 31 deadline. I
understand that you are the principal military advisor, that
you advise, you do not decide. The President decides. But
if all of this is true General Milley, why have you not
resigned?

General Milley: Senator, as a senior military officer
resigning is a really serious thing, and it is a political
act if I am resigning in protest. My job is to provide
advice. My statutory responsibility is to provide legal
advice or best military advice to the President, and that is
my legal requirement. That is what the law is. The
President does not have to agree with that advice. He does
not have to make those decisions just because we are
generals. And it would be an incredible act of political
defiance for a commissioned officer to just resign because
my advice is not taken.

This country does not want generals figuring out what orders we are going to accept and do or not. That is not our job. The principal civilian control of the military is absolute. It is critical to this Republic. In addition to that, just from a personal standpoint, you know, my dad did not get a choice to resign at Iwo Jima, and those kids that are at Abbey Gate, they do not get a choice to resign and I am not going to turn my back on them. They cannot resign, so I am not going to resign. There is no way.

If the orders are illegal, we are in a different place, but if the orders are legal from civilian authority, I intend to carry them out.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cotton.

Senator Hirono, please.

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Do I understand you correctly, General McKenzie and General Milley that your personal recommendation was that the troops who remain in Afghanistan, a certain number of them beyond the August 31st deadline?

General Milley: No, Senator. Our recommendation, this was the Joint Chiefs of Staff, this is myself included, General McKenzie, Major General Donahue, the Ground Tactical Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, and Admiral Vasely. Every single one of us were in a tank. I brought them up.
Secretary Austin did not show up. There was no political pressure. There was no expectation of consensus. Every one of us evaluated the military conditions at the time on the 25th, and we made a unanimous recommendation that we end the military mission and transition to a diplomatic mission.

Senator Hirono: Thank you. So while you testify that you may have had the personal recommendation, and I think in your case, General McKenzie, in the fall of 2020, or it might have been General Milley, that by the time we are evacuating everyone, that was not a recommendation that you personally held --

General Milley: Absolutely not. At that point on the 25th of August, no. On the 25th of August, we recommended that the mission end on the 31st.

Senator Hirono: Thank you for that clarification.

General Milley: Thank you.

Senator Hirono: So the evacuation was chaotic, and yes, we are really grateful that our military performed magnificently in evacuating over 120,000 people. But Secretary Austin, Secretary Blinken acknowledged to my colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that no one believed the Afghan government and military could collapse as rapidly as it did, especially in the first weeks of August. However, U.S. forces conducted at least a couple of airstrikes in the middle of July aimed at blunting the
Taliban's rapid advance.

So Secretary Austin, in July you were aware, or the DoD was aware that the situation was deteriorating rapidly by July. Why was action not taken to secure the Kabul airport or retake Bagram then?

Secretary Austin: Thank you, Senator. You are right, the tempo had picked up significantly and the Taliban continued to make advances. Our entire chain of command -- myself, the Chairman, General McKenzie -- routinely engaged the Afghan leadership to encourage them to solidify their defensive plans, to make sure that they were providing the right logistics to their troops, and further, stiffen their defenses, to no avail. And to compound that, President Ghani continued to make changes in the leadership of the military, and this created further problems for the Afghan Security Forces.

Senator Hirono: Mr. Secretary, I do not mean to interrupt you, but my time is elapsing. So this gets to the overestimation, I think the overly optimistic assessment, because even as late as July, you are still encouraging the Afghan Special Forces, you are expecting the Ghani government to remain, but that was not the case.

In December 2019, the Washington Post reported that the U.S. military commanders privately expressed a lack of confidence that the Afghan army and police could ever fend
off, much less defeat the Taliban on their own.

So General Milley, you noted that there were some
specific military lessons to be learned. This is not the
first time that I think we have relied upon overly
optimistic assessments of conditions on the ground or
conflict conditions. It certainly happened in Vietnam. So
my question to you is what specific steps can we take to
make sure that our assessments are not overly optimistic, so
we can avoid the reliance on assessments that are not
accurate?

General Milley: I think in the case of working with
other countries' armies, it is important to have advisors
with those units, so that you can do a holistic assessment
of things that are very difficult to measure, the morale
factors, leadership will. I think that is one key aspect.

Another part, I think it is really important, and this
is a lesson from Vietnam and I think today, is do not
Americanize the war. We learned that in El Salvador, or in
Columbia, for example, where we did assist and help other
countries' armies fight insurgencies, and we were quite
effective, but it was their country, their army that bore
the burden of all the fighting. And we had very, very few
advisers and it was quite effective. Now, every country is
different, every war is different, and it has to be
evaluated on its own merits, but I think those are some key
points that are worth thinking about.

Senator Hirono: I agree. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Senator Rounds, please.

Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, first of all, thank you for your willingness to appear before this committee to answer questions on the withdrawal from Afghanistan. You have received and will continue to receive tough questions on what led to this decision. This is an important constitutional requirement of the jobs that you have agreed to serve in, and I thank you all for your many years of service to our nation.

I want to underline the fact that every single member of this committee, regardless of party, is grateful for the dedication and bravery exhibited by our service members, especially those who gave their last full measure of devotion at Abbey Gate.

General McKenzie, General Miller told this committee that he recommended keeping 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, and this is back in January 2021, because he felt that Afghan forces would not hold out long without our support. It seems to me that there would have been a process to convey General Miller's recommendation to the President. Can you share the process and who conveyed General Miller's recommendation, and was that recommendation delivered to
both President Trump at the time and also to President Biden?

General McKenzie: So there is a process for delivering recommendations to commanders in the field. I was part of that process. While I have been very clear that I will not give you my recommendation, I have given you my view, which I think you can draw your own conclusions from, and my view is that 2,500 was an appropriate number to remain, and that if we went below that number, in fact, we would probably witness a collapse of the Afghan government and the Afghan military. So --

Senator Rounds: General McKenzie, I guess my question is would it be fair for the committee to assume that both President Trump and President Biden received that specific information that had been assumed to be delivered by General Miller?

General McKenzie: I believe it would be reasonable for the committee to assume that.

Senator Rounds: And would General Miller have been able to deliver that directly to the President, or would someone else have had to have delivered that for him?

General McKenzie: I would leave it to General Miller to express an opinion on that, but he and I both had the opportunity to be in executive session with the President, and I cannot share anything beyond making that statement.
Senator Rounds: Thank you. Secretary Austin, this committee was briefed on the series of rock drills, rehearsal of concept drills that examined the many potential scenarios that could arise through the execution of different types of actions and counteractions. We have been briefed by multiple leaders that the worst-case scenario, an un-forecasted collapse of the Afghan government, was not something that these drills factored in as a possibility.

Is it true that we actually did tabletop exercises and we actually went through these drills, and we never assumed that there could be an immediate collapse of the Afghan government?

Secretary Austin: We planned for a range of possibilities. The entire collapse of the Afghan government was clearly one of the things that if you look at the intel estimates and some of the estimates that others had made that could happen. But in terms of specific planning, especially with respect to NEO, we planned for, you know, a contested environment or an un-consented environment, the requirement to evacuate a moderate amount of people versus a large amount of people. So there was a range of possibilities that we addressed.

Senator Rounds: But never with an immediate collapse of the government?

Secretary Austin: We certainly did not plan against
the collapse of a government in 11 days.

Senator Rounds: Thank you. General Milley, I think Senator Cotton made a very good point with regard to the timing, the collapse of Kabul and the time in which you were asked for your professional military opinion about the path forward. What seems to be the real challenge for many of us is that it appears that in your professional military opinion it would have been prudent to have used a different approach than a date certain with regard to a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

And if that is correct, and if there were other alternatives presented to the President, I am certain that the frustration that you felt in not having your professional military advice followed closely by an incoming President, that you were then tasked, in a very short period of time, with handling what was a position in time for the people that were on the ground there to respond in an emergency basis, would it be fair to say that you changed from a long-term plan of gradual withdrawal based on conditions to one in which you had to make immediate changes based upon a date certain?

General Milley: Senator, as a matter of professional advice, I would advise any leader, do not put dates certain on end dates. Make things conditions based. Two Presidents in a row, put dates on it. I do not think that is a -- my
advice is do not put specific dates. Make things conditions based. That is how I have been trained over many, many years.

With respect though, to the 31st and the decision on the 25th, the risk to mission and the risk to force, and most importantly, the risk to the American citizens that are remaining, that was going to go up, not down, on the 1st of September. And the American citizens, I know there are American citizens there, but they would have been at greater risk had we stayed past the 31st, in our professional opinion.

Senator Rounds: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Senator Kaine, please.

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the witnesses, I want to return to a point that Senator Wicker made. I informed a DoD witness about 10 days ago that we would expect an answer to the question of how many Americans are still in Afghanistan, and that we would not appreciate an answer that that was deferred to State. I am going to ask the question during my second round of questions after lunch and with the number of staff who are here in this room and in the ante room, we ought to be able to get an answer. And if we cannot, it will suggest to the committee, and I do not think you want to suggest this to the committee, that you do not want to be responsive to that question, or that
you do not talk to the State Department, or that the number
of Americans in Afghanistan is something that you are
indifferent to. I do not think any of those are true, so I
will ask the question again after lunch, and I hope we can
get an answer.

Two compliments and then a critical observation and
inquiry. First, thanks to President Biden for ending the
U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan after 20 years. It took
guts and it was the right thing to do, and it should have
been done earlier. A Virginia servicemember, whose wife is
expecting, said this to me recently: "I am so glad that my
baby is not being born into a country at war."

Some want us to sustain on permanent war footing in
Afghanistan and elsewhere. Some will point out that U.S.
troops are still deployed, still in harm's way, still
carrying out limited militarized strikes around the world.

But to the families of those who have been deployed
over and over again into Iraq and Afghanistan over the
course of the last 20 years, they are relieved that America
is now turning the page and rejecting the notion that we
should be a nation in permanent war.

Second, the effort to evacuate more than 120,000 people
to safety under chaotic circumstances was remarkable. I
visited the Dulles Expo Center, the principal arrival point
for about 80 percent of the Afghans. I also visited Fort
Lee, the first of the eight forts that process Afghans, and I visited with Afghans, our troops, the many Federal agencies working together, NGOs. The competent and compassionate service on the American side and the deep gratitude among Afghans made a deep impression on me. We should do all we can to make that transition to safe life in America as productive as possible.

My chief criticism and question is this. Why did the Afghan Security Force and civilian government collapse so quickly, and why did the U.S. so overestimate their capacity?

The second half of the question, why we overestimated their capacity, is very important. To any who have said we could not see this coming, the members of this committee know that is wrong. An immediate collapse may not have been the most likely outcome, but we have heard for years, particularly from the intel community, that DoD estimates of Afghan strength were way too optimistic.

I believe that the U.S. government had a good evacuation plan, but it was premised on an Afghan civilian and military government that showed high resistance to the Taliban. And so, we did not adequately plan for the real possibility of a quick collapse. We need to explore both military and inter-agency decision-making processes to understand why we were unrealistic, and how to correct that
going forward.

But the most important part of the question is why a military we had trained for 20 years at a cost of $800-plus billion dollars collapsed so quickly. I can think of three reasons, but after I put them on the table, I would like each of you beginning with General McKenzie to address the question, and if we cannot, we can do it when we come back after lunch.

First, the lightning collapse may show that our training was insufficient, and that it did not prepare the Afghan military to defend the country on their own. That should have been our goal, but we failed to accomplish it. If so, how must we change our thinking about training foreign militaries?

Second, the lightning collapse may not prove that the NSF were poor fighters, but that they were demoralized. Did they lack confidence in their own political and military leaders? Were they demoralized by a 2020 peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban that did not even include the Afghan government?

Mr. Chair, I would like to introduce the peace agreement for the record.

Chairman Reed: Without objection.

[The information follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator Kaine: Did U.S. and allied funding deepen a culture of corruption that long predated our involvement? Even the best fighting force may give in if they have no confidence in their leadership.

Third, the lightning collapse may show that we wanted things for Afghans that Afghan leadership did not want for themselves. We celebrated gains in public health and women's education, and we assumed that Afghans would fight to preserve those gains rather than allow the Taliban to take over. In other words, we thought we knew what Afghans wanted, what they feared, and what they would fight for.

But was our belief, though well intentioned, incredibly naive? We cannot get one-third of Americans to take a COVID vaccine, or accept the results of a presidential election. Do we really think we can transform the culture of another nation?

So to each of our witnesses, when we return in the second round, I will ask you this question: Why do you believe the Afghan military and civilian government collapsed so quickly?

With that I will yield back, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much. Senator Kaine.

Senator Ernst, please.

Senator Ernst: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair and gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today.
And unfortunately, this morning's hearing is required due to the haphazard withdrawal of U.S. forces, American citizens, and many of our Afghan partners. However, we do want to thank the men and women in uniform that assisted the evacuation of those that were able to make it out, and of course, to those that have given their service and sacrifice over the past two decades of the global war on terror.

The loss of our servicemembers and abandonment of Americans and Afghan allies last month was an unforced, disgraceful humiliation that did not have to happen. The President put a cheap political victory, a withdrawal timeline timed to the 20th anniversary of 9/11 on his calendar and executed his vision with little regard for American lives or the real threats that we face.

I do appreciate your open, your honest and expert participation in communicating to this committee what went wrong. I think our American citizens are at a real crossroads right now where they are questioning the leadership from this President and this administration. President Biden's blunders cannot be erased, but the United States must now account for them through a revamped counterterrorism strategy that recognizes the newfound momentum of terrorists and new threats emanating from the Middle East, in addition to rising challenges that we see coming from China and Russia. Pretty high stakes.
Secretary Austin, I would like to start with you. Did President Biden or any of his national security advisors express any military or diplomatic conditions for the American withdrawal from Afghanistan beyond the looming date of 9/11? What were those military conditions or diplomatic conditions that were outlined to you?

Secretary Austin: Again, once the President went through a very deliberate decision-making process and made his decision to exit Afghanistan, there were no additional conditions placed on it.

Senator Ernst: Can you tell me that he did take into consideration military or diplomatic conditions, and what were those conditions that he was weighing as he was making those decisions?

Secretary Austin: Sure. One of the things that, you know, all of us wanted to see happen was for this conflict to end with a diplomatic solution. And so one of the things that we certainly wanted to see was progress being made in the Doha negotiations. And we did not see, or he did not see any progress being made, and there was really not much of a bright future for that process.

Senator Ernst: So General Milley had stated earlier that his recommendation is always, as any military commander should do, should be conditions based. And we have to be able to evaluate whether those conditions are achievable,
and if we can successfully complete those. It sounds like there were very little consideration given to diplomatic or military conditions. The diplomatic, again, going to conditions based, the diplomatic end to it, I think General Milley, you also said that the military mission would end on the 31st, and transition to a diplomatic mission. But I do not understand how we fulfill a diplomatic mission after August 31st, when there are absolutely no diplomats on the ground in Afghanistan. They are gone. They have been evacuated. Who do we hand that mission off to when there is nobody there to complete it?

So can you then say that the President directed you, Secretary Austin, to execute an unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan? Unconditional. August 31st, done.

Secretary Austin: Once he made the decision to withdraw, I mean, that was the decision, to leave. And we certainly wanted to make sure that we shaped conditions so that our embassy could maintain a presence there, and continue to engage the government of Afghanistan. So protection of the embassy was pretty important.

Senator Ernst: Yes, Secretary Austin, you are extremely diplomatic in your answers. I can appreciate that, but this was not a conditions-based withdrawal. And I think all three of you have stated that you made your best opinion known to the President of the United States. He had
no conditions other than to get our people out of Afghanistan, which he failed at, because we still have Americans as well as Afghan partners in Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Chairman Reed: Thank you. Senator Ernst.

Senator King, please.

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am finding this a very interesting hearing. It is really two hearings at once. One is on the question of should we leave Afghanistan, and if we should not, what should be the nature of our troop commitment and our commitment to the country? The other is the withdrawal, which I thought was the subject to the hearing.

The decision to leave Afghanistan was made by President Trump in his administration on February 29, 2020, where we committed to leave by a date certain. There was a particular provision, or a condition, if you will, about negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. There was even a date specified -- March 10, 2020, less than two weeks after the signing of the Doha agreement.

Clearly that condition was not met. My question is, and General Milley, you were the only one who overlapped the two administrations, were there any efforts on behalf of the prior administration to enforce that condition of negotiation with the Afghan government and the Taliban?
General Milley: Senator, as I said in my opening remarks, the conditions that were required of the Taliban, none of them were met except one.

Senator King: My question is, did we attempt to enforce those conditions? Did we inform the Taliban, for example, we will not advocate for the release of 5,000 prisoners, unless you begin negotiations, or something similar?

General Milley: I do not have personal knowledge of that, whether or not Zal Khalizad or others were personally saying that. I do not have personal knowledge of that. But I do know that none of the conditions were met except the one, which is do not attack American forces and coalition forces. That condition was.

Senator King: The conditions were not met, but you testified that the troop withdrawals and the release of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners did proceed, even though the conditions had not been met. Is that correct?

General Milley: That is correct.

Senator King: And you have testified you provided your best military advice to President Biden, that there should be a residual force left in Afghanistan. Did you provide the same advice to President Trump when they were negotiating the Doha agreement?

General Milley: Again, I am not going to discuss
precise advice.

Senator King: Was it your best military judgment that a residual force --

General Milley: At that time, yes, and that is what that a series of memos, and advice and meetings, et cetera, in the September, October time frame, that is exactly what they were. And you can talk to Secretary Esper and he can tell you the same thing.

Senator King: So your military judgment did not change on January 20th.

General Milley: No.

Senator King: Thank you. General McKenzie, you touched on something that you were the only one to mention it in this entire hearing. In my judgment, one of the key moments was the fleeing of President Ghani, and that that is, in fact, what really pulled the rug out from under the military and demoralized the entire government. That was really not the beginning of the end but the end of the end. Do you have some thoughts on that?

General McKenzie: I think, when we consider what happened to the Afghan military, you have to consider it completely linked to what happened to the Afghan government. And when your president flees literally on no notice in the middle of the day that has a profoundly debilitating effect on everything else.
Now, events were pretty far along on 15 August, so I would note that it, but I do believe it is possible they could have fought and held parts of Kabul had the president stayed. I think that really demoralized those remnants of Afghans, and there were still considerable Afghan combat formations around Kabul on 15 August. I believe they were really disorganized by that, and led to the Taliban really pushing in as fast as they wanted to go into the center of the city.

Senator King: I do want to point out for the record that, to my knowledge and memory, this committee never had a hearing on the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in February of 2020. And it now appears that would have been a beneficial hearing because we could have discussed all of these issues, but we were already on the path for withdrawal. And the withdrawal date under that agreement was May 1, 2021. President Biden extended that -- I do not know whether it was a negotiation or some kind of understanding -- until the end of August.

General Milley, in questioning from Senator Cotton, you talked about your military advice about leaving on August 31st versus staying to try to help additional Americans leave. Was it the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs that the August 31st date should be observed? And if so, why was that the military advice?
General Milley: It was of the Joint Chiefs plus General McKenzie, Admiral Vasely, and General Donahue. The reason is risk to force, risk to mission, and risk to the American citizens.

On the 1st of September, we were going to go to war with the Taliban -- of that there was no doubt -- and we were already in conflict with ISIS. So at that point in time, if we stayed past the 31st, which militarily is feasible but it would have required an additional commitment of significant amounts of forces, probably 18th Airborne Corps, 15,000, 20,000, maybe 25,000 troops, we would have had to re-seize Bagram, we would have had to clear Kabul of the 6,000 Taliban that were already in Kabul.

That is what would have happened, beginning on the 1st. And that would have resulted in significant casualties on the U.S. side, and it would have placed American citizens that are still there at greater risk, in my professional view and in the view of all the other generals. So on the 25th, we recommended that we transition to a diplomatic option beginning on the 31st.

Senator King: Thank you, General. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator King.

Senator Tillis, please.

Senator Tillis: General Milley, you said that the
Taliban had not lived up to the terms of the agreement.

Give me a rough date of when they first breached terms of the agreement. When you said they were not living up to the terms of the Doha agreement, what was the first evidence that they were not living up to the terms of the agreement?

General Milley: Yeah, the memo signed 29 February, so through, really the fighting season of the summer of '20.

One of the requirements, for example --

Senator Tillis: Okay. So more than a year ago?

General Milley: Absolutely.

Senator Tillis: Okay. I do not buy the idea that this President was bound by a decision made by a prior President. This was not a treaty, and it was clearly an agreement where the Taliban were not living up to it. This President, President Biden, could have come in, reasserted conditions, and completely changed the timeline. He is not bound by the President's prior agreements any more than he was bound by President Trump's decision to exit the Iran Deal or the Paris Climate Accords. So, that to me is a false narrative.

I also have to say that this President, moving forward, with a failed construct, has cost American lives or has cost lives of North Carolinians. We were working on a case with an SIV holder who had a sister who worked for an NGO, Save the Children, and a father who was in the Afghan police force, and as we were working to get through them, the
Taliban -- Taliban 2.0 is every bit as ruthless as the one that we replaced in 2001 -- they sent pictures of the slit throats of people that we were working personally with. They killed this pregnant woman, they killed this police officer, and they are killing countless other people now, that we should have gotten out.

Secretary Austin, I think we do owe a debt of gratitude to the people that got 120,000, 124,000 people out. It was a logistical success, but this is a strategic failure.

General McKenzie, General Miller said 2,500. I have heard you and General Milley also say you agreed with the idea. You personally agreed. You did not necessarily say that you recommended to the President, the 2,500. I understood from General Miller that there was a broader context within that recommendation. There were 2,500 fighters, U.S. fighters, but I understand almost 5,000 NATO allies, or 5,000 others that were willing to remain on the ground. And as General Miller said, "Keep the hand on the shoulder of the Afghan national forces, so that we could have a counter to the Taliban." Is that correct, that it was bigger than that, it was probably the 7,000 range?

General McKenzie: Senator, you are correct. Our NATO allies would have been on board for --

Senator Tillis: And also a CIA presence with bases out there for human intelligence, to help us be more precise,
more exquisite with the execution of whatever operations we
had on the ground?

General McKenzie: That is correct, sir.

Senator Tillis: Okay. Now I know that you will not
say that you advised the President, but is it fair to say
that when General Miller, he said that he advised all of you
on his recommendations, it sounds like two of the three of
you agreed with it. Is it at least fair to say that in the
interagency discussion that those recommendations were made
and that in your best military advice it would have kept the
situation stable in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: Well, I have stated consistently
that my position was if you go below 2,500, you are going to
look at a collapse of the Afghan military. I did not
foresee it to be days. I thought it would take months. But
the rest of the ecosystem would go out with it too, that the
NATO partners are going to leave, the interagencies are
going to leave, and you are going to leave the Afghans by
themselves.

Senator Tillis: Did any of you embrace the notion that
the 2,500 plus the several thousand, I think an estimated
5,000 NATO allies and partners who were willing to stay
there as well, did any of you agree with the President's
assessment, that if he acted on that recommendation that he
would ultimately have to send tens of thousands more U.S.
service members to Afghanistan, that if we held that one
that it would ultimately just delay the day where we would
be back to 100,000 or 50,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: So Senator, these discussions were
occurring in January, February, March. They are separate
from the late August discussions, so I want to make that
point clear.

Senator Tillis: But in your best military judgment, do
you believe that the recommendations that General Miller put
forth, with some 2,500, and I think General Milley said
maybe flex up at 3,500, do you believe that that would have
sown the seeds for ultimately having to send tens of
thousands of U.S. servicemembers back to Afghanistan, as the
President has said, publicly?

General McKenzie: Senator, I believe there was a risk
you would incur increasing attacks by the Taliban. That was
a risk withholding at 2,500. That was a very clear risk.
But I will tell you, Senator, I am really humbled recently
by my ability to deduce what the Taliban or would not do, so
I think it is hard to know.

Senator Tillis: Thank you. And next round I will get
onto the fate of the SIV holders and people that are
stranded in Afghanistan. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Let me recognize Senator Warren, and I am going over
for the vote. Senator Hirono will preside in my absence.

Senator Warren, please.

Senator Warren: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

So I want to begin by zooming out because it is not possible to understand our final months in Afghanistan without viewing them in the context of the 20 years that led up to them. Anyone who says the last few months were a failure but everything before that was great clearly has not been paying attention.

In 2015, the Taliban conquered its first province since 2001. By October 2018, the Afghan government controlled only 54 percent of the 407 districts, and by May 2020, the Afghan government controlled less than a third of Afghan's 407 districts. We poured money and support and air cover, and the Afghan government continued to fail.

By 2021, it was clear that 2,500 troops could not successfully prop up a government that had been losing ground and support to the Taliban for years. Secretary Austin, I understand that you advised President Biden to stay in Afghanistan, but as you acknowledge, staying or withdrawing is a decision for the President alone. So I want to focus on what happened next. Once President Biden made the decision to have U.S. forces leave the country, who designed the evacuation?

Secretary Austin: Well Senator, again, I will not
address the advice I gave the President. I would just say
that, in his calculus, this was not risk free, and the
Taliban, as we said earlier in this hearing, were committed
to recommencing their operations against our forces. His
assessment was that in order to sustain that and continue to
do things that benefited the Afghans, that would require at
some point that he increase our presence there in
Afghanistan.

So once he made the decision, then of course, from a
military perspective, in terms of the retrograde of the
people and the equipment, that planning was done by Central
Command, and certainly principally by General Miller. Very
detailed planning, and then we came back and briefed the
entire interagency on the details of that plan.

Senator Warren: Okay. So the military planned the
evacuation. Did President Biden follow your advice on
executing on the evacuation plan?

Secretary Austin: He did.

Senator Warren: Did President Biden give you all the
resources that you needed?

Secretary Austin: From my view, he did.

Senator Warren: Did President Biden ignore your advice
on the evacuation at any point?

Secretary Austin: No Senator, he did not.

Senator Warren: Did he refuse any request for anything
that you needed or asked for?

Secretary Austin: No.

Senator Warren: So the President followed the advice of his military advisors in planning and executing this withdrawal. As we have already established, the seeds for our failure in Afghanistan were planted many, many years ago. So let me ask you one more question, Secretary Austin. Knowing what you know now, if we had stayed in Afghanistan for another year, would it have made a fundamental difference?

Secretary Austin: Again, it depends on what size you remain in at, and what your objectives are. There are a range of possibilities, but if you stayed there at a force posture of 2,500, certainly you would be in a fight with the Taliban, and you would have to reinforce yourself.

Senator Warren: I appreciate your looking at it as a fighter, but I would also add, one more year of propping up a corrupt government, and an army that would not fight on its own was not going to give us a different outcome. And anyone who thinks differently is either fooling himself, or trying to fool the rest of us.

I believe President Biden had it exactly right. Withdrawing was long overdue. The withdrawal was conducted in accordance with the advice of his military advisors, who planned and executed every step of this withdrawal.
Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator Hirono: [Presiding.] Thank you, Senator Warren.

Senator Sullivan, you are recognized.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Madam Chair. Gentlemen, this committee recognizes that your constitutional duty is to follow the lawful orders of the President or resign if you do not agree with his decisions and policies like Secretary Mattis did. But I want to emphasize you do not have a duty, constitutional or otherwise, to cover for the commander in chief when he is not telling the truth to the American people. With that, I have a few questions that I would like you to keep short, concise answers to.

On August 18th, in a media interview to the American people, the President said that none of his military advisors told him that he should keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan. General Milley, that was a false statement by the President of the United States, was it not?

General Milley: I did not even see the statement, to tell you the truth.

Senator Sullivan: I am reading you a truthful statement. That was a false statement.

General Milley: Yeah, look --

Senator Sullivan: Look, I do not have a lot of time.

General Milley: Okay.
Senator Sullivan: Was that a false statement to the American people?

General Milley: I am not going to categorize a statement of the President of the United States.

Senator Sullivan: General McKenzie, was that a false statement? The President said none of his commanders said that he should keep troops in Afghanistan. Was that a false statement by the President of United States? Remember you do not have a duty to cover for the President when he is not telling the truth. Was that a false statement or not?

General McKenzie: I have given you my opinion on the matter. I have given you my judgment on it, and I will let --

Senator Sullivan: I think we all know it was a false statement. Okay, that is number one. President also said, "If there is an American citizen left behind in Afghanistan, the military is going to stay until we get them out."

General Milley, was that statement -- did that statement turn out to be true or untrue by the President?

General Milley: I think that was the intent, but we gave him a recommendation on the 25th of August to terminate the mission on the 31st of August.

Senator Sullivan: The statement was untrue.

Let me ask another question. General Milley, General McKenzie, the President, around the same time said, quote,
"Al Qaeda was gone from Afghanistan," told the American people that. Was that true or not true? Was Al Qaeda gone from Afghanistan in mid-August? True or not true?

General Milley: Al Qaeda is still in Afghanistan. They were there in mid-August. They have been severely disrupted and attritted over many, many years. They are not --

Senator Sullivan: So it was not true.

General McKenzie, was that true or not?

General McKenzie: Al Qaeda was present in Afghanistan.

Senator Sullivan: Okay, so it was not true.

Let me make one final one. The President called this entire retrograde operation, "an extraordinary success."

General Miller, in his testimony, disagreed with that assertion. General Milley, was this Afghanistan retrograde operation an extraordinary success?

General Milley: There were two operations, Senator.

Senator Sullivan: Just yes or no. I have a lot of questions. Was this an extraordinary success?

General Milley: Senator with all due respect, there were two operations. There was the retrograde, which Miller was in charge of, and there is the NEO, which CENTCOM was in charge of. The retrograde was executed, and ended by mid-July, with a residual force to defend the embassy, the NEO --
Senator Sullivan: You and I have discussed this. Would you use the term "extraordinary success" for what took place in August in Afghanistan?

General Milley: That is the non-combatant evacuation. And I think one of the other senators said it very well. It was a logistical success, but a strategic failure, and I think those are two different terms.

Senator Sullivan: Look, I think -- here is the problem. I think the whole world knows -- this is the cover of The Economist magazine, "Biden's debacle," that had stories in it, articles in it called, "The fiasco in Afghanistan is a huge and unnecessary blow to America's standing." That was one article. "Joe Biden blames everybody else." That is another article. "China sees America humbled." That is another article.

And gentlemen, the problem here, these are not marginal misstatements by the President to the American people. These are dramatic, obvious falsehoods that go to the very heart of the foreign policy fiasco we have all witnessed. These are life and death deceptions that the President of the United States told the American people.

I have one final question. I might leave it because it is a long one for the follow up, but here is the anger. I have never seen my constituent more angry about an issue than this, and it is the combination of everybody knowing...
that this is a debacle, and yet people defending it as a, quote, "extraordinary success." And here is the biggest: no accountability. No accountability. You gentlemen have spent your lives, and I completely respect it, troops in combat. You have been in combat. You have had troops under your command killed in action. You have been part of an institution where accountability is so critical, and the American people respect that, up and down the chain where there are instances, commanders get relieved up and down the chain. We see it. The McCain incident, the Fitzgerald incident, the AAV incident with the Marine Corps, three-star, four-star flag officers, all relieved of duty.

But on this matter, on the biggest national security fiasco in a generation, there has been zero accountability, no responsibility from anybody. So I will ask this final question of all of you. Senator Cotton talked about it.

Senator Hirono: Senator Sullivan?

Senator Sullivan: Madam Chair, if I --

Senator Hirono: Could you submit your question for the record, please? We are trying to keep to a 5-minute questioning round. You can ask the question in your second round, if you would like. Thank you.

Senator Peters.

Senator Peters: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to each and every one of you for your service to our
country.

I want to return to some of the comments made by Senator Warren, and looking at over the last 20 years. I think if ever we are going to have a strategic assessment of what happened in Afghanistan, it is important that any kind of strategic assessment is not just to look at the present, but to look at the past, and look at the future, and look at all three of those elements as we are making that kind of assessment. And if we are going to do that, we have to look over the 20 years that we were in Afghanistan, and we are going to have to have a pretty hard-nosed assessment of that. General Milley, you mentioned that strategic decisions have consequences, and there are a lot of lessons to be learned over 20 years of our involvement in Afghanistan.

I sat at this table here at Armed Services for many years, served in the House before. I have had an opportunity to travel to Afghanistan on a couple of occasions, and when we have ever asked our military leaders the situation in Afghanistan, we often heard, "Well, it is a stalemate right now, but this year coming up is going to be different. This year will be different." I heard that year after year. "This year is going to be different. Yeah, I know we were in a stalemate but this year is going to be different."
There is one commentator that said, and Secretary Austin, I want you to comment on this, he said that we did not really have a 20-year war in Afghanistan. We had 20 one-year wars in Afghanistan. How would you respond to that?

Secretary Austin: I would certainly say, Senator that is something to think about. You know, you have heard me say in my opening comments that we have to ask ourselves some tough questions. Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? And so if you are reshaping that strategy every year, one year at a time, then that has consequences.

So I think that is something we got to go back and look at, and we also have to look at the impact, the effect of the corruption that was in the environment, weak leadership, changes in leadership, and a number of factors.

Senator Peters: Well, I want to build on that, because I think it is important, Secretary Austin. For example, General Milley, when you commanded NATO ground forces in Afghanistan eight years ago, you called 2013 a critical year for the Afghan security forces because it was the first time they had taken responsibility for their security across the country. Secretary Austin, you offered similar assessment in 2015 and 2016, during testimony before this committee. As CENTCOM commander, you emphasized that there were 326,000
ANSF forces, and they were ready to lead security operations.

And I will just say, from most my experience, especially when I was in Afghanistan, the input that I got from our commanders was that "This year is going to be different. We are going to be able to do things better."

But I got a completely different assessment when I went to the mess hall and ate with the soldiers and the Marines and the folks on the ground, who said, "I do not trust these folks that we are with. I do not know if they are going to fight. In fact, they do not even show up. They get their paycheck, but they do not show up."

And now there may have been some instances where they have performed, and I know you have highlighted some of those, but my question from a strategic standpoint is, did we just become fixated perhaps on some tactical performance from our forces, their forces, and forget to measure the Afghan Security Force's actual institutional health as a fighting force that could sustain a fight, even though they were in an incredibly weak economy and a whole host of complicated cultural issues?

Secretary Austin: Clearly questions that we have to drill deep on. At one point, as you know, Senator, we had a number of advisors down to fairly low levels. As we began to lift the numbers of advisors that we had there and scale
back on the people that we had interfacing with the Afghans
on a daily basis we began to lose that fingertip feel. And
so our ability to assess, with some degree of certainty,
continue to erode, the smaller that we got.

Senator Peters: My sense is that that was what we were
hearing for years. It was not just at the end, that this
was an endemic problem for over a decade. So hopefully we
will have the opportunity to do that.

That is my final question, Secretary Austin. What are
we actually doing to learn from the conclusion of these
military operations, particularly from a strategic
assessment point of view, when it comes to end-of-conflict
transition? We are going to have potentially other
operations like this, even in great power competition.

Secretary Austin: Yeah. So as we always do, Senator,
we are going to take a hard look at ourselves in terms of,
you know, what we did over the last 20 years, what worked,
what did not work, and we are going to learn from those
lessons and make sure that we incorporate that into our
planning, and our strategic assessment going forward.

Senator Peters: Thank.

Chairman Reed: [Presiding.] Thank you very much,
Senator Peters.

Senator Cramer, please.

Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank all
three of you for your service and for being here, and God
bless the men and women under your command.

    General McKenzie, is it true that U.S. forces had the
ISIS-K cell under surveillance prior to August 26th, and
could have struck them before the deadly terrorist attacks
at Kabul, but were not given the authority to strike?

    General McKenzie: No, that is not true.

    Senator Cramer: You know, I noticed that the President
was quick to take a victory lap after the first strike and
push this tough guy image he is so famous for. He once
threatened to have union bosses beat me up. He said things
like, "Just do it. If we find more, we will strike them."
Of course, this was after he said of the ISIS-K leaders, "We
will hunt you down." He talks tough. He is going to go get
them.

    I also noticed he has been equally silent, taking no
responsibility for the strike on innocent civilians,
including children, that was in part caused by, in my view,
his insecure need to appear tough. He just let you take the
blame, General McKenzie. But what I really worry about is
the air crews who actually were pressured into pulling the
trigger that terrible day.

    Secretary Austin, as you know, the North Dakota Air
National Guard operates reapers around the world, and I know
what kind of pressure those air crews are under, and the
level of responsibility they feel to accomplish their
missions properly. And I am worried that whoever was
operating the aircraft involved in the tragic 29th August
strike was set up to fail by an administration that wanted a
political victory more than they wanted an American victory.

Have you reached out to the air crew to make sure that
they understand it is not their fault, that there are seven
dead children?

Secretary Austin: I have not, Senator. As you
probably know, I have directed a three-star review of this
incident. General McKenzie did an initial investigation and
I have directed a three-star review, and so I will not make
any comments.

Senator Cramer: You know, there certainly seemed to be
a lot of indications that a terrorist event was likely, if
not imminent, leading up to the ISIS-K bombing on the 26th.
Why were our military members still exposed after that
threat was known, General McKenzie?

General McKenzie: The purpose of our force at the
airfield was to bring American citizens and Afghans at risk
out. In order to do that, you had to have the gates open.
You had to process people.

You are right, there were a lot of threats, and we
worked very hard to minimize those threats, and you try to
balance it. Every once in a while, the bad guys sneak one
in on you. This is an example of where that occurred. It was not through any lack of attention to trying to find those cells or looking hard for them. And we did find a number and we did, in fact, which I will be happy to talk about in closed session, we did, in fact, enable and stop those attacks from occurring. This one we were not successful on.

Senator Cramer: So speaking of that I want to drill down just a minute since I have a couple. The Taliban was controlling the checkpoints obviously around the airport. And you had indicated, General McKenzie, that the U.S. at that time had, you called it a pragmatic relationship of necessity with the Taliban. Did we share any information with the Taliban about the ISIS-K threat, and if so, how did the Taliban respond to it? In other words, how did they get in? Is it possible that they let them in on purpose?

General McKenzie: So it is possible that they let them in on purpose, but the body of intelligence indicates that is not in fact what happened. You know, so one event happened and that is a terrible tragic event. A lot of other events did not happen because that outer circle, the Taliban forces, were there.

Look, I defer to no one in my disdain for the Taliban and my lack of trust for them, but I believe they actually prevented other attacks from occurring. This event, someone
got through. I believe there were other times when people
did not get through.

Senator Cramer: All right. Look, the reality is there
are patriotic Americans all over the country and certainly
in North Dakota they are really upset. I mean, they are
genuinely pissed off. And they sense that there is a lot of
sort of political positioning, and apologizing, and
rationalizing. And no one is really saying anything other
than it was an extraordinary event. Now some of you have
admitted that it was not perfect, I think were your words,
General Milley, but "extraordinary success" just rankles
them when they hear that, especially when they see that out
of the 124,000 people that were brought to the United
States, we do not know much about a whole bunch of them, and
yet we know a whole bunch about people that were not brought
back to the United States, and they are upset. They are
really, really upset. I know you know that. I think you
are seeing the reflection of that in their elected
representatives, and this afternoon, we will probably drill
down a little more on some things. But I look forward to
the closed session as well, General McKenzie, to learn more
about August 26th.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cramer.

Senator Manchin, please.

Senator Manchin: Thank you very much, and first of
all, thank all three of you. I appreciate your service to our country, and I never have doubted your unwavering commitment to defend our country and our constitution.

I am having a hard time. I am old enough to understand. I remember Vietnam very well. I was in line to go there, and had an injury in my playing ball at WVU, and that did not happen. So anyway, I just cannot figure out, I cannot explain to the younger generation, to my children and grandchildren, how do we get into this and never get out?

We did not learn from Vietnam? That was a horrible exit. I remember that very vividly. This was even worse than that, as far as my recall. And I do not know what lessons we are taking from this right now.

But I look back at lack of an AUMF. We had an open-end AUMF. We still have an open-end AUMF. If we would have had an AUMF and basically had a time-certain and specific goal, do any of you think that could have made a difference? Do you think, I mean, hindsight being 20/20, what did we learn from these mistakes? How do we prevent them again? We thought from Vietnam we learned not to go in and try to change a nation, and here we are, trading partners with Vietnam. Is that same going to end up with Afghanistan?

I cannot comprehend any of it, to be honest with you, and I have no explanation. So anybody that wants to help me. And General Milley, I know that you have a great
knowledge of history, and how we have gotten into
situations, and how maybe we should keep from repeating
them.

General Milley: Yeah. As I said, Senator Manchin, in
my opening comment.

Senator Manchin: I am sorry. I was conducting an ENR
meeting and I was not able to be here for that. I am so
sorry.

General Milley: Okay. Sorry. I mentioned, you know,
that there have been four Presidents, 20 commanders on the
ground, seven or eight Chairman of Joint Chiefs, dozens of
Secretaries of Defense, et cetera. And outcomes like this
are not determined in, you know, the last 5 days, the last
20 days, or the last year for that matter. Outcomes in a
war like this, an outcome that is a strategic failure, the
enemy is in charge in Kabul, there is no way else to
describe that. That outcome is a cumulative effect of 20
years, not 20 days, and there are a huge amount of
strategic, operational, and tactical lessons that need to be
learned from this, some of them in the military sphere, the
narrow military sphere. One of them, for example, is the
mirror-imaging of the building of the Afghan National Army
based on American doctrine, tactics, techniques, and
procedures. That made a military that may, I am going to
wait full evaluation, but may have been overly dependent
upon us, our presence, contractors, and higher tech systems, in order to fight a counterinsurgency war. That is one area that needs to be fully explored.

Another is the intel. How did we miss collapse of an army and a government that big, that fast, in only 11 days? That needs to be pulled apart. Then there are other factors that are not strictly military, but things like the legitimacy of the government, corruption, the parasitic nature of the police forces. There is a whole series of 10 or 20 that I wrote down just a week or two ago, that need to be looked at, and looked at in depth, and very seriously and comprehensively over time.

Senator Manchin: Do we know where the president, the former president of Afghanistan is today and how much money he took with him? Do we have any idea?

General Milley: Secretary Austin, do you have any idea?

Secretary Austin: I think that he may be in UAE, senator. I am not certain of that. That is what the last report that I had. And in terms of any money that he may have taken with him, I have no knowledge of any amounts of money.

Senator Manchin: You all have not been able to -- I mean there is no way that we can trace that through the banking institutions? No way that we have any insight on
that whatsoever? There has to be exchanges going back and forth because I am sure he is not keeping it in the bank of Afghanistan.

Secretary Austin: Defense does not have any insight on that, Senator, but certainly I am not sure if the law enforcement agencies --

Senator Manchin: We will check with Treasury. Maybe Treasury might. I am just looking for some answers that maybe are not answerable. Everyone has asked the questions of how do we prevent this from happening again? Why did we not see it? There is not a person that is returned that I have spoken to in special ops that were there, when they returned. I was there a couple times in 2006. I was there in 2011. I was there. But every time it got worse. It did not get better.

So this could not be a surprise. They never were going to step to the plate. And it could not have been a surprise that they would not fight. They never had allegiance to a country. I mean, we knew that. And the special ops people said it gets worse every day. It does not get better. Every mission was worse. We used to drive from Kabul to Bagram. After I went back the second time, hell, we could not do that. I mean, it got so bad, everything got bad.

And I have got to tell this one. It drives me absolutely insane to see the television at night, and see
the Taliban, and all of them wearing our uniforms, wearing
our night vision, doing everything, using everything we
have, our MRAPs and everything else that we left there. I
just cannot believe it. I cannot even get an accounting of
how much equipment we really did leave. I know how many
aircraft we left, and I know how many basically MRAPs and
all the different things. But not to plan better to take
that equipment out, it was unbelievable.

Secretary Austin: I would just flag for you, Senator,
that all of the equipment that we had, that we used, was
retrograded by General Miller as a part of the drawdown.
Thousands of tons of equipment, and whatever high-end
equipment that we had, that we were using. The equipment
that the Afghan Security Forces had as the Taliban took over
is the equipment that you see. And, of course, all of the
helicopters that were left on the airfield at HKIA, I asked
General McKenzie to demilitarize those so that they could
not ever be used again.

And so we took, we retrograded all of our equipment
that we were supposed to retrograde as we drew down.

Senator Manchin: Only thing I can say in finishing up
is that I would hope that God would bless America to have
the intelligence not to repeat what we continually have seen
does not work. And with you all, expertise you have, and
knowledge you are gaining from all this, please, please help
us from ever, ever repeating what we have done.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Manchin.

Senator Scott, please.

Senator Scott: Thank you, Chairman. First of all, I
want to thank each of you for being here. General Milley,
one thing I hope at some point you will address is the
context of your calls with regard to the Chinese and whether
what has been alleged is that you would warn them if there
was going to be an attack. Also, address whether there was
any intelligence indicating that the Chinese were actually
nervous.

One thing that surprised me about what has been going
on in the last few months is the President has absolutely
blamed everyone else but himself for the botched withdrawal
of Afghanistan. He, as the President of the United States,
has ability to make these decisions. He can take all the
advice he wants, but he gets to make the final decisions. He
has blamed previous administrations. He has blamed the
people of Afghanistan. He has blamed the military of
Afghanistan, which I think is absolutely disingenuous. The
people in the White House have even blamed our own military.

Secretary Austin, some things you have said today
actually surprised me. You said you were ready, you said
you exceeded expectations, you said our credibility is
solid, and you have said the President followed your advice
on the evacuation. Let me just ask you, the first question is, do you still believe that the most effective withdrawal strategy involves extracting the military, abandoning our military installations, and reducing our use of force and ability to use force before we got our civilians out?

Secretary Austin: Thanks, Senator. First of all, the plan was to -- the decision was to end our military operations and draw down all of our forces and retrograde all of our equipment, and that was accomplished. General Miller, I think, put together a great plan and executed that plan, in accordance with the plan.

Also a key part of the plan was to maintain an embassy in Kabul, and maintaining that embassy would allow us to continue to engage the government, to continue to provide resources to support the Afghan Security Forces. So the plan was to leave a diplomatic presence there. In conjunction with that plan, we also were going to leave a small military force there to help secure the embassy. So that was the plan, Senator.

Senator Scott: But you did not address the issue that -- you all made all these -- it was your plan. You have acknowledged it was your plan, and your plan said you would do all these things before we got our civilians out. I mean, when, in the history of this country, have we ever had the U.S. military say, and have a plan that we will take our
military out first before we take our civilians? I cannot imagine that.

Secretary Austin: When you say civilians, are you talking about --


Secretary Austin: -- American citizens?

Senator Scott: Yeah.

Secretary Austin: Well, the American citizens would come out once a non-combatant evacuation is declared, and until that point, typically we do not evacuate all the citizens in the country.

Senator Scott: But we did not here. There are American citizens still there.

Secretary Austin: And we continue to remain engaged and work to get those citizens out, Senator.

Senator Scott: Why would you propose a plan that did not get all American citizens out? I just cannot imagine ever in the history of this country, our U.S. military would propose to leave a country without our citizens coming out first. I mean, have we ever done that before?

Secretary Austin: All of the American citizens would not leave, Senator, unless there was a non-combatant evacuation. And, you know, the plan was to leave the embassy there, to continue to address the needs of our American citizens, to engage with the government. And so
that was a part of the plan. You know, again, the plan was
never to evacuate the American citizens and leave the
embassy there.

Senator Scott: Did it bother you when the President
went on national television and said that he would not leave
until all American citizens were taken out? Did it bother
you when he said that, because it clearly was not truthful?

Secretary Austin: Now, Senator, you know, you heard me
say several times that we are going to work as hard as we
can, for as long as we can, to get every American citizen
out that wants to come out, and we continue to do that to
this day.

Senator Scott: Well, I am running out of time, but one
thing I want when we have next round, I want to understand
what decisions would you make differently today to save
those 13 lives of service men and women that we lost at the
Kabul airport.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley: Senator, if I could comment on your
first opening comment, if I may?

Chairman Reed: Go ahead, sir.

General Milley: Yeah. I am happy to lay out every
detail in all the intel to you as an individual, to any
other member, or to a committee, or anything you want on
these Chinese calls at your convenience. Happy to do it.
Senator Scott: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you. Thank you, Senator Scott.

Senator Duckworth, please.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I share my colleagues' concerns about the rapid collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, and the Afghan government and the failure of our intelligence. We need some answers.

After investing two decades, nearly $2 trillion, and most importantly, the lives of almost 2,500 of American troops, our nation must conduct a thorough and honest review of the United States government's involvement in Afghanistan since the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks.

For the sake of current and future generations of warfighters, we must capture the hard lessons from Afghanistan to ensure that these lessons are not forgotten, or worse, repeated on a future battlefield. This is our moral responsibility as a nation.

Gentlemen, all three of you have been involved in the war in Afghanistan multiple times, in multiple different capacities throughout your careers. Secretary Austin, was the situation on the ground in Afghanistan over the last few months influenced by previous decisions made over the course of several years?

Secretary Austin: I absolutely believe that, Senator.
Foremost among those decisions is the Doha agreement. I think that severely impacted the morale of the military.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you. Secretary Austin, if that is the case, is it possible to have an intellectually honest lessons learned exercise that only looks at the most recent events in Afghanistan of the last couple of months, or must any effective review look at the whole 20 years since September 11th?

Secretary Austin: I think you have to look at the entire 20 years. Senator, I think there are some great lessons learned that we are going to take away once we do that. But yeah, I believe you got to look at the entire time span.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you. I agree that an effective review must be comprehensive. After all, the war in Afghanistan was shaped by 4 different administrations and 11 different Congresses. No party should be looking to score cheap, partisan, political points off a multi-decade, nation-building failure that was bipartisan in the making. Instead, Congress should authorize a long-term effort, solely devoted to bringing accountability and transparency to the Afghanistan war and lessons to be learned.

That is why on Thursday I will be introducing the Afghanistan War Study Commission. My bill would establish a bipartisan, independent commission to examine every aspect
of the war, including the political and strategic decisions that transformed a focused military mission into vast nation building campaign. Importantly, this commission must produce actionable recommendations designed to guide the development of real reform. Just ask the 9/11 Commission's work inform congressional law making efforts in the years after its publication.

Secretary Austin, would you agree with me that such an independent, long-term study could serve as an effective complementary effort to the more targeted lessons learned reviews that DoD always conducts, particularly in shedding light on how Congress and civilian leaders from multiple government agencies can do a better job in defining the scope of military missions and actually enforcing legal limitations on the use of force?

Secretary Austin: I would, and the point that you are making, in my view, it needs to be an interagency approach to this.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you. And I do want to note that my family and I were in Cambodia until the very end. I am an American. I was born in Thailand, but my father worked for the United Nations. And to answer my colleague's question, my father chose to stay as long as possible to help the Cambodian people as long as possible, and he left after American troops had left. The American ambassador
stayed behind after American troops had left. And in fact, after the last military transport had left, I know this because my father was on the last military transport to leave Cambodia, and the ambassador had to travel over land. So yes, we do leave Americans behind, but this is all tied to NEO operations and how that is planned, which is why I think it is so important that we have an independent investigation. Maybe the failure here was that we did not have a NEO plan in place, and we did not activate it before all of our troops left. But if that is the case, we need to learn that.

So I would ask for my colleagues, who considered this independent commission, we put somebody in charge of it, who was not in a decision-making capacity during the 20 years, make it nonpartisan and Let us get those lessons learned so we do not make these same mistakes over and over again.

Our troops deserve better, and the families of the 2,500 American troops who laid down their lives to protect and defend this Constitution, who followed the lawful order of all of those Presidents, they deserve better than partisan fights. We need to get some real answers.

Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

Now, let me recognize Senator Blackburn.

Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Gentlemen, we thank you all for being here with us today.

As you have heard from all of us, the American people, Tennesseans are wanting some answers. They deserve to hear your testimony. And I think it is unacceptable that this is the first time that I am hearing from you in any forum, despite attempts at outreach by both me and my staff, save a few short, all-Senator phone calls that we have had. And I want to emphasize, all of us here, every one of us, answer to the American people, and they deserve transparency and information regarding this administration's botched and disgraceful withdrawal.

Tennesseans are really angry. And as you know, General Milley, Tennessee is home to the 101st Airborne, one of the most deployed divisions in the U.S. military. We are also home to the specialized 160th SOAR, who were among the last on the ground, extracting U.S. citizens from danger in Kabul. Tennessee National Guard units have deployed to Afghanistan at a high-operational tempo, as well as providing vital, logistical services, such as refueling. We are home to more than 400,000 veterans, many of whom have lasting physical and psychological wounds from the time they have spent in service.

And Tennesseans are heartbroken over the loss of one of our own, Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss, a patriotic American who represented the best of all of us in the August 26th
suicide bombing at Hamid Karzai International Airport. He made the ultimate sacrifice.

So how did we get here and how did we get to what has been a complete letdown to most Tennesseans? And I have got a few questions. These are yes-or-no questions, so quick answers are appreciated.

General Milley, were there options given for keeping American troops in Afghanistan, rather than the unconditional, chaotic withdrawal?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: You presented options and those options were declined.

General Milley: There were options presented and debated --

Senator Blackburn: Yes or no.

General Milley: -- and a decision was made.

Senator Blackburn: Yes or no is fine. Did you at any point create options for keeping Bagram open beyond July 2nd?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: Did you provide options for keeping Bagram open directly to the President?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: Had Bagram stayed open, would our support to the Afghan Air Force have been more effective in
your view?

General Milley: I am sorry, I did not catch the last part.

Senator Blackburn: If Bagram had stayed open, would our support to the Afghan Air Force have been more effective, in your view? Yes or no.

General Milley: Frankly, I am not sure on that one, because most of the Afghan Air Force was at different bases, specifically at HKIA.

Senator Blackburn: President Biden keeps calling it an extraordinary success. We have discussed some of this today. Is leaving Americans behind an extraordinary success in your view, Secretary Austin?

Secretary Austin: We are not leaving Americans behind.

Senator Blackburn: Yes or no is fine.

Is the killing of 13 American service men and women while trying to secure a chaotic evacuation of the President's own making an extraordinary success?

Secretary Austin: The loss of any civilian life is always tragic.

Senator Blackburn: Is the fact that we failed to evacuate most of our Afghan partners an extraordinary success, or the fact that we have Afghans bringing child brides, people who are hardly vetted, is that an extraordinary success?
Secretary Austin: Again, these are issues that we continue to work to get our American citizens out and the Afghans who helped us out.

Senator Blackburn: Let me move on. Per Article II of the Constitution, the President may require the opinion in writing of the principal officer in each of the Executive departments. Did the President ever require or request written recommendations related to the withdrawal of the Afghan forces? Yes or no. Secretary Austin, then General Milley, then General McKenzie. Yes or no.

Secretary Austin: I provided our input as a part of a policy process --

Senator Blackburn: In written form?

Secretary Austin: -- that that was very well and then deliberately run.

Senator Blackburn: We will note that you did not completely answer that.

General Milley, in written form?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: Would you make those available to us?

General Milley: I will make it available to the committee upon request in accordance with appropriate classifications.

Senator Blackburn: We will. We will do so.
General McKenzie, yes or no.

General McKenzie: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: And you will make those available?

General McKenzie: Based on guidance from the Secretary.

Senator Blackburn: Each of you had committed to make those available when you went through your confirmation processes. We will come back to you for those.

General Milley, yes or no to this. Did you talk to Bob Woodward or Robert Costa for their book, Peril?


Senator Blackburn: Did you talk to Carol Leonning and Philip Rucker for their book, I Alone Can I Fix It?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: Did you talk to Michael Bender for his book, Frankly, We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost? Yes or no.

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Blackburn: And were you accurately represented in these books?

General Milley: I have not read any of the books so I do not know. I have seen press reporting of it. I have not read the books.

Senator Blackburn: Let us have you read the books and then let us know if you are accurately presented and
portrayed.

General Milley: Absolutely. Happy to do that.

Chairman Reed: Senator Blackburn, we are adhering to the 5-minute rule.

Senator Blackburn: I yield back my time.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Senator Rosen, please.

Senator Rosen: Thank you, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe for holding today's very important hearing.

A critical part of this committee's oversight responsibilities, it is an opportunity for the American people to get answers about our withdrawal from Afghanistan and how we plan to counter terrorist threats in the future. I also want to sincerely thank the brave men and women, who served our country in Afghanistan, many who made the ultimate sacrifice, and, of course, their families as well.

Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, I appreciate you all being here to address lingering concerns we have about the last two decades of war generally, and the past two months in particular. You are all men of honor and integrity, who have served our country nobly, and I so look forward to your candid responses, to my questions, even if they require admitting that in some cases, serious mistakes were made.

Like all Senate offices, as the Taliban approached
Kabul and eventually took over the city and the country, my
team and I worked to help vulnerable individuals evacuate.
These were people who, in many cases, had the State
Department's approval to leave Afghanistan for the U.S. or a
third-party country, but due to crowds, Taliban checkpoints,
or a legitimate fear of being killed along the way, they
could just not physically get to a gate to present their
paperwork, no matter how many times they tried, or no matter
how long they waited. My office worked was CENTCOM and the
Afghanistan Task Force to try to coordinate opportunities
just to grab these people from the crowd so they could
present their paperwork and flee to safety, but
unfortunately, again, these efforts were to no avail.

As these individuals continue to wait for help that may
never come, I remain frustrated that the U.S. did not set up
a perimeter around Kabul, or at the very least create a safe
corridor for the S-1 visa holders to get to the airport for
their families' potential asylum seekers, who were
attempting to escape a near-certain death.

So continued support, General Milley. I appreciate the
State Department now taking the lead on evacuations, but
like our military, the State Department no longer has any
presence on the ground in Afghanistan. So I would like to
ask you, sir, does the U.S. military's recent experience
facilitating the evacuation from Kabul give you the
confidence that the Taliban will be honest brokers in working with our diplomats to help vulnerable Afghan nationals leave the country?

General Milley: I think that what we have seen so far, since the 31st, is some Americans have gotten out through diplomatic means, and they have reached safety through either overland routes or through aircraft. I do not know all the details, but I cannot imagine that did not happen without Taliban facilitation.

Senator Rosen: Well, we can get back to Afghan nationals helping them leave the country as well, those SIV holders and others who supported us. But Secretary Austin, the administration has said they will utilize every tool available to hold the Taliban accountable if they fail to meet their commitments, to provide safe passage for anyone who wants to leave the country. Certainly, we know there are economic levers, but can you elaborate on what the military tools are, and could there be a shared interest in targeting ISIS-K?

Secretary Austin: In terms of military tools, Senator, as you know, we have the ability to offer a range of options, depending on what, you know, the President's objectives are. So we can do most anything that is required of us, because we have substantial resources.

But in terms of our cooperation with the Taliban to
counter ISIS-K, I will not venture to make any comments on that. I would just say that we have coordinated some things that are very narrow in scope with them to get our people out, as you know, and to continue to further evacuate American citizens. But I do not think it is right to make assumptions to broader and bigger things from that coordination. They are still the Taliban.

Senator Rosen: Thank you. I would just like to, in the few seconds I have left and we can take these second round or off the record, future counterterrorism operations. We have to reorganize our counterterrorism capabilities and our assets in the region, of course, as we move to an over-the-horizon scenario.

Secretary Austin, General McKenzie, and we will take these in the second round, think about, I would like the answer to what is the plan for an enduring counterterrorism strategy that is going to be able to address and counter the influence of the violent extremist organizations in Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Rosen.

Senator Hawley, please.

Senator Hawley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just sum up where I understand that we are, based on what has been a fairly, extraordinary hearing.
Here is what I have learned so far. Number one, the President of the United States lied to the American people about the advice that you gave to him about the military judgment that you provided for him. I think you have all testified to that effect now, repeatedly.

Secondly, the State Department, and maybe the White House, appeared to have pushed back the evacuation to such a time that it became a catastrophe, apparently against your advice, although I would like to learn more about that.

And third, for some reason we still do not quite understand the Pentagon failed to plan for the potential collapse of the security forces or the collapse of the Afghan government, despite there being quite a lot of warnings -- Senator Kaine referred to this earlier -- quite a lot warning for really, frankly, years that the Afghan security forces were ill-equipped, ill-trained, and frankly, not up to the job. I do not understand any of that. I would like to explore those things with you in this round and the next.

But first before I do, Secretary Austin, I have to take issue with something you just said. I know this is an administration talking point. I have heard it out of the mouth of the Press Secretary and others. "We are not leaving Americans behind." That was your quote of just a minute ago. With all due respect, sir, you have left -- past tense
-- Americans behind. We have no presence any longer in Afghanistan. There were hundreds of -- and not just Americans generally, civilians you left behind, against the President's explicit commitment not to leave until all American citizens were out and to safety.

That is not what happened and now we have people who are desperately, frantically trying to get out of this country, coming to me, coming to members of this committee asking for help. They cannot get that help. They are stuck behind enemy lines. So please do not tell me that we are not leaving Americans behind. You left them behind, Joe Biden left them behind, and frankly, it was a disgrace.

Let me ask you this though.

Secretary Austin: Senator, thanks for your help in continuing to help get American citizens and Afghans who have helped us out of the country, but as you have seen, we have continued to facilitate --

Senator Hawley: Well actually, I did not ask you a question, but since you seem to want to address the issue, so since you do, is it not true that you left Americans behind on August 31st?

Secretary Austin: There are Americans, there were Americans that were still in Afghanistan, and still are.

Senator Hawley: Yes.

Secretary Austin: We continue to work --
Senator Hawley: Correct.

Secretary Austin: -- to try to get those Americans out.

Senator Hawley: Yeah, that is a yes. Let us not repeat, please, the frankly falsehood that we did not leave Americans behind.

Let me ask you this. Secretary Austin, you have alluded to several times the fact that the military was ready -- you say this in your prepared remarks -- by late April. You say military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. You refer later in your remarks to the fact that you were waiting for the State Department to make a decision about evacuations. NBC News is reporting this morning that the military wanted to begin evacuations earlier, but the State Department and the White House intervened and by May 8th said, "No, we are delaying the evacuations of our civilians." Can you just help us get to the truth here? Was it your judgment and opinion that the evacuations of civilians should have begun before the middle of August?

Secretary Austin: We provided our input to the State Department and again, it is the call of the State Department to --

Senator Hawley: I understand that. I understand that, Mr. Secretary. I am asking for what your judgment was, and
I am asking specifically about your testimony that in April you develop evacuation scenarios, and this is reported by multiple sources this morning in the news. So I just wonder, as of last April was it your opinion that the evacuations of civilians should begin, should have begun before, should begin earlier than they did?

Secretary Austin: We provided input to try to get out as many Afghans who have helped us along the way as early as possible, but again, the State Department made its decisions based upon the fact that even President Ghani had engaged them and said, "Hey, we are very concerned about the mass exodus of civilians from the country."

Senator Hawley: General Milley, let me direct this to you. Did you ever advise, in the interagency process, that the rapid withdrawal timeline that the White House and Pentagon signed off on, General Miller proposed effectively getting us to zero by the middle of July, that that would negatively impact any effort to get out our civilians? In other words, if we had drawn down to zero by July, if we then had a civilian evacuation order, we would be in a lot of trouble. Did you ever advise to that effect during the interagency process? Did you warn about that possibly of drawing down so quickly before a civilian evacuation was underway?

General Milley: Yeah, but it is more complicated than
that. The drawdown of the forces under Miller, those guys are advisors. They are not the NEO kind of guys. The NEO troops are Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Purpose MAGTF, and elements of the 82nd Airborne Division. That is what you need in order to do the NEO.

Those are the plans, I believe, that the Secretary is referring to that were developed early on, and there are specific triggers that are required in the State Department calls "the time of the NEO." The Secretary in fact on the 12th of August, started pushing forward forces in orders and on the 14th, the ambassador, Ambassador Wilson, called the NEO.

Should that have been called earlier? I think that is an open question that needs further exploration based on a series of meetings. But the April piece and the drawdown of the advisors, that is a separate and distinct task than the retrograde of those forces. Those 2,500 advisors were not the guys bringing out the American citizens anyway. Those were the advisors to the Afghan Security Forces.

There were concerns that we raised throughout the interagency that when those advisors, if the advisors were to stay then there is a possibility that, you know, the Afghan Security Forces would hang in there. We all knew that when we pulled the advisors out, when we pulled the money out, that at some point in the future, most said it
was in the fall, that the Afghan Security Forces were going to fracture and the government would collapse.

The speed at which that happens in August is a different animal. The advisors are already gone by mid-July. There is still a government. There is still an Afghan army. And the assumption was that it would remain and the mission was to keep the embassy open, secure the embassy, transition that off to contractors, and then all the military would be out and it would be a diplomatic mission and there would be money in the over-the-horizon fund.

None of that happened because that army and that government collapsed very rapidly. As soon as those indicators came of fracture, Secretary Austin and others throughout the government executed and implemented a NEO plan for which there was contingencies that were built, that was a plan for a rapid collapse, and that was the NEO plan that General McKenzie had come up with, and that is what was executed. That is why those 6,000 troops could deploy as rapidly as they did. That is why all those aircraft showed up. That was not done without planning. That was done with planning and that was done -- from an operational and tactical standpoint that was a success. Strategically -- strategically, the war is lost. The enemy is in Kabul. So you have a strategic failure while you simultaneously have an operational and tactical success by the soldiers on the
ground.

So I think we are conflating some things that we need to separate in this after-action review process so that we clearly understand what exactly happened.

And I am sorry for taking all that time, but I thought it was necessary.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Hawley.

Senator Kelly, please.

Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, let me begin by expressing my gratitude to each of the over 800,000 Americans, many of them Arizonans, who served in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, and to their families. I also commend our servicemembers' support of one of the largest airlifts in our country's history. We will never forget the achievements of the men and women who worked 24/7 in Kabul, managed impossible conditions on the ground, and above all, those who made the ultimate sacrifice protecting innocent civilians. One hundred twenty-four thousand people are safe today because of American troops and diplomats.

Still, after decades of conflict, 2,500 American soldiers killed, and billions invested in security cooperation, the American people deserve to know why the Afghan government and security forces collapsed in a matter of days and how there was a failure to prepare for this
scenario and ensure that our people were out of the country before it fell. And I think we have established here that the withdrawal and evacuation did not account for real-world conditions and that the intelligence was flawed.

The United States wields incredible power as a global leader, and our accountability must match our influence. For our own national security and for each of those who served in Afghanistan during our longest war, we must understand what happened, but also look forward to ensure that our posture allows us to provide for our national security and prevent Afghanistan's use as a base for terrorist activity.

So I want to transition and look forward and not ask you questions that you have already answered. General McKenzie, America's armed forces have been on the front lines fighting terrorists for the past 20 years. During this time, Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations have been degraded. While our military presence in Afghanistan has ended, our commitment to fighting terrorism has not. With our withdrawal complete, the Afghan government collapsed, and the Taliban seeking to fill the power vacuum left behind, how is Central Command postured to prevent terrorist organizations from gaining strength in the region?

General McKenzie: Senator, probably the details of this would be best left to the classified session which we
will have later this afternoon. But I would tell you that I have today headquarters that has the ability to look into Afghanistan, albeit limited, and we have the ability to fuse the different disciplines of intelligence to look particularly at ISIS-K and Al Qaeda. We are still refining that, the best practices on that, but we do have a way forward. I have told this committee before it is very hard to do this. It is not impossible to do this.

Senator Kelly: Well I am looking forward to seeing those details in the closed hearing. Are you confident that we can deny organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS the ability to use Afghanistan as a launchpad for terrorist activity?

General McKenzie: I think that is yet to be seen. I think, you know, we are still seeing how Al Qaeda and ISIS are configuring themselves against the Taliban. We are still seeing what the Taliban is going to do. So I think it is early. I would not say I am confident that that is going to be on the ground yet. We could get to that point, but I do not yet have that level of confidence.

Senator Kelly: And you might have to share this in the closed hearing, but do you have the resources necessary to accomplish this, even as our national security pivots towards great power or near-peer threats like China and Russia that are seeking to expand their influence and compete with our military?
General McKenzie: Senator, I will just say I am in a constant dialogue with the Secretary about requirements in CENTCOM and I will give you some more details in the closed session.

Senator Kelly: Good. Well, thank you. And I know you cannot go into much detail about the analysis that led to the August 28th drone strike in Kabul in this open setting, but I would like to note my serious concerns and give you the opportunity to make any comment on how the American people can know that the military will be able to adequately assess targets before conducting future strikes and operations, even as we have even fewer local intelligence and surveillance resources to leverage.

General McKenzie: Senator, again the matter is under investigation, but what I can tell you broadly and to restate some things I have said earlier, I am responsible for that. It happened in my area of responsibility so I am the responsible officer for that strike. Moreover, I was under no pressure and no one in my chain of command below me was under any pressure to take that strike. We acted based on the intelligence read that we saw on the ground. We acted several times on intelligence that we saw and we were successful in other occasions in preventing attacks. This time, tragically, we were wrong and you are right to note that as we go forward in our ability to create what we call
the ecosystem that allows you to see what is going on on the ground and put all that together, it is going to get a lot harder to do that, particularly in places like Afghanistan, but I can share a little more with you later.

Senator Kelly: Well thank you, General.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Kelly.

Senator Tuberville, please.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thanks for being here today. You are part of the most powerful military in the world. I will ask all three of you this question, and I know how you are going to answer this. Is this any enemy that could defeat the strongest force in the world, the United States military? And I know all of you are going to say no.

So Secretary Austin, since your confirmation in January, have you been denied any resources with regards to Afghanistan? I think I heard you say earlier you got everything you needed.

Secretary Austin: That is correct, Senator.

Senator Tuberville: Yeah, thank you. On August 18th, you were asked why the U.S. would not rescue Americans who could not reach the airport. You responded, quote, "I do not have the capability to go out and extend operations currently in Kabul," end quote. We saw the Germans, the French, the British rescue citizens in Kabul, but from this
administration, which commands the world's most lethal fighting force, we saw nothing but blame, weakness, and our American citizens were left to fend for themselves. Our fighting men and women have the courage, training, and discipline to defeat the enemy any time anywhere and there are people all over this country wondering why in the heck would we let our allies get their people and we did not get ours?

I want to thank all of the hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families who sacrificed over the past 20 years, and I truly believe our soldiers did not fail us. A lot of our leadership did.

Secretary Austin, before President Biden even took office, you thought we needed to leave Afghanistan. On January 19th, you told my colleague Senator Shaheen, quote, "I think this conflict needs to come to an end and we need to see an agreement reached and in accordance with what the President-elect wants to see," end quote. You testified that General Milley and General Miller had adequate resources to secure Afghanistan at a troop level of 2,500. But you told Senator Hawley you wanted to, quote, "assess the situation to make recommendations to the President," end quote.

I know how you are going to answer this. Did you give advice to the President on the withdrawal from Afghanistan
without conditions, or is that the direction you got from him?

Secretary Austin: Again, my recommendations were a part of a very deliberate process where we presented a range of options for the President.

And if I could, Senator, I would like to go back to the first comment that you made about the question that I answered for a reporter who asked, "Why don't you go out and establish cordons and create safe passageways for our people just to move into the airport?"

At that point early on in our deployment, we only had less than 4,000, or about 4,000 troops to secure and defend the airport. And our troop presence continued to grow as we flowed people in. We used a number of innovative approaches to go out and pick up and facilitate the entry of American citizens into the airport as the situation continued to develop. But I just wanted to give you a little context for that answer.

Senator Tuberville: Well, thank you. And, you know, we are all talking about did President Biden know all this and, you know, my question about withdrawal. You know, basically there are two options. I can answer that. Either the President was given bad military advice or he gave his military the terrible decision and direction to surrender Afghanistan without condition.
I will have some more here in a few minutes. I just wanted to make a couple of statements. You know, the American people, especially people I represent, they are disgusted by how this U.S. surrender happened in Afghanistan, and I know you have heard that yourselves, all three of you. America's veterans are pissed off that their service was squandered, America's allies are in disbelief, but America's enemies are delighted. The Taliban are euphoric that the job that happened with our military given the orders to retreat. President Biden abandoned our allies who fought alongside us for 20 years. This administration left American citizens behind enemy lines. We left $85 billion worth of equipment that the American taxpayers paid for. And this administration created a sanctuary for terrorists to plot against United States for years and years to come. It is just absolutely amazing that we did this.

So I will end it there. I know these guys need to probably take a break, but we will see you after the break.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield my time.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Tuberville.

We have completed the first round, and as I indicated we will break at 1:00 for lunch, so we will begin the second round.

Secretary Austin, you said in response to Senator
Warren that if we stayed past August 31st, we would certainly be back at war with the Taliban and that you would have to reinforce yourself. Do I interpret your testimony to mean that staying at 2,500 past the 31st was not sustainable at an acceptable level of risk to American personnel and that we would be seeing today casualties which could be accumulating at an unacceptable rate?

Secretary Austin: Chairman, I think the point that is been left out of a lot of the conversation is that, you know, had we stayed past that date that was agreed upon early on, that the Taliban would begin to attack us, attack our forces there. And we would have to make some decisions on how to reinforce our forces so that we could continue to operate and that would include quite possibly increasing the force there.

Chairman Reed: Now, in the Doha agreement, President Trump agreed to leave with certain conditions on May 1st. Those conditions have been testified by the panel that were really never achieved, never challenged by the Trump administration. Would you consider that an abdication of or a surrender of that agreement?

Secretary Austin: I certainly believe that the conditions were preset, and again, we met -- lived up to all the things that we were obliged to do. We did not attack them and we drew down our forces. But the Taliban, the only
thing that they lived up to was that they did not attack us.

Chairman Reed: And we saw a great deal of difficulty in meeting the deadline which was August 31st. Would it appear to you that a May 1st deadline, as President Trump imagined, would have caused more complications in terms of getting our equipment out, getting our personnel out, identifying Americans who were eligible to leave and getting them the paperwork, since you would be doing it at a much shorter time frame?

Secretary Austin: Yeah, I do not think that would have been feasible to do that in an orderly fashion, Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much. General Milley, regardless of whether the Taliban had met the conditions required under Doha, were you not already in a trajectory to go to zero forces, as I said, by May 1st, as required by the agreement when the President took over, so that you actually would have accelerated the process of withdrawal and complicated it more, similar to my question to the Secretary?

General Milley: Yes, we were actually given an order to go to zero by 15 January which was changed to go to 2,500 by 15 January and then taken down to zero by 1 May, depending on the decisions of the new administration.

Chairman Reed: Thank you. And General Milley, your prepared testimony indicates that the Biden administration,
through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April, in which the views of senior military leadership were all given serious consideration by the administration. You also testified that you received an order in November 2020, you just referred to, to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. Was that November order similarly informed by a rigorous interagency review?

General Milley: No.

Chairman Reed: So that was basically, I think --

General Milley: Secretary Esper submitted his recommendations in a written format on the 9th, the day that he was relieved, and 48 hours later we received a written order to go to zero by 15 January.

Chairman Reed: I think -- General McKenzie, again, your advice with regard to maintaining 2,500 troops has been reiterated repeatedly, but you also recommended in the fall of 2020, 4,000 troops. Was that correct?

General McKenzie: Sir, that is correct. I recommended that in the fall of 2020, when we were having deliberations, I recommended that we hold at that level.

Chairman Reed: And that was rejected by the Trump administration?

General McKenzie: Sir, it was.
Chairman Reed: And there was no recriminations against you or anyone else? That was the President of the United States making a decision based on his view of the world?

General McKenzie: In so far as I know, that is correct, sir.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much.

And again, adhering to the 5-minute rule, I will cede back 8 seconds to Ranking Member Inhofe.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. One good way to judge any President's decision is whether it has made American people safer. Generals, I will ask all three of you. You have both noted that the Taliban has not severed its relationship with Al Qaeda. President Biden stated on July 8th that Al Qaeda is gone from Afghanistan. I would ask you, is Al Qaeda gone from Afghanistan? Generals?

Secretary Austin: Senator, I think there are remnants of Al Qaeda still in Afghanistan.

Senator Inhofe: Does anyone believe that Al Qaeda is gone from Afghanistan?

President Biden stated at the United Nations recently that this nation is no longer at war. Is it your personal view that Al Qaeda is no longer at war with us?

Start at the right, General.

General Milley: I believe Al Qaeda is in Afghanistan. I believe they have aspirations to reconstitute, and if they
develop the capability I believe that they have aspirations to strike. It is too early in the process right now, Senator, to determine the capability, but I do believe they --

Senator Inhofe: Do you believe the personal view that was stated, that Al Qaeda is no longer at war with us right now? Okay.

General Milley: I think Al Qaeda is at war with the United States, still, and never has not --

Senator Inhofe: Thank you. Does the withdrawal from Afghanistan increase or decrease the likelihood of an Al Qaeda or ISIS attack on the U.S. homeland?

General Milley: You asking me, Senator?

Senator Inhofe: Sure.

General Milley: My view is that it makes it much more difficult for us to conduct intelligence surveillance reconnaissance find-fix functions and then we can strike almost from anywhere in the world, but the find-fix function, it is more difficult. We can still do it. It is not impossible --

Senator Inhofe: Okay.

General Milley: -- but it will make it more difficult.

Senator Inhofe: General Milley and General McKenzie, we entrusted security to the Taliban, but they failed to prevent the ISIS-K suicide bomber on August 26th. We do not
really even know if they wanted to prevent it. Now, we are
in the same situation, trusting the Taliban to prevent
attacks. The Senator from Missouri brought up and talked
again about the fact of what is the situation right now, and
I think we do not really after this several hours, have an
answer to that.

I do want to bring something in the record that I do
not think has been put in the record already, and that is
the conditions under which the previous President, after
making the statement about the Taliban, not only did the
previous President have conditions, and the conditions
included having a presence, a military presence, but they
also had four other things that were stated that was
conditions. One, to prevent Al Qaeda and the terrorists
from threatening the United States from Afghanistan.
Secondly, to make statements and commandments to its members
against threatening the United States. Thirdly, deny
residence and visas and passports to those threatening the
United States' allies. And fourthly, begin negotiations with
the Afghan government.

Those were conditions that were made at that time, and
this has been stated several times. It is my opinion and
the opinion of many who have testified at this hearing that
there were no conditions. I believe that is the case.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Shaheen, please.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Secretary Austin, I am going to go back to my question earlier about the records that Special Immigrant Visa applicants really need in order to qualify for those visas, and there has not been a real -- a good process through DoD to ensure that they get those records. Is that something that the Department is looking at, and would you be willing to work with this committee or others to see if we could set up a process that would ensure that those folks who worked with our men and women actually have the documentation they need to show that? I know that one of the challenges is that many of those records have been destroyed, but I would hope there is some way that we can ensure that those people are able to get the documentation they need to come to this country.

Secretary Austin: Senator, let me first say that I absolutely agree with you that the process is onerous and that we need to do something to make it easier for those people that have helped us to prove that they have in fact worked with us before.

One of my departments in defense is working to try to find ways to propose ways to truncate the process or come up with alternative means to demonstrate that they have worked
with us in the past. And to answer your question, we would absolutely welcome working with the committee on this.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you. I assume we should contact your office to find who the appropriate contact person would be.

Secretary Austin: Well we will contact your office and let you know who he is, Senator.

Senator Shaheen: Okay. General Milley and General McKenzie, it is long been publicly reported that the Pakistani intelligence services have maintained a close and continuing relationship with the Taliban. Do we expect that relationship to become more complicated now that the Taliban is in power? Are we concerned about Pakistan's nuclear weapons and the potential that terrorist groups might be able to get access to those weapons? Can you talk a little bit about how you see the relationship with Pakistan and the Taliban playing out and the challenges that presents for the United States?

I will start. Which one of you would like to answer that?

General Milley: Go ahead, Frank. I will follow you.

General McKenzie: Senator, some of this we can talk in a little bit more detail in the closed session.

Senator Shaheen: Okay.

General McKenzie: But I would tell you that I believe
Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is going to become significantly more complicated as a result of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. In fact, they are going to see pressure moving into Pakistan from Afghanistan in ways that they have been able to deflect before because of the pressure that we and our allies had then. So I think that is a significant problem that Pakistan is going to face. I would like to talk about their special weapons perhaps in the closed session.

As has been noted by several people, in order to get to Afghanistan, you have to fly over Pakistan unless you come from the north and that is a subject of continuing deliberation with Pakistan, and I can shed a little bit more light on that going forward. But they have actually, over the last 20 years, we have been able to use what we call the "air boulevard" to go in over western Pakistan and that is become something that is vital to us, as well as certain landlines of communication. And we will be working with the Pakistanis in the days and weeks ahead to look at what that relationship is going to look like in the future. But I can again talk a little more in the closed session.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you. General Milley, did you want to add to that?

General Milley: Yeah, I have had several conversations over the years and also recently with Pakistanis and there
is no question in my mind that the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is going to become increasingly complex. There are a whole series of issues there that have national security interest for the United States that are best handled in a different session.

Senator Shaheen: Okay. Thank you. Well can you, and Secretary Austin, can you talk about what we are doing to work with our European counterparts who, based on conversations that I have had with some of the civilians from our NATO allies, there was some frustration about the communication that led to the withdrawal and the evacuation? Are we working to rebuild those relationships? Do you see that frustration reflected in the military relationships that you have?

Secretary Austin: I do not, Senator, and, you know, I understand that there will be concerns. But as I engage my counterparts, they are very willing to work with us. And, you know, I do not want us to sound Pollyannish on this, but they have been very, very thankful for the fact that we helped them get their people out and we helped them get thousands of evacuees out that had worked for them, because of what we did.

So I think, as I look at the major players, that there is still a strong willingness to work with us, and relationships are things that we just have to continue to
work at.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

Before I recognize Senator Wicker, at the conclusion of Senator Wicker's questioning we will adjourn, as I said, the 1:00 adjournment, a little early, a couple of minutes, and then we will promptly return at 1:30.

Senator Wicker, please.

Senator Wicker: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, let me ask you, as I understand it one of our primary missions in Afghanistan was training the Afghan armed forces. We also equipped them with approximately $83 billion in military equipment, we always provided them extensive support in the form of intelligence and surveillance, air support, logistics, including contract aircraft maintenance, and special operation advisors.

General McKenzie, were the Afghan armed forces ever trained to fight the Taliban without U.S. support of any kind?

General McKenzie: So, Senator, some elements of the Afghan military could fight very well without our support, some of the elite commando units. Obviously, we know from the example that we saw in August that other elements were unable to do that. And, in fact, as we began to withdraw
our support during the withdrawal operation we began to see
the effects of that. You know, we shift to an over-the-
horizon model for aviation maintenance. That is difficult
to do --

Senator Wicker: It really is difficult to do.

General McKenzie: -- with a technologically literate
population. It is harder to do in Afghanistan. We were
having some small success with that, and actually Afghan Air
Force continued to fly strikes up until well into August.
But they were, nonetheless, on a general negative attrition.

Senator Wicker: What percentage would you term as
elite?

General McKenzie: Oh, I would say less than 5 percent.

Senator Wicker: Okay. And so really, for 95 percent
it was unrealistic for us to expect them to be able to fight
alone at that point, in July and August of this year.

General McKenzie: The combination of the obvious
withdrawal of the U.S., which had a profound psychological
effect -- because I think in the mind of the soldier, you
know, the Taliban and the Afghan military, they have the
same DNA, so it comes down to the fighting heart of the man
on the ground. And I think that the Taliban were heartened
by what they saw happen at Doha and what followed, and our
eventual decision to get out by a certain date. I think the
Afghans were very weakened by that, morally and spiritually.
Senator Wicker: Thank you. Good. Let me rush on then to try to get another question in.

Secretary Austin, the reports in The New York Times are that you warned the President all the way back in March that there could be dire outcomes in which the Afghan military folded in an aggressive advance by the Taliban, and that you drew comparisons between that and our experience in Iraq, where disaster unfolded and we were required to go back in. According to the same article, you warned the President, we have seen this movie before.

I know you do not want to tell us what advice you give to the President. Was that your feeling, and did you make known the comparison with Iraq, and did you feel we had seen this movie before?

Secretary Austin: Thanks, Senator. Again, you are right. I will keep my conversations, my recommendations to the President confidential. But I would say that as we worked our way through the process here we laid out, you know, all potential consequences that could result from any course of action that we took, and we were clear-eyed about that.

And so, you know, there were inputs coming --

Senator Wicker: With regard to Iraq -- that is my question, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary Austin: Well certainly, then we get back to
the specific conversation that I would have had. But it is
clear that I have a history with Iraq. It is clear that I
have learned, you know, there are lessons to be learned from
Iraq. And, you know, I would certainly --

Senator Wicker: Was it your feeling that we had seen
this movie before?

Secretary Austin: Well, there are certainly some of
the same kinds of things could transpire as we look to
transition.

Senator Wicker: Okay. Speaking of things transpiring,
one was that we had to go back into Iraq. Secretary Austin,
does the Department of Defense have plans in place to
redeploy U.S. combat troops to Afghanistan in the event that
our intelligence estimates proved true and our homeland
security is, in fact, threatened?

Secretary Austin: Currently, the President's decision,
Senator, as you know, is that, you know, we have left Iraq --
-- excuse me, Afghanistan. And so we have not been tasked to
construct any plans to go back into Afghanistan.

Senator Wicker: So there are no such plans in place.

Secretary Austin: No.

Senator Wicker: General Milley, of the conditions that
were required of the Taliban in the agreement only one was
met. Is that correct?

General Milley: That is correct. The condition was,
the one that was met was the most important one, which was
do not attack us or the coalition forces, and they did not.

    Senator Wicker: And so President Trump made a
    recommendation, gave an order that we leave on 15 January.
    
    General Milley: Correct.
    
    Senator Wicker: And the advice came back from the
    military strongly that that was not a good idea. Based on
    that advice, the President rescinded that order. Is that
    correct?
    
    General Milley: That is correct.
    
    Senator Wicker: And none of those conditions that
    President Trump based his decision on had been met in 2021,
    when President Biden made, in fact, the same decision. Is
    that correct?
    
    General Milley: Those conditions were never met. That
    is correct.
    
    Senator Wicker: All right. Thank you very much.
    
    Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
    
    Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Wicker.
    
    At this point the committee will stand in recess until
    1:30. Thank you very much.
    
    [Recess.]
    
    Chairman Reed: Let me the call the hearing back to
    order, and I will recognize Senator Blumenthal for a second
    round.
Senator Blumenthal: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your testimony earlier and your continuing testimony now.

Secretary Austin, I would like to go back to the topic of my first round of questions, the evacuation of Americans and our Afghan allies, translators, guards, and security officers who sided with us, put their lives on the line, and who now literally have targets on their backs, along with their families. I asked you who, at the Department of Defense, is in charge of our efforts to evacuate them and, with all due respect, you did not give me the name of the person at DoD leading these efforts but you pointed me instead to the Department of State and interagency efforts.

I have been involved in working on this evacuation issue and on the refugee question for some time, along with coalition of veterans, NGOs, concerned citizens, and some government officials, and the frustration I have encountered is that I have been directed, repeatedly and constantly, from one agency to another. DoD sent me to State, who then sent me to the National Security Council, who would send me back to the Department of Defense. It was a Kafka-esque exercise in bureaucracy and red tape with no clear lines of authority while lives were on the line. And this private network or coalition was doing the work that the United States government would have done if it had maintained a
presence there, but it had none, and that is why, at Mazar
and Kabul it was doing that work.

So I am concerned that despite this committee's efforts
to call attention to the looming crisis in the evacuation,
we were unprepared. And as I mentioned earlier, a number of
members of this committee went to the White House in the
spring, asked for a plan, a strategy, and none was
forthcoming. I am concerned we will repeat that mistake as
we work to avoid a humanitarian crisis during refugee
resettlement, and that will be a huge undertaking, with
hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees who are literally
escaping torture and murder coming to this country, many of
them with nothing more than the clothes they had when they
left.

We currently have tens of thousands of those
individuals on your bases, Department of Defense bases, both
overseas at Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and
domestically, as you well know, Virginia, Wisconsin, New
Mexico, and Texas. This is a Department of Defense
responsibility. It is a moral imperative. These people
risked their lives for us, as you know on this panel better
than any of us, and it will be shared with the State
Department, the Department of Homeland Security, Health and
Human Services, numerous other Federal agencies. And we own
it. It is our responsibility.
I am a United States Senator and I continue to have difficulty ascertaining who is in charge. I think we need an evacuation czar, a point person on refugee resettlement, whose mission is public, and who is known to the American people to be in charge here.

So I would like to ask you, how do we ensure that there is an official in charge, a point person, someone to ensure that Afghan children receive schooling, that there are language services that they received medical care, and can you give us an update on what the status is?

Secretary Austin: Well again, Senator, thanks for your sustained interest and for all that you have done to continue to help get people out. And there is a process. There is a mechanism. State has responsibility, as you know, for being the lead to continue to evacuate American citizens and SIV applicants out of Afghanistan. That process is being run by Ambassador Bass as an interagency effort, and we contribute to that with a dedicated general officer as a part of that.

In terms of the evacuees or the guests that are being housed on our installations, Department of Defense has responsibility for housing them and for their care and feeding. In terms of integrating them into our society, DHS and State really are leading that process. And I agree with you, it is very important that we do this the right way, and
it is very important that we do this carefully but as rapidly as possible, because we do have, you know, children that need education and all those kinds of things.

In the meantime, DoD will remain sighted on making sure that they receive the very best care and we provide for their safety as well.

Senator Blumenthal: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Senator Fischer, please.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General McKenzie, at the beginning of this hearing Chairman Reed made a comment about the goal and mission that we are going to be looking at now in the future is to assure that Afghanistan never again can be used as a base for terrorists. And as we look at that goal, as we look at that mission, I think we need to be honest with the American people on how that will be accomplished. I do not think the American people should be misled about capabilities that are needed to make sure that we can conduct over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations.

President Biden has pointed out that we conduct over-the-horizon CT operations to go after terrorists in other places in the world, including ISIS in Syria, Al Qaeda in Yemen, al-Shabab in Somalia.

General McKenzie, in those three locations we have either a U.S. presence or reliable partners on the ground.
Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, that is correct.

Senator Fischer: And in those three locations, do we have strike assets or basing agreements in nearby countries?

General McKenzie: At the level of this briefing, yes, we do.

Senator Fischer: General McKenzie, when the Department developed its initial plans for an over-the-horizon approach to counterterrorism in Afghanistan, did those plans assume that the Afghan Security Forces would serve as our partner on the ground?

General McKenzie: So we developed plans that were neutral on that. We developed a spectrum of options, ranging from we would have robust help from some future government in Afghanistan to a situation, which is what we have now, where we would have no help from the government of Afghanistan. So we developed options across that entire span of future possibilities.

Senator Fischer: But as we developed the options, you developed the options and the reality is now that we did not see this collapse coming so quickly then we do not have partners on the ground. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: We always had a -- one of the options for CT in Afghanistan would be that we would be at a state where there would be no diplomatic presence there and
there would be no help from the government of Afghanistan.

So from the beginning we always saw that as one of the possible futures.

Senator Fischer: And that is the situation we are in right now?

General McKenzie: That is correct.

Senator Fischer: You stated that during the evacuation we developed a pragmatic relationship with the Taliban, but you are not saying we should consider the Taliban to be a reliable partner, by any means, are you?

General McKenzie: I do not trust the Taliban. I do not consider the Taliban to be a reliable partner. And any time you deal with the Taliban you have to look at what they do and not what they say.

Senator Fischer: General McKenzie, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia all border an ocean or a sea and we can use carriers or other sea-based assets to conduct CT operations. Afghanistan, however, is a landlocked country, so we cannot use our sea-based assets in the same way. Our nearest strike base, or our nearest base in Qatar is about 1,600 miles away from northern Afghanistan, so our strike assets are significantly further from potential targets than they are in other operating locations.

Is it fair to say that it is more difficult to hit targets that are further away from where the strike asset is
based?

General McKenzie: Senator, in general that is a factor, but I would tell you because of our ability to refuel aircraft, to position -- for example, during the withdrawal we positioned a carrier off the Makran coast of Pakistan, which shortened the range considerably. So there are ways to get to that finished solution.

Senator, if I could just add, it is not the finished part of the problem that is the most difficult part of the problem. It is the finding and fixing the target where we have run into great difficulties, particularly associated with Afghanistan, because of, as you noted, it is a landlocked location, it is a great range from our bases. And while we do have platforms that can fly in there, it eats up a lot of time and a lot of platforms to conduct that mission. That is why I said from the beginning, it is hard to do, very hard to do. It is not impossible to do. But we can talk more about it in the closed session.

Senator Fischer: Right, and it is hard because of a lack of partners on the ground?

General McKenzie: That is a significant factor that you look at when you look at any CT operation of this specter.

Senator Fischer: To even reach Afghanistan, our strike assets, they have to fly over other countries. So without
an agreement from central Asian nations north of Afghanistan
is it accurate that we are reliant on the continued use of
Pakistani air space for our over-the-horizon strategy?

General McKenzie: Senator, you are correct.

Senator Fischer: And that is not a sure thing for the
future. Correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, I would not predict the
future. I know they were very supportive during the last
phase of our engagement in Afghanistan. I think we are now
talking to them at various levels about how we might
maintain the ability to do that in the future, but I would
not want to get out ahead of the Department, the Secretary,
and the policy people on this.

Senator Fischer: But they also have a strong
relationship with the Taliban. Would you consider that that
is going to grow?

General McKenzie: I would consider that they are going
to be very conflicted about this, as they have been for the
last 20 years.

Senator Fischer: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Fischer.

Senator Kaine, please.

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the
witnesses.

I guess I will direct this to Secretary Austin. What is
the administration's current best estimate of the number of Americans that are in Afghanistan?

Secretary Austin: Senator, according to State there are currently fewer than 100 American citizens who want to depart and are ready to leave. We got out 21 American citizens today, along with their family members, and we will continue to work this, as you have heard us say earlier.

The numbers fluctuate daily because more people come to light as time goes by and they see opportunities to safely leave, and so this has been a dynamic process. But again, we will stay focused on this.

Senator Kaine: I understand that. I am aware that you had success in getting Americans out because I have advocated on behalf of some of them and I have seen the results of your effort, and I know you will continue that.

If I remember correctly, there started to be communiques to Americans in Afghanistan that they might possibly consider returning to the United States as early as March. Is that correct?

Secretary Austin: I do not have knowledge of those communiques.

Senator Kaine: I think that may be from a foreign relations, State Department standpoint. Obviously, you cannot bring folks home who do not want to come home, but the number that you are currently looking, and I understand
that it changes, who want to come home is now less than 100, and I trust that you will continue to be diligent about that.

To the question that I posed in my first round of questions -- and, General McKenzie, I would like to start with you -- all three of you are leaders but you also have on-the-ground experience, and I know you have a deep connection to Afghanistan and people that you fought together with and your partners and colleagues there, as well as the Americans who sacrificed so bravely. And for the purposes of the committee, we really want to dig into this question about why did the security force and government fail so quickly? Because it bears upon future train-and-assist efforts or future humanitarian efforts.

Beginning with you, General McKenzie, what are your own thoughts about the sped of the collapse of both the military and civilian government?

General McKenzie: So, Senator, I believe that the collapse of the military and the government are completely linked. You cannot consider one without looking at the other. And I believe probably the primary accelerant to -- I will take the military side first -- the primary accelerant to lowering moral and general efficiency of the Afghan military was what they saw coming in the heels of the Doha agreement, what they believed was forced upon them.
And so I think that had a negative effect.

Plus as we get closer to the date that we are leaving, the clear vision that the United States is going to leave, and we are going to apply a system of, at best, partial remedies, from their perspective, to continue the maintenance of not only the main force, the conventional force on the ground, but also the really high-priority items like their air force. And as I have noted before, we had an over-the-horizon solution to do that. It was not a perfect solution but it was our best attempt to do that. So I think that affected the military.

But I would tell you what I think -- the DNA of those Afghan soldiers is the same DNA the Taliban had, and the Taliban fought pretty hard. And so I think it comes down to the will to combat and fighting spirit, and I think that is where you get the link to the government of Afghanistan. And when your president leaves suddenly in the middle of a campaign for the capital, I think that finishes any chance at all you might have had of making a stand there.

And, you know, there were signals before then of disaffection and fractures in the Afghan government -- you know, probably better people than me to talk about that -- but I think all those came together and had a very powerful negative synergy towards the end.

And this is not new. We have been able to see it for
years. But you know, Senator, one point I would make is, this is not inherently a military problem. There are larger factors here than just the U.S. military and what we did or did not do training the Afghans. So I will pause there.

Senator Kaine: To your last point, of the two points you made, you had the best fighting force in the world. But if they do not have confidence in their military or political leadership it is hard for them to put it all on the line for a leadership if they lack confidence in the leadership.

To Secretary Austin or General Milley, any additional thoughts?

Secretary Austin: The three choices that you laid for us was, your questions were was it because of insufficient training, was it because the troops were demoralized, or was it because we wanted thing for them more than they wanted it for themselves. I would agree with General McKenzie that, you know, the Doha agreement had a significant impact on the morale of the troops, but I would say that is compounded by weak leadership, corruption in the government, and, you know, the fact that, you know, the Taliban made a concerted effort to really reach out to provincial leaders and convince them that the Taliban was going to be in charge so they might as well side up with them early on.

Senator Kaine: My time has expired. I yield back.
Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Caine.

Senator Cotton, please.

Senator Cotton: General Milley, in the final two pages of your written statement you lay out some detailed circumstances of your phone calls with the Chinese counterparts on October 30, 2020, and January 8, 2021. You also say you would be happy to make available various documents. I want to ask for three sets of documents, if we can get them. I think the first two should be fairly straightforward. One, could we get the list of people who joined you on those calls, by name and by title?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Cotton: U.S. officials.

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Cotton: Two, could we get a list of similar calls you have made to your military counterparts around the world from, say, September 1, 2020, to January 20, 2021?

General Milley: Sure. Yes.

Senator Cotton: Again, I think there should not be an issue, have any classified information.

Third, you mentioned in that written statement that shortly after those two phone calls with General Li you circulated readouts within the Pentagon and inside the interagency partners you have. Could we get those readouts
as well?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Cotton: Secretary Austin, could I get your commitment that you will work with General Milley and his team to get that to us, both as quickly as possible and without unnecessary classification?

Secretary Austin: Yes, Senator.

Senator Cotton: Thank you. Secretary Austin, on May 8th you conducted, at the Pentagon, what is known as a rehearsal concept drill, also called a rock drill. Is that right?

Secretary Austin: That is correct.

Senator Cotton: And that is pretty important, especially for such a significant decision as withdrawing from Afghanistan. Is that right?

Secretary Austin: That is correct.

Senator Cotton: And it has been reported that you attended, General Milley attended, Jake Sullivan attended, Bill Burns attended. Is that correct?

Secretary Austin: That is correct.

Senator Cotton: Did Tony Blinken attend?

Secretary Austin: His deputy attended, Senator.

Senator Cotton: His number two deputy, Wendy Sherman?

Secretary Austin: No. Yeah, McKeon.

Senator Cotton: His number three deputy, Brian McKeon.
Do you know where Tony Blinken was on Saturday, May 8th?

Secretary Austin: I do not. I do not.

Senator Cotton: Do you know if he used any DoD resources to travel between May 7th and May 10th?

Secretary Austin: I can certainly find out, but that is not something I would --

Senator Cotton: Yeah. I understand it is not right at your fingertips, but I think we could probably get it pretty quickly. I would like to know if Secretary Blinken used any DoD assets, whether aircraft or air bases, or personnel, air crews or ground crews, to travel between May 7, 2021, and May 10, 2021. Thank you for that.

Secretary Austin, who chose September 11th as the date by which we would withdraw from Afghanistan?

Secretary Austin: I am not sure that -- well, certainly that was not a military recommendation. But the military, when asked to provide an estimate of how long it would take to retrograde our people and equipment, that number fell in the range of possibly up to 120 days, but certainly much shorter than that if we were uncontested. And as it turned out we were uncontested.

That date takes you to the end of August.

Senator Cotton: I am sorry, Secretary. My time is limited. So can you tell me who it was that directed you, the Secretary of Defense, that September 11th was the date
1. by which you would complete the withdrawal?

Secretary Austin: Nobody directed us that September 11th was the date that we would complete it. I think that was an objective that was laid out by the administration.

Senator Cotton: I believe that President announced that in mid-April, when he announced the decision. Someone had to come up with that date. You cannot recall who it was that recommended September 11th?

Secretary Austin: That was not a military recommendation.

Senator Cotton: General Milley, is there any military significance to withdrawing by September 11th?

General Milley: I do not know who came up with it, but sure there is significance of September 11th.

Senator Cotton: General McKenzie, it has been reported by NBC News that you told Taliban leader Baradar, on August 15th, that if they took Kabul we would bomb them. They obviously took Kabul on August 15th. We did not bomb them. Is the report that you told them that correct?

General McKenzie: That report is incorrect.

Senator Cotton: It is incorrect. Thank you.

General McKenzie, why did we not conduct ground patrols into Kabul? The French did. The British did. The Germans did. We stepped outside the gates. We flew Chinooks out to police up our people. Why did we not conduct ground
patrols?

General McKenzie: Senator, actually, I do not believe any of those nations conducted ground patrols into Kabul from HKIA. I believe that the British went out to what they call the Baron Hotel, which is a facility located about 150 meters off the HKIA compound, and they did business there. But no one conducted ground patrols from HKIA going out. In fact, I am very confident of that, based on -- I looked into it with my commander on the ground, so I am quite confident when I make that assertion.

Senator Cotton: Thank you. Secretary Austin, one final question. Obviously, this is an issue on which many of our troops and our veterans feel very passionately, on both side of the issue. One of those servicemembers, Marine Colonel Stuart Scheller, posted a very critical video on social media last month, and he was received of his command for that posting. Media reports today indicate that he is being held in pretrial confinement. Why is that?

Secretary Austin: I do not have any specifics of what caused him to be held in pretrial confinement, and I would certainly ask the Marines to provide that insight.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cotton.

Senator King, please. Do you need a moment?

Senator King: The discussion that we have had thus far today is a peculiar one about decisions, and the assumption
seems to be that you could make a different decision, for example, on August 31st, and everything would have been okay and we would have gotten more people out.

My understanding, General Milley, is that it was your view that making that decision to go beyond August 31st -- and I am using this as an example -- would have had consequences which you and your colleagues judged would be far more damaging and dangerous to American lives than the decision to leave on August 31st, including being back at war with the Taliban, subject to terrorist attacks, and subject to perhaps airplanes being shot down by the Taliban. Am I right about this, where the risk calculus was?

General Milley: That is correct, Senator. We said risk to mission, risk to force, and risk to remaining American citizens in Afghanistan was going to go to extremely high, beginning 1 September if we stayed past 31st with U.S. military forces.

Senator King: And you used that term, "risk to mission, risk to force" as a kind of -- that is a descriptive phrase. But we are talking about potentially hundreds of American lives, are we not?

General Milley: Well, when we talk risk to force, we are specifically talking casualties, killed and wounded, and our estimate, my estimate at the time -- this is 25 August we are talking about -- is if we go to war with the Taliban
on the 1st of September -- there were 6,000 Taliban and 56 checkpoints in Kabul at that time -- we would have had to clear Kabul, we would have had to re-seize Bagram and the 30 miles of road between Bagram and Kabul. That would have taken a significant amount of force. You are looking at probably a core operation.

We probably, my guess, is that we would have had significant amounts of killed and wounded. Exact numbers are always imprecise when you are doing those kinds of estimates, but it would have been significant U.S. military killed and wounded, and the remaining American citizens would have been at greater risk.

Senator King: You mentioned we would have had to have retaken Kabul. Then had 6,000 troops. As I remember discussions in this committee when we were talking about retaking Mosul, the generally accepted rule of thumb is that it takes 10 troops to dislodge 1 in a city, that dislodging of troops in a city is very difficult and takes a large number of attacking troops. Is that correct?

General Milley: It is, but the disposition and composition of the Taliban in Kabul at that time was not the same as ISIS in Mosul. Mosul was a prepared defense. They were dug in. They were ready to go, underground positions, et cetera. The Taliban had just moved in. So it would have been not that level of fight that you saw in Mosul, but it
still would have been significant -- 6,000 is 6,000 -- and you are in an urban area of about 5 million people. So it would have been a significant level of effort, and it would have resulted in significant U.S. casualties.

Senator King: Thank you. Do you know -- and I want to be clear on this. There was a deadline in the Doha agreement of March 10th for the beginning of negotiations. Did the administration, the former administration, make any objections or raise problems with the Taliban because of their failure to meet that deadline, or indeed, to ever meet that deadline in terms of negotiations with the Afghan government?

General Milley: I do not have personal knowledge of that. Zal Khalizad might be a good one, or former Secretary of State, but I do not know personally know.

Senator King: General McKenzie, I do not want to go over the same ground, but do you agree with General Milley that had we gone beyond August 31st, that decision was not just, oh, we are going to abandon Americans. It was, if we stay until September 1st we would have to make an additional troop commitment, and our troops would be at risk. Is that correct?

General McKenzie: Senator, that is exactly correct. And, actually, in the meeting in the tank with the JCS I was the principal briefer who advanced that argument, and that
does reflect my position.

Senator King: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator King.

Senator Rounds, please.

Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In listening to your testimony today, and I have appreciated the amount of effort that you put into being very clear with us, it seems to me that we have left a power void in central Asia that has already increased the threat of terrorism and has provided significant opportunities to our adversaries.

Secretary Austin, a little while ago you indicated that -- and I believe your term was that if we would have had to have made an earlier withdrawal, perhaps in April or May, that it would have been very, very difficult to have had that completed in an orderly manner. And I think that is the way that you described it. Is that correct, sir?

Secretary Austin: That is correct, sir.

Senator Rounds: I think also, sir, you would probably agree that the withdrawal on the August 30, August 31 deadline, was probably not an orderly -- done in an orderly manner either, was it?

Secretary Austin: There are two issues here, Senator, if I may. First of all, you will recall that we stated that General Miller planned for an orderly evacuation of people
and retrograde of equipment. That plan was laid out, it was rehearsed, and it was executed so that by early July all of the equipment that we wanted to retrograde had been retrograded, and most of the people were out, except for a small element that was in around the embassy and on HKIA.

Senator Rounds: Mr. Secretary, the American people watched with horror on TV, during the last days in August, in which our young men and women in uniform not only died but they were in the middle of huge throngs of individuals desperately trying to get out. I do not believe that you would suggest that that was being completed in an orderly manner.

Secretary Austin: No. So that is the second. The second operation was a non-combatant evacuation, which was -- I think you heard me say early on, Senator, was -- we had some challenging times early on. We recovered from that and were able to --

Senator Rounds: But Mr. Secretary, you would not consider that to have been done in an orderly manner, would you?

Secretary Austin: I would say overall we endured challenges, but again, we were able to get out an enormous amount of people.

Senator Rounds: I do not disagree that the young men and women who wear the uniform of this country, on that
particular, very challenging time period, did everything they could. But clearly it was not in an orderly manner. They were in a very disastrous, and I think we would all agree, a very deadly situation. Would you agree, sir?

Secretary Austin: And you heard me say so, Senator, that, you know, it was a very dangerous situation that we were in, and despite that they were able to fight through the challenges. And because of their heroic efforts, we were able to do what we did.

Senator Rounds: Mr. Secretary, the reason why I asked this is because I think not only American citizens saw this but I think our allies saw it as well, and I think what they saw was, first of all, that because of the date certain rather than a conditions-based withdrawal, because of a decision that was made by our President, because of that we left American citizens behind, and we did leave Afghans behind who had served directly with our U.S. forces. And it appears that many of them believe that we did not appropriately consult with them about our activities in a timely fashion.

And finally, to look at and to see American equipment being left there, even if it is not quite ready for use but most certainly there in the hands of the Taliban did not help our position with our allies, sir.

Let me just move on very quickly. General Milley, I
have got just less than a minute left on this, and I just
wanted to comment. I think your second statement in which
you shared with the American people and with us today an
expression of how, in a very unclassified way, how the
nuclear chain of command works. Part of this -- and some of
us have had the opportunity to observe, in a tabletop
exercise, how that actually works with the processes working
their way through what the President on down and the
questions that are asked and the responses required, and so
forth. The 2022 NDAA has some very specific exercise
requirements that the White House and other members are
required to follow through. Do you know if either President
Trump or President Biden had the opportunity to do a
tabletop exercise and actually listen to the questions that
were going to be asked of them should there ever be the
possibility of the use of nuclear weapons?

General Milley: I do not know if either one, President
Trump or President Biden, has gone through that tabletop
exercise.

Senator Rounds: Thank you. Once again, thank you,
gentlemen, for your service to our country.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Rounds.

Senator Hirono, please.

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Austin, my colleague, Senator Duckworth,
mentioned the idea of an independent commission to evaluate what happened before, during, and after the war in Afghanistan. So, Secretary Austin, are you open to such an effort?

Secretary Austin: Senator, I will also, as you would expect, always cooperate with my oversight committee.

Senator Hirono: Yes, because I, for one, very much agree that this was a 20-year war and there were four Presidents involved, and I would like to ensure that there are some lessons learned from a 20-year forever war.

And, at the same time, I feel some of the Republicans have made a total about-face, a U-turn regarding the war. I thought that they wanted the war to end and they were very supportive of President Trump when he made the deal with the Taliban to get out. So there is that, and clearly there are lessons to be learned in terms of an evacuation, but I think the decision to get us out of this forever war was a good one.

Secretary Austin, the President -- I want to move to a different topic -- the President has touted the Afghanistan pullout as necessary to free up time and money to deal with near-peer competitors like Russia and China, but that stated rationale is somewhat, I think, at odds with the administration's budget, which fails to align funding priorities with the lines of effort identified in the
Secretary Austin, I have brought this up before when we had a posture hearing. So you do not have to get into it now, but I would very much appreciate the efforts and where we are in terms of meeting the five lines of effort under the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. Could you provide us with that?

Secretary Austin: We can, and I would just add, Senator, that I have spent a fair amount of time with our combatant commander since we last talked. He has laid out his plans and his intent, and I am fully behind the effort that he wants to undertake. And so we look forward to discussing that with you.

Senator Hirono: Thank you. And along those same lines, nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea remain stalled, and I am concerned that steps taken by the DoD, including zeroing out funding for the Homeland Defense Radar Hawaii, HDRH, and objecting, just last week, to congressional action to reauthorize funds to keep that program on track put Hawaii at risk in the near future.

What is DoD's credible alternative to HDRH Hawaii, going forward? This is the second time that Congress has had to put back money for that radar. So what is the alternative that the DoD has that will protect Hawaii?

Secretary Austin: The capability that we currently
have, Hawaii is protected, and again, this is an issue that we continue to look at. And you can rest assured that Hawaii will not be unprotected.

Senator Hirono: Well, I know that we are protected as of today. I am looking at the future.

So a lot of us have concerns about what is going to happen to the Afghani women and girls with the Taliban coming back. I would be interested, Secretary Austin, to hear your perspective about concrete steps the U.S. can take to influence a future for Afghan women and girls that honors their human rights and freedoms.

Secretary Austin: Well, I certainly share your concern, Senator, and Taliban's track record on this is absolutely horrible. We will have to continue to -- we will have to work to use economic levers and also international pressure to hold the Taliban accountable for some of the things that they said they are going to do. And again, I think this will have to be an international effort to maintain pressure on the Taliban.

Senator Hirono: And at some point I think we would like to know specifically what kind of international efforts are bearing fruit with regard to what the Taliban is doing with women and girls in their country.

Regarding our relationship with Pakistan, so I think I will submit that for the record, because I know we are
trying to keep to 5 minutes. But the relationship with Pakistan going forward with regard to the Taliban.

Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Hirono.

Senator Ernst, please.

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair. General Milley, in a previous round we established that the withdrawal achieved no security conditions other than an unconditional withdrawal. We had to withdraw by a time certain, a date certain. And these are yes-or-no questions, please, General Miller. Has the military's task to defeat terror threats from Afghanistan gotten harder?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Ernst: Does the Taliban and its other terror partners have more ability to train and prepare in Afghanistan now that we have left?

General Milley: More ability, yes.

Senator Ernst: Has President Biden or his policy staff provided any -- any -- updated guidance or direction for countering terror from Afghanistan?

General Milley: Yes.

Senator Ernst: Are we at a greater or lesser risk of terror attack from Afghanistan as a result of our withdrawal?

General Milley: Too early to tell.
Senator Ernst: Too early to tell.

General Milley: Yeah. I think we have got about -- you know, to elaborate a little bit, we have probably got about 6 months here to really sort this out and see which direction things are going to go. It is not much time, but that is my personal estimate. It could be out to 12. And then we are going to have some indicators and warnings of what direction this is going to go. But that is where I would put it.

Senator Ernst: In the previous round -- and this is a comment -- but in the previous round each of you had admitted that your best recommendation was to leave a residual force in Afghanistan. Clearly the President disregarded that opinion, that recommendation, that advice. And I do believe that this has left us less safe.

A number of my colleagues have mentioned over-the-horizon. General McKenzie, you referenced the fact that we do not know yet how effective that will be. We do not have partners on the ground. We talked about the airspace that would have to be used for over-the-horizon capabilities.

There is still a terrorist threat in Afghanistan. Now on August 20th, President Biden had stated, "What interest do we have in Afghanistan at this point with Al Qaeda gone?" First, I did not recognize that Al Qaeda was gone. General McKenzie, is Al Qaeda gone?
General McKenzie:  Senator, Al Qaeda still maintains a presence in Afghanistan.

Senator Ernst: And Secretary Blinken had said, on August 22nd, that "the threat of terrorism metastasized out of Afghanistan a long time ago." General McKenzie, is there any terrorist threat in Afghanistan now?

General McKenzie: What we see is ISIS nearly rejuvenated with the prisoners that came out of Harwan and Pul-e-Charkhi prison. You know, they are gathering their strength. We have yet to see how that is going to manifest itself. But we know for a certainty that they do aspire to attack us in our homeland, and we know the same for Al Qaeda. So that threat, it has metastasized, and it is resonant in other parts of the world. In my part of the world, though, it certainly is in Afghanistan.

Senator Ernst: Yes. And it has been reported that the top 22 officials of the new Taliban government are known associates of Al Qaeda, including five terrorists who were once imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, and 13 more who were sanctioned by the U.N., the United Nations, as terrorists post-9/11. And I am very alarmed, Secretary Austin, that your Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, claims there is a minimal threat. He called the terror threat from Afghanistan "insignificant" on a call with Senators less than a month ago.
He is wrong. I think all of you would admit he is wrong. The FBI Director even said that he was wrong last week. He is in denial or he is lying. I would hope that his testimony and comments are not indicative of your own thoughts, and if they are different, I just truly hope they are. Let us just leave it at that.

So if the Department of Defense cannot get their lead policy official off the couch, which is where he told me he was during closed testimony last week, that he was sitting on the couch, he did not really care what General Miller's opinion was, if that is the type of thought process that we put into decisions that are made at the Department of Defense, with this lead policy official, maybe he needs to go back to the couch.

I do think that there is still a threat in Afghanistan. I think we all need to acknowledge that, recognize it. Al Qaeda is not gone. I hope we all make that very clear to the President. And we will have to have additional discussions about over-the-horizon as things develop in the upcoming months.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Now let me recognize Senator Gillibrand, please.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In continuing on my line of questions from the first round,
Secretary Austin and General Milley, are you aware of any internal audits that are being conducted within the Department of Defense on the execution of the war over the last 20 years?

Secretary Austin: I am not, other than the AAR activity that we will conduct within the Department.

Senator Gillibrand: What is that?

Secretary Austin: After-action review.

Senator Gillibrand: And what will make up that review?

Secretary Austin: We will focus on, you know, the things that have occurred as a part of this latest operation. But I think your initial question was is there a review of the last 20 years --

Senator Gillibrand: Right.

Secretary Austin: -- and the answer to that is no.

Senator Gillibrand: And do you think a review of broad scope would be useful to the DoD and useful to policymakers in the future, particularly this Committee?

Secretary Austin: I do, Senator, and I also think that, as I mentioned earlier, that that should have an interagency flavor as well.

Senator Gillibrand: And do you have any recommendations for an external independent review of the war in Afghanistan. For example, what do you think Congress' role should be and how would such an audit be
conducted? What U.S. agencies, countries, and organizations should be included in the review of America's longest war?

Secretary Austin: Yeah, I do not have any recommendations at this point. I can certainly take that for the record, Senator.

Senator Gillibrand: I would be grateful for that.

Secretary Austin and General Milley, this is something that hits a little closer to home. A number of our diplomats, intelligence officers, and servicemembers who assisted with evacuation, including the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, New York, were subjected to acute trauma and chronic stress, a problem we are not unfamiliar with after the last 20 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Families at Fort Drum have told my office it felt like a full deployment compressed into the time of a few weeks. Further, so many of our servicemembers have lost their lives to suicide, which has been devastating. What is DoD doing to ensure that our combat veterans and their families are getting adequate mental health assessment and the resources they need?

Secretary Austin: Well, thanks, Senator. I will make a comment and I will let General Milley comment as well. I think you asked him as well.

But you have heard me say before that, you know, my belief is that mental health is health, period, and there
should be no stigma associated with seeking help if you are dealing with issues. And I have encouraged the entire force, all of our leadership, to make sure that, number one, we have adequate resources available for our troops and our families, and number two, that they destigmatize the issue of assisting help with mental health issues.

General Milley: Senator, as you know, I commanded the 10th Mountain Division, as well as Secretary Austin at one point, and that division is one of the most deployed divisions, along with the 101st Airborne Division out of Senator Blackburn's state. And there is significant mental health capability there to help the soldiers that were on this non-combatant evacuation, and they will get immediate assessments upon redeployment. It is the normal procedure. And then those that need counseling, it is there.

The key that we have to do is emphasize a culture of non-stigmatizing any sort of mental health issues that a soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine have, and so that they feel free they can seek out the counseling we have available.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you. I would like to follow up on the line of questioning that Senator Ernst started. Can you describe for us the Al Qaeda threat today -- where it is located, where you believe it will be going, what the strength is compared to the strength over the last 20 years?
And please answer the question for ISIS, ISIS-K and other variations of ISIS across the world.

General Milley: You are asking me, Senator?

Senator Gillibrand: Yes. General Milley first and then Secretary Austin.

General Milley: Okay. So first, I think it would be good to handle it in some detail in the classified session, but in an unclassified session I would say that the Al Qaeda threat, globally, is still there. The threat in Afghanistan has an opportunity now to potentially reconstitute, although it has been ripped apart pretty steadily over 20 years. And Al Qaeda has displaced to other parts of the world, with their affiliates in East Africa, for example, al-Shabab, or AQAP down in Yemen, also in the Maghreb, et cetera.

So there are several affiliates worldwide, some of which are quite capable and definitely have aspirations to attack the United States.

With respect to ISIS, we saw ISIS core in Iraq and Iran and all that. That was all ripped apart, but they still exist up there, by the way. And ISIS has found a new home in parts of Afghanistan, although right now they are at war, essentially, with the Taliban. But ISIS has affiliates as well, in other parts of the world, because of their brutality.

So there are other regions of the world which have high
concentrations of very lethal terrorist organizations that have aspirations to conduct operations against the United States, and we have operations and intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, et cetera, in all of those parts, to continue to watch that. But it has moved in various parts, and we can cover that in some detail in the classified session, if that is okay.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will pursue both questions in the classified setting.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Tillis, please.

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley and General McKenzie, I ran out of time before I could thank you for some of the work that your staff did in August. We were working several cases. I was involved. I remember a conversation with one of your staff, General McKenzie, at about 3:00 in the morning, while we were trying to shepherd someone out, and we did get them out successfully, along with some American citizens.

But unfortunately we have a much longer list of people that we were not successful with getting out. Between SIV holders and family members, my office alone has over 900 people still on a list of people who are still in Afghanistan. And we communicate with these people through
WhatsApp. We were trying to shepherd them to HKIA and then back and forth, and ultimately operations were shut down and they were stranded and left behind.

So what role -- and, Secretary Austin, maybe I will start with you -- what role, if any -- and actually, before I ask that, on the mental health issue, we were working with a Marine who was trying to get an interpreter out, had been maintaining contact for years. We had all the authenticating documentation. We were not successful in that case. That Marine committed suicide about 3 weeks ago, a retired Marine. So this is having real-life consequences, not only in Afghanistan but here in the United States.

So, Secretary Austin, what role, if any, does the DoD play in helping us draw down this list of people that we believe we have documentation that suggests they should somehow get shepherded out of Afghanistan?

Secretary Austin: Senator, first of all, my deepest condolences on the loss of our Marine. I am really saddened to hear that. Thoughts and prayers to his family.

DoD continues to work as a part of the cell that you may have heard me mentioned earlier, that is actually run, or headed up by the State Department, and Ambassador John Bass is running that. And we are trying to pull in as much information from every corner that we can and refine lists, and refine contact information so that we can reach out and
make sure that people have the right credentials to be able to leave the country.

And so we continue to work as a part of the State effort on this issue.

Senator Tillis: I think it would be helpful to find out what our point of contact was. It was literally me reaching somebody to see if they could help me or moving it up the chain of command to where I was able to personally intervene in several cases.

General Milley and General McKenzie, some people have said we are glad that we have ended this war. Is the war on terror over? General Milley?

General Milley: Absolutely not.

Senator Tillis: General McKenzie?

General McKenzie: The war on terror is not over, and the war in Afghanistan is not over either.

Senator Tillis: Has the exit from Afghanistan made the war more challenging for us or less challenging, with respect to continuing to try and protect the homeland and U.S. interests abroad?

General McKenzie: Senator, it has made it more challenging.

Senator Tillis: General Milley, do you agree?

General Milley: Yeah, absolutely.

Senator Tillis: A related note. A Wall Street Journal
article published on August 31st said, "U.S. official acknowledge the military has lost 90 percent of the intelligence collection capabilities it had using drones before the drawdown." Do you agree with that?

General Milley: I did not see the report. It said -- say again what it said?

Senator Tillis: It said that we have lost 90 percent of our intelligence collection capabilities it had using drones before the drawdown.

General Milley: I would have to go look at the actual math. I have got my J-2 actually doing that right now, to determine the level of ISR assets and the statistics. It is significant. I do not know if it is 90 percent.

Senator Tillis: On the SIVs and folks that are stranded in Afghanistan, is it fair to say that our human intelligence network, given the current status and fact that many were left behind, is it fair to say that that has been stressed even more so than our drone surveillance capabilities? I mean, do we have much in the way of human intelligence on the ground in Afghanistan today?

General Milley: We can explain that, I think, in good detail in a classified session --

Senator Tillis: Okay.

General Milley: -- but there is still, yes.

Senator Tillis: Back to Secretary Austin, I think it
is so important for us to show that we are going to move
heaven and earth to try and get these other out of
Afghanistan, because this not only has an impact in
Afghanistan, it has an impact anywhere. You know, SIVs are
not unique to Afghanistan. People working with us, human
intelligence on the ground keeping our forces safe, is
something that standard operating procedure in a lot of
dangerous areas.

So I hope that we recognize that we owe it to the
people of Afghanistan, but we owe it to our men and women in
uniform to get this right. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Now let me recognize Senator Warren.

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General
Milley, our military executed a massive operation during the
month of August. As I understand it, it was larger than the
Berlin airlift. For the record, can you just tell us how
many Americans you evacuated?

General Milley: Almost 6,000. I can get you a precise
number for the record, but it was about 6,000.

Senator Warren: Let us get the right number for the
record, but that is helpful. And how many people, in total,
did the U.S. and coalition forces evacuate?

General Milley: 124,000 total. 44,000 went out on
non-U.S. aircraft and the rest came out on U.S. aircraft.
Senator Warren: Okay. An extraordinary effort, but still it is hard to get everyone out.

General Milley: The largest airlift in history.

Senator Warren: Right. Hard to get everyone out. One problem, of course, is that there were so many Afghan SIV applicants in Kabul waiting to be evacuated because the Trump administration had essentially shut the program down.

Withdrawal was a massive operation, conducted in a chaotic, unpredictable environment, and some people have criticized you for leaving on August 31st. But I just want to explore that for a minute. General Milley, once the Afghan government collapsed in August, would you say that staying past the date of their collapse would have exposed the force on the ground to substantial and additional risk?

General Milley: Yes, and that is exactly what we assessed, that if we stayed past the 31st the risk to force, U.S. military casualties, the risk to the mission, the ability to continue to execute the NEO, and most importantly, the risk to the Americans citizens that are still there was going to go to, we assess, very high levels, and we thought that that was a level of risk that was unacceptable.

Senator Warren: Okay. And just so I am sure and everybody has got this on the record, so if we had stayed another week or two or three then it is likely there would
have been another attack that killed American
servicemembers. Is that what you are saying?

   General Milley: I would say that that is a near
certainty.

   Senator Warren: All right. For years, we poured money
into the Afghan government, and for years we trained their
army, we outfitted them with all the best American
equipment, we provided them with overwhelming air power.

Even so, both the Afghan government and the army collapsed
almost instantaneously. So General Milley, let me ask you,
given how quickly the Afghan government and the Afghan army
collapsed, do you think that either or both would have been
able to stand on their own with just another few months or
another few years of American assistance and training?

   General Milley: I think at this point that is
unknowable, but my estimate at the time was if you kept
advisors there, kept money flowing, et cetera, that we
probably could have sustained them for a lengthy or
indefinite period of time. Whether or not you would have
had a different result at the end of the day that is a
different question.

   Senator Warren: You know, when I hear you say that it
reminds me of all the years that I have sat now in the
Senate Armed Services Committee and how many times the
generals have come in front of us, and when you point out
every way in which the Afghan government was failing and
Afghan army was failing, the generals respond with, "But we
are turning the corner now."

General Milley: I did not say we were turning the
corner, Senator. I said we could sustain them.

Senator Warren: And that we would be able to keep
them, and somehow, when we got ready to withdraw, they would
be so well sustained that they would not have collapsed
instantaneously, the way they did after 20 years of
sustenance and training?

General Milley: Well, I think the end state probably
would have been the same no matter when you did it.

Senator Warren: Well, you know, I believe that leaving
a force behind would have necessitated that force staying
indefinitely.

General Milley: That is right.

Senator Warren: And many of those servicemembers would
have been exposed to unnecessary risk and harm.

General Milley: That is exactly right.

Senator Warren: We agree. And I also just want to
say, this week we will have our fifth hearing on Afghanistan
in the 8 months since President Biden took office. During
the Trump years, as the Afghan government and the Afghan
army racked up one failure after another, the Republicans
seemed far less interested in this topic, holding one public
hearing a year. The Republicans' sudden interest in Afghanistan is plain old politics. It is not the kind of oversight that we should have been exercising in years past.

So thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Warren.

Senator Sullivan, please.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and just to my colleague's statement, it is a little bit rich coming from one of my colleagues on this committee who wants to gut the military and its readiness. But that is a whole other issue.

I want to get back to my line of questioning from this morning, and I will tell you again, gentlemen, I have never seen so much anger, at least from my constituents, who witnesses a fiasco, a humiliation, a President who is consistently telling falsehoods to the American people and the issues that there is no accountability.

And you, gentlemen, have spent decades serving your country, honorably in combat. I have the utmost respect for your service, your fidelity to America. And, importantly, you have dedicated your lives to an institution that has a culture of strict accountability and responsibility up and down the ranks. I mentioned a few examples this morning, the collisions of the U.S.S. McCain and Fitzgerald. Everybody up and down the ranks, including the three-star
admiral, was relieved. The recent, very tragic, Marine AAV accident -- everybody up and down the ranks, including the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division was relieved. If you are a Marine or Army second lieutenant training your platoon on patrol and one of your soldiers loses his NVGs or his rifle, that lieutenant is going to get relieved.

But on this issue, one of the biggest national security fiascos in a generation, no one is accountable, and the American people are livid because they saw it. They see it. They know it is a debacle.

General Milley, this morning you called the Afghan retrograde a logistical success but, quote, "a strategic failure." I appreciate your honest assessment. I believe the President of the United States is solely responsible for this.

Mr. Secretary, do you know if anyone -- the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of State, or Under Secretary for Policy of DoD -- has offered their resignation to take responsible for this fiasco?

Secretary Austin: I do not.

Senator Sullivan: Okay.

Secretary Austin: I do not, but I do not believe they have.

Senator Sullivan: Okay. Thank you. Given the military culture of accountability that all of you gentlemen
come from -- and again, I respect that more than almost anybody -- have any of you offered your resignation to the President at any time since his decision to withdraw? And General Milley, I understand your earlier answer to this question that senior military advisors and officers cannot resign every time they disagree with the President. I actually agree with that. But after the President's decision, when the American people see such a strategic failure, as you called it, that is undermining our national security, they expect accountability, and there has been none. So have any of you accepted that accountability or responsibility?

General Milley: I am accountable for my actions, and --

Senator Sullivan: No. I am just talking about a resignation.

General Milley: I have not submitted my letter of resignation.

Senator Sullivan: Mr. Secretary?

Secretary Austin: No.

Senator Sullivan: General?

General McKenzie: I have not submitted a letter of resignation.

Senator Sullivan: Mr. Secretary, I want to know, what will it take for someone, anyone, in the Biden
administration to take responsibility or accountability for this national security fiasco? Anyone.

Secretary Austin: Senator, from a DoD perspective, again, you heard me say that we will continue to review our actions, and we will not hesitate to be critical of ourselves. And if there is someone that should be held accountable for an action then we will certainly do that.

Senator Sullivan: I want to switch topics here very quickly. General Milley, do you think if the Chinese Communist Party decided to invade Taiwan, would their military leadership call and give you a heads-up?

General Milley: I think there would be a period of increased tension, indicators, and warnings, and I think there would be an exchange of various communications at all levels, Department of State and --

Senator Sullivan: Do you really think --

General Milley: -- and I think --

Senator Sullivan: Do you really think the Chinese Communist Party, head of the PLA, would call and say, "Hey, General, FYI, we are going to get ready to invade Taiwan. I just thought I would give you a heads-up"? Do you honestly think that?

General Milley: I know I would call him and ask him.

Senator Sullivan: No, I am asking --

General Milley: I would call him and ask him outright.
Senator Sullivan: Do you think he would give you a heads-up --

General Milley: I think --

Senator Sullivan: -- on the invasion of Taiwan?

General Milley: -- I think an invasion of Taiwan would be a fairly obvious thing to pick up on, and there would be a lot of communications --

Senator Sullivan: No, that is not what I asked.

General Milley: -- going back and forth.

Senator Sullivan: Let me ask a related question.

General Milley: Sure.

Senator Sullivan: I think the answer to that is no. I think if the PLA called you and said, "Hey, we are getting ready to invade Taiwan," and Xi Jinping found out about it, he would be shot. But let me ask a related question.

You said you were, quote, "certain that President Trump did not intend on attacking China." That is what you just said.

General Milley: That is correct.

Senator Sullivan: Yet you are quoted in the Woodward book as telling the top Chinese communist military commander, quote, "If we are going to attack, I am going to call you ahead of time." Is that true, General Milley?

General Milley: Let me tell you what I actually said.

Senator Sullivan: So that is not true. I hope that is
General Milley: Let me tell you what I actually said, Senator. What I said, if there is going to be a war, if there is going to be an attack, there are going to be a lot of calls and tension ahead of time.

Senator Sullivan: But what you --

General Milley: And you are going to get calls.

Senator Sullivan: -- said in your testimony was that you were --

General Milley: You are going to get calls.

Senator Sullivan: -- you thought President Trump would not attack. That was your testimony this morning.

General Milley: That is true. That is absolutely true.

Senator Sullivan: Okay. Then why would you --

General Milley: And I was communicating to my Chinese counterpart on instructions, by the way, to de-escalate the situation. And I told him that we are not going to attack. President Trump has no intent to attack. And I told him that repeatedly, and I told him if there was going to be an attack there will be plenty of communications going back and forth, your intel systems are going to pick it up. I said, "I will probably call you. Everybody will be calling you. We are not going to attack you. Just settle down. It is not going to happen." And I did it twice, in October and
January.

   Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

   Senator Sullivan: You are giving a heads-up to the
   Chinese Communist Party --

   General Milley: I did not give him a heads-up we were
going to attack because we were not going to attack. I was
telling him we were not going to attack --

   Senator Sullivan: If we are going to attack I am going
to call you ahead of time.

   Chairman Reed: Senator Sullivan?

   General Milley: -- which was the President of the
   United States' intent.

   Chairman Reed: Time.

   General Milley: I was being faithful to his intent,
   Senator.

   Chairman Reed: Thank you very much.

   Senator Peters, please.

   Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

   Secretary Austin, in your confirmation hearing you
spoke focusing on our shared interest with Pakistan. A
readout from your August call with Pakistan's chief of army
staff contained some similar language that you expressed.

   My question to you, could you please elaborate for this
committee on what you view as our shared interest with
Pakistan today? And I am particularly in how this relates
with the Pakistani government's relationship with the
Taliban, now that the Taliban are in power in Afghanistan.

Secretary Austin: Well, thanks, Senator. I think that
one key shared interest is the prevention of a humanitarian
disaster in Afghanistan or in the region, and so I think we
will continue to share that interest. I do think there is
some intersection in terms of certain types of terrorist
activity that I think we can both remain focused on. And
again, an in-depth conversation about Pakistan probably
would be better suited in a closed hearing.

Senator Peters: Very well. I understand that there
were certain airplanes, helicopters, and ground vehicles
that were disabled as forces left and as the Afghan forces
were overrun. And right now I do not want to talk about the
operability of a Humvee or an MRAP or the pictures we saw of
Taliban sitting on grounded C-130s. What concerns me more
is the potential for our strategic adversaries to have some
time and space to examine the technology inside those
vehicles, to find vulnerabilities. Even if a system has
been disabled, in some ways destroyed, reverse engineering
can still be used on those systems and can provide
information to sophisticated adversaries that may get a hold
of this. And as all of you know, we harden our supply
chains to protect military technology. It is a matter of
national security.
So my question for you, Secretary Austin, is the Department now conducting an extensive counterintelligence assessment of equipment to get a sense of what might be reverse engineered and how do we protect against any use of that information against our forces?

Secretary Austin: We will continue to assess what is exploitable, Senator. I would flag for you that all of this equipment is not high-end equipment. You know, again, equipment that we had for our use was retrograded as General Miller drew down the retrograded equipment and drew down our forces.

I would also like to flag for you, sir, that while the number, $84 billion, has been bounced about quite a bit, that is the number that we invested in Afghan Security Forces over a 20-year period of time, and less than 20 percent of that was dedicated towards Afghan equipment. Most of that money was focused on sustainment and salaries and those types of things.

Senator Peters: General McKenzie, if you could go back in time and change one thing about the strategy in the last 6 months of operations in Afghanistan, which could have alleviated some of the chaos that we saw at the end, what would it be?

General McKenzie: In the last 6 months, Senator, would of course infer that decisions made were going to zero. I
go back to, could we have gotten more people out earlier in
the process. By that I mean U.S. citizens. And I know the
embassy put out at least a dozen notices to U.S. citizens to
leave. I know that the ambassador was very aggressive on
that. But I would have liked to maybe have seen done more
there, more done in that regard.

Additionally perhaps to try to get more of the SIV
population out. But, Senator, I think we need to recognize
that if you are asking the Afghans to fight, and, at the
same time you are bringing out the best and the brightest,
that is clearly a conflicting message that you are sending
them. So I do not say that lightly or recognize there would
not be inherent risk in taking that course of action.

Senator Peters: So there would have been risk doing
those things.

General McKenzie: There would have been, in my
judgment, yes, but that is the way that we could have -- you
know, we could have been more forceful with our citizens,
although, you know, there are very strict limitations on
what you can say or do to an American citizen abroad, for
good reason. So I think, you know, you have got to trust
the good judgment of the people, of the American citizens
that are in Afghanistan.

Senator Peters: Right. Thank you. Thank you, Mr.
Chairman.
Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Peters.

Senator Cramer, please.

Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Secretary Austin, why did the committee not get the testimony for today until 10:35 last night? Were you guys not prepared?

Secretary Austin: We were prepared, and again, I do not know the specifics of what last-minute adjustments were being made at what level. But we were prepared.

Senator Cramer: Well, it must not have been a level below you then or you would be aware of it, right? So it would have to be a level above you. In other words, did the White House withhold your testimony? General Milley, did you have your testimony done before 10:35 last night?

General Milley: We did, but the White House was not witholding my testimony, no.

Senator Cramer: Who was?

General Milley: Nobody. You have to submit -- when you submit written documents, as you well know, you have to submit them to OMB.

Senator Cramer: Right.

General Milley: They reviewed them in the afternoon.

We got them back, I do not know, 1800, 1900, something like that, and then we made the changes and submitted them. And yes, we were late.

Senator Cramer: But it was not you?
General Milley: No.

Senator Cramer: It was OMB --

General Milley: There was not any intent to block.

Senator Cramer: Yeah. It was somebody's strategy, is my guess. It just might not have been yours. But it clearly was somebody's.

General McKenzie, about a half hour ago you said, "We know for certain ISIS intends to attack us at home," or something to that effect, right? Is that correct?

General McKenzie: That is correct.

Senator Cramer: So 20 years ago, on September 11th, when the terrorist hijackers took over four aircraft and attacked the homeland, all of them came here on a visa. Correct? Now in the last 20 years, Al Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban, they have not acquired ICBMs or a navy or an air force, as far as we know. So if they are going to carry out that intent they are going to have to get here themselves, and that means either through a visa program or as refugees across the southern border.

My question to all of you is, is not national security tied directly to good immigration security, and do you feel like we are adequately prepared to protect the homeland from visa holders and refugees?

General McKenzie: Senator, in the case of ISIS I think we have done a remarkable job over the last two decades
about hardening the entry process and making it very
difficult for them to get their agents into the United
States, and that is a matter of record, just based on
performance. The same thing with AQ. The larger discussion
about immigration I would defer to the Secretary in the
Department.

Senator Cramer: But I would submit to you that as good
as the work that has been done in the last 20 years, the
last 6 or 7 months it has been pretty well degraded, I would
say. Others? Is immigration policy pretty important to
national security?

Secretary Austin: It absolutely is, Senator, and
again, I would not want to -- again, that is the domain of
Secretary Mayorkas, and I know that he and the interagency
are continuing to work that very hard.

Senator Cramer: All right. According to a CENTCOM
press release, General -- this is a quote -- "Post-strike
reflections indicate that Kabir Aidi was directly connected
to the ISIS-K leaders that coordinated the August 26th
attack at the airport." The way I read that, the actual
ISIS-K leaders who coordinated the attack are still out
there. Is that true?

General McKenzie: I would prefer to talk about it in a
private setting.

Senator Cramer: I thought you might. I look forward
to that and I yield back.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Cramer.

Now let me recognize Senator Duckworth, please.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I just wanted to say thank you. I just received a letter this morning in response to a letter I had written to you and Secretary Blinken asking about the process of certifying that somebody did work for the DoD as a contractor, and I do want to say that the response is a good one. I think you have made, with regards to Project Rabbit, which I will give you a couple of minutes to talk about, but it seems that you have reviewed over 7,800 employment records and matched over 3,400 of those PRECOM applicants. Would you like to talk about Operation Rabbit for just a little bit?

Secretary Austin: Well, only to say that, you know, I mentioned earlier, Senator, that when this question came up that this is important to us. We think we have to do everything we can to shorten the amount of time that it takes for somebody who has worked with us before to be able to verify that they have worked with us. We are going to continue to work on this, and again, one of my major directorates is focused on this. And we will work with the committee on this if you have further requirements. But
thanks for your support in this regard.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, and I know each one of us probably does have folks who have contacted our office seeking help in verifying their employment as a contractor, not just under DoD but also with State.

I would like to shift gears a little bit and talk about Mark Frerichs. Although military operations have ended, an Illinoian and a veteran of the U.S. Navy, Mr. Mark Frerichs is still being held hostage in Afghanistan. He was abducted in Kabul on January 31st of last year, and while he has been held captive too long, recent reporting in Newsweek indicates Taliban willingness to engage on his release.

Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official, confirmed that U.S. and Taliban negotiators have discussed my constituents and said about the prospect of a deal to secure Mr. Frerichs' freedom, quote, "There are attempts between the political bureau and the United States envoy which we hope will be successful in this regards. We must continue to press for Mr. Frerichs' swift and safe return. This must be a priority for our government." And in August, a Pentagon spokesperson stated the DoD is laser-focused on returning him home safely to his family and where he belongs.

And Secretary Austin, I know from our numerous conversations, including just yesterday, about my constituent, that you have been personally involved in
attempting to secure his return, both in your engagements with your counterparts in the region and your role as a member of the Principals Committee at the National Security Council.

Can you please update me on your discussions regarding Mr. Frerichs with your foreign counterparts as well as your interagency partners in our government? And I know his family is probably watching this testimony today.

Secretary Austin: As you have indicated, Senator, I want him back. And, you know, we are going to continue to do everything we can to get him back. As you and I have talked in other sessions, you know, I have engaged the chief of the Pakistani army on multiple occasions to solicit his help. I have engaged other senior leadership, Qataris, for example, to use their influence to see if they can help us there.

We will remain focused on this. You know, this is -- I am hopeful that we could see some daylight, some movement here in the future. I do not have anything to offer you in terms of specific readouts from the interagency process, and I defer to Mr. Sullivan to provide commentary there.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and I appreciate your commitment to getting Mr. Frerichs home. I am, however, frustrated by how little information there has been made available to congressional staff and
others when it comes to everyone who is trying to get allies
out of Afghanistan. General Milley, I understand from
public reporting that you have been working with some
veterans groups and some other NGOs who have been
voluntarily offering their help in the continued effort to
evacuate Americans and at-risk Afghans from Afghanistan.
Can you share any details with us and the public today about
that effort?

General Milley: Yes. So what we did, Senator, is we
did a little bit of outreach to some of the groups that are
probably well-known to folks in this room, had them in for
some sessions in the Defense Department to get coordinated
so we could have a common operating picture of what SIVs,
what P-1, P-2s, and what American citizens, most
importantly, are still there, try to get the information in
a single database, et cetera, from the various groups.
In addition to that, get them linked into Ambassador
Bass, because he is the single focal point with the
Department of State, which we have done that now. And we
have a joint staff general officer who is involved in that
working group with them, and he is our liaison and brings
them all together in order to get all the information, in
order to develop course of action to help bring out
additional American citizens and others.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you. Will you commit to
1 communicating with me and all of Congress about this
2 partnership so we can help facilitate the connections with
3 these people who still remain at risk and are contacting us
4 through our various offices?

5 General Milley: I will. It is being run by the
6 Department of State, but I will work with the Department of
7 State to make sure that they get it over to you, yes.

8 Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
9 Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Duckworth.
10 Let me recognize Senator Scott, please.
11 Senator Scott: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 General Milley, why would you, as the sitting Chairman
13 of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, talk to a reporter that is
14 writing a book about a prior administration? Why would that
15 be part of your job description?

16 General Milley: Well, as Senator Blackburn said
17 earlier, I deal with the media routinely. Two, three, four
18 times a week I am talking to the media, and the media,
19 whether it is books, TV news, reporters, we have a lot of
20 media here, I think it is very, very important to make sure
21 that senior officials talk to the media in all of its
22 various forms in order to explain what we are doing.
23 Senator Scott: But you are talking about what happened
24 in the past.

25 General Milley: Sure, past --
Senator Scott: Why would you do that? I mean, what is the upside to the American public of you talking to -- you know, you have sensitive information --

General Milley: Sure.

Senator Scott: -- you have a full-time job, and then you go and talk about the prior administration. I just do not get it. It does not make any sense to me. If the media wants to ask you about what we are doing right now, something like that, I get it, but the prior administration, why would you do that?

General Milley: I think it is important to make sure that the American people are transparent with what our government does. That is all. Nothing more complicated than that.

Senator Scott: So it has been reported you discussed sensitive information, including private conversations you had with the prior President with these reporters. How is that consistent with your testimony today that you will not talk about any conversations you have had with the President. You will only talk about what your position is. But it has been reported, by these reporters, that you have told them exactly the conversations you had with the prior President. Does that seem inconsistent?

General Milley: I am not so sure about what they are reporting about what I said in private conversations, et
cetera. I do not share private conversations with the
President, with this President, former President, any
President, period.

Senator Scott: So what these reporters are saying is
completely untrue.

General Milley: I am not going to say whether they are
-- I do not even know what they have written. I have not
read their books. But I can tell you that I do not share my
personal conversations with the President, period.

Senator Scott: So Senator Sullivan was asking about
this conversation about whether you would give prior notice
to the military in Communist China that America was going to
attack. So is it your testimony you will not ever give a
heads-up to the Communist Chinese military if the President
of the United States -- it does not matter who the President
is that you are reporting -- is ready to attack?

General Milley: Of course I would not.

Senator Scott: I mean, you do not feel like you did
that at all?

General Milley: No. The context we were talking
about, Senator, there was a significant degree of
intelligence, and I think I put the unclassified versions in
that timeline. It is not insignificant. It is not like one
report or two. It is an entire body of intelligence that
led us to believe that the Chinese were misinterpreting our
actions and misinterpreting what was happening inside our own country, politically, and they were assessing a situation that was leading to escalation, possible incident, and it would have been quite dangerous.

So Secretary Esper and I met, and we met with other members of the team, and we developed an engagement plan to ensure that we engaged at various levels. Secretary Esper had his DASD do it and he asked me to do it, so I did that. And I made a call, and the theme was to de-escalate, to lower tensions. And I believe that is a faithful and loyal execution of my constitutional responsibilities, and I believe that was faithfully executing the intent of the President of the United States at the time, because I knew -- I knew, with certainty, that President Trump was not going to attack the Chinese, just out of the blue. It was not going to happen. And if things did happen there would be periods of tension, calls going back and forth.

Senator Scott: I have one more question. It has been reported that you had concerns about the prior President's fitness for office. Do you have a criteria for Presidents, and have you reviewed the existing President, President Biden, for his fitness for office, or do you think that way? Do you think you have the ability to have a right to make those decisions, and have you been doing that?

General Milley: I am not qualified to evaluate the
mental fitness or the health of the former President, present President, or anybody else, or anybody in this room. That is not my job. That is not what I do, and that is not what I did. There was a lot of speculation going on, but I do not evaluate people's health and fitness. That is not my job.

Senator Scott: Okay. How did you feel when President Biden attacked the willingness of the Afghan military to fight? How did that make you feel?

General Milley: How did I feel --

Senator Scott: Yeah, when he went and attacked -- he said he did not think the Afghan military had the willingness to fight. As a military officer, how does that make you feel? I mean, something that you put your life on the line --

General Milley: I think the Afghan military sacrificed -- I mean, there were 60,000 or 70,000 Afghans that were killed in action over the last 20 years, defending their country, and I personally have witnessed to units that fought, fought well, and fought bravely, and gave their life for their country. But I would also say, at the same time, that over the summer, in those 11 days, the vast majority of the Afghan units put their weapons down, and they surrendered without a fight. Kabul was taken with a couple hundred guys on motorcycles and there was not a shot fired.
So my question to myself is how did we miss that? What happened? How did that happen? And that is one of the things we have got to figure out. How is it that an army of that size -- they were trained, they were manned, they were equipped, et cetera -- how is it that the factors of will and leadership and morale just collapsed like that? And we have to answer that to ourselves. But the Afghan army fought for their country for 20 years and lost a lot of people.

Senator Scott: Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Scott.

Senator Rosen, please.

Senator Rosen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank for being here with us throughout this long day.

You know, I just want to speak about how, as Americans, we are really frustrated, all of us, about the way we withdrew from Afghanistan, but we, nonetheless, understand the difficult position that you and our men and women in uniform, on the ground, were, the position you were in last month.

So what the American people fail to understand, however, and what I, too, have difficulty accepting, is the idea that the circumstances we found ourselves in were inevitable. So I would like to ask about a few areas where perhaps we might have taken a different approach that could
have given us more time to accomplish the mission.

General McKenzie, why was it always the responsibility of the U.S. and coalition forces or contractors to maintain Afghan aircraft and equipment, and why were the Afghan forces either not trained or not given this responsibility over the last 20 years?

General McKenzie: So I think you begin with the basic technological literacy of the country, which began when we first had dealing with them, in 2001. You know, you are talking to people who are coming out of rule by the Taliban, in position of Sharia law, a Stone Age approach to these things. You cannot impose technological literacy quickly. So that is why it took a long time, and we were still not finished with the Afghan air force.

And, you know, there is a lot of contract maintenance done for a lot of air forces around the world. The Afghan air force is not unique in that regard, although in this case it was particularly telling because they were so dependent on it.

Senator Rosen: And so understanding that, would it have been helpful to keep Bagram Air Base open in order to help with any of this going, any of the evacuation, anybody else coming through the country, another place for our citizens, people from other countries, or special SIV holders, any of those folks?
General McKenzie: Ma'am, I was intimately involved in all the decisions on Bagram, and in no way would Bagram have been able to contribute to either the effective use of the Afghan air force, its continued maintenance, or bringing people out. And very briefly, I can tell you that once we went below 2,500 people in Afghanistan, we lost the ability to hold Bagram Air Base. And it was inevitable that we were going to have to come out Bagram, because we ended up, in late June, early July, with 650 Marines and soldiers in the country. It was feasible to hold Bagram under those circumstances.

So we were driven by the plan, which we had all had an opportunity to work, that we were going to come out of Bagram. There was no way we were going to be able to keep Bagram and go to effective zero in Afghanistan. Just not possible.

Senator Rosen: Well, thinking of what we may have gained or may have lost as we leave, we think about countering adversaries. So again, General McKenzie, what is your assessment of the foreign influence in Afghanistan in the wake of our withdrawal, and what are the measures that we can take now to prevent our adversaries from filling the vacuum created by our departure?

General McKenzie: Senator, last week I was in Kazakhstan, in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, where
I hosted what we call the CASA CHOD conference. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Kurdish Republic, and Pakistan, we all met and we talked about that region after the fall of Afghanistan. And generally what they want is they want assurance. They want to continue to have ties with the United States, because they want alternatives to Russia and they want alternatives to China.

Unfortunately, because of their geographic location, they are going to always have to deal with Russia and China, but I think our partners in the region want a message that the United States is not going to turn our back on them, even though we left Afghanistan. And we had a very productive two-day conference, based on those themes.

Senator Rosen: Well, I could not agree more, because I think it makes us more vulnerable if we allow anyone else to fill that vacuum.

I would like to, in the just minute I have left, just touch briefly on the fate of Afghan women. What we have seen regarding the status of women in the territories where the Taliban had retained control prior to overthrowing the Afghan government, we know how horrible the conditions are for women. And so what do you see, moving forward, for the fate of Afghan women? What can we do? What do you see as the future for women's rights in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: Senator, during our long engagement
in Afghanistan I think we made great strides in educational and other opportunities for women in Afghanistan. I think those are all now gravely at risk with the return of the Taliban. So the levers that we have are economic and diplomatic, which are, you know, not part of the Department of Defense. But I think that is how we have to work the problem. And I do think there is opportunity. It will not be a long-lived opportunity, a matter of months perhaps, where we can force the Taliban down a certain path, based on their desire to have international financing, international recognition, the release of sanctions and other things that are very important to them.

So I think we have got to be very hard-nosed as we negotiate with them going forward, to ensure these gains are not lost.

Senator Rosen: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate the hearing today, and I will be submitting more questions for the record.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Rosen.

Senator Blackburn, please.

Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, I want to come back to you. We discussed that you have had conversations with Woodward, Costa, Leonning, Rucker, and Bender on their books. Correct?
General Milley: Not Costa.

Senator Blackburn: You did not on Costa.

General Milley: Not Costa. Woodward yes, and others.

Senator Blackburn: We will leave that as a point of discussion. Okay. In any of these conversations did you discuss private meetings with the President or White House officials?

General Milley: White House officials perhaps.

President, I do not think so.

Senator Blackburn: So you never discussed any of your conversations with President Trump.

General Milley: With President Trump --

Senator Blackburn: With any of these authors.

General Milley: -- no, not a prior conversation.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. Did you portray the commander in chief in a negative light or make comments that were critical of the commander in chief to any of these authors with which you had conversations?

General Milley: Not my comments or my observations, no.

Senator Blackburn: You did not?

General Milley: Others that were relayed to me from others.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. Well, I am looking forward to your book report on this.
Would you see these conversations as an abuse of executive privilege?

General Milley: I would not, no.

Senator Blackburn: You would not. Okay. Let me ask you this. What is your standard for determining when to leak private conversations with the President?

General Milley: I do not leak private conversations with the President.

Senator Blackburn: You did not. So you had these conversations with the authors but you do not see that as leaking information to which they were not entitled to know?

See, this is the problem --

General Milley: No, so --

Senator Blackburn: -- that we have. See, as a member of this committee, and as someone who represents a lot of our men and women in uniform that are there, as we have referenced today, I have really got an issue with the fact that you will talk to authors but then you all come in here and you say, "Well, we cannot tell you what we told the President." And then I have to drag it out of you that the written documents, which, under Article II you are supposed to give those to us, you cannot go hide behind somebody's skirts on this, and you do not want to give those to us.

So you have repeatedly told this committee that you will not reveal your private conversations with President
Biden, but then you have leaked this information from your meetings with President Trump. So it is important to us that you truthfully respond to us on this.

   General Milley: Yeah, absolutely.

   Senator Blackburn: And I think what you did with making time to talk to these authors, burnishing your image, kind of, you know, building that bluster, but then not putting the focus on Afghanistan and what was happening there. General Milley, that is really disappointing to me. I know it is disappointing to people that have served with you or under you, under your command, and it does not serve our nation well.

   You talked a little bit earlier about the damage, and you said "damage" was the right word to use when assessing what has happened in Afghanistan, when you look at America's credibility. So how do you look the men and women in the eye that have served under your command? How do you look young men in the eye that are coming to our military Academy Days and who want to serve, and say, "You can depend on me. I have got your back"? Because you know what? I think a lot of these families right now, they do not feel like you have their back. The special ops guys I met with Friday in my office in Nashville that are taking their time, their money, and risking their lives to do a job that the three of you could not do -- maybe we are going to remember you three
as the three that broke the military.

I do not know, but this is causing just a lot of anger from people who have trusted the military. They have felt like the military was one of the most trustworthy institutions. But in order to get a name in a book, in order to not be drawn into a political fight, what you have managed to do is to politicize the U.S. military to downgrade our reputation with our allies. Nobody has resigned. Nobody has submitted their resignation. And we have got thousands of people watching this hearing today that are looking at you all and saying, "I cannot believe they are sitting there and not answering the questions and are trying to punt."

I yield back.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Now let me recognize Senator Kelly.

Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Earlier today I had the opportunity to ask some questions. At the time, because we were short on time, I did not have the opportunity to thank all three of you -- General Milley, Secretary Austin, General McKenzie -- for your service to our country, serving in combat overseas, multiple deployments. You know, your family has served as well, all of your families, and I want to thank you personally for that. It is a big commitment. I understand it.
Secretary Austin, since U.S. troops departed Kabul on August 31st, the number of evacuation flights has been very small. The State Department briefed on Friday that only four charter flights have departed with U.S. support, and the ability to leave by a land route is even less right now.

The testimony today has indicated that the mission of facilitating evacuation for Americans and vulnerable Afghans is ongoing. Can you explain what role the military has in ongoing evacuation efforts behind led by the State Department?

Secretary Austin: You are correct, Senator. It is led by the State Department, and it is an interagency effort. And so as General Milley and I said earlier, we do have a senior officer participating in that cell that is run by Ambassador Bass, and they are reaching out to a number of different entities, veterans groups, many of your colleagues who have information that can be helpful in contacting people who have a desire to get out and have the right credentials. And if they do not have the right credentials, are there things that we can do to help them obtain those credentials if they have helped us, worked with us in the past, or if they are an American citizens with expired credentials.

Senator Kelly: And do you anticipate there will be transport from third countries? Many of our Afghan allies
have left and now find themselves in a third country.
Should we expect that there will be flights out of those
places as well?

Secretary Austin: I think those individuals, as they
work with our embassy personnel in those various countries
to help them, again, if they qualify as one of the people
who helped us in the past. Certainly either taking a
routine commercial flight or taking a charter flight that we
can help sponsor, I do anticipate there will be some sort of
activity in the future.

But again, I do not want to speak for the State
Department. I will tell you, Senator, that from a DoD
perspective we are going to do everything we can to help
enable this effort.

Senator Kelly: Throughout this evacuation effort, my
office worked closely with groups of former Afghan pilots
and women who served, in addition to American citizens and
veterans working to assist them in leaving the country.
These are men and women who trained with us, who fought with
us, and who are at heightened risk because of it. So I am
concerned that they were not a priority in our evacuation
efforts, and that guidance on immigration options for them
has been inadequate.

Due to the challenges and uncertainties of accessing
evacuation flights, many Afghan evacuees sought alternative
means of escape, flying to these third-party countries, as I mentioned. How is the Defense Department working with State right now to ensure that these individuals do not fall through the cracks with regards to resettlement?

Secretary Austin: Again, I would have to defer to State in terms of outlining what the resettlement processes are, but in terms of direct activity from the Department of Defense, we do not have much -- we are not a big part of that effort, that resettlement effort in third countries.

Senator Kelly: Well thank you, Mr. Secretary, and again I want to thank all three of you for being here today, and thank you for your service.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Kelley.

Senator Hawley, please.

Senator Hawley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Milley, I have just got one more question for you about these many book interviews that you did. I Alone Can Fix It is one book. Peril is another book. Frankly We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost is the third book. It seems like that is a significant outlay of time.

General Milley: I do not think so. I think -- Senator Hawley: They were short interviews?

General Milley: Relatively short. I do not think it took an excessive amount of time.
Senator Hawley: What was the time frame on these interviews for these three different books? By the way, for folks who do not know at home, you said you did not read the books. I do not think most people probably do. These are D.C. insider tell-all type books. But what was the time frame, did you say, that you were doing these interviews?

General Milley: I would say it took a couple of hours maybe.

Senator Hawley: But when? What is the time frame? When were you sitting for them? Dates?

General Milley: I can get you the dates. I do not know.

Senator Hawley: This year?

General Milley: I do not know off the top of my head but I will get you the dates.

Senator Hawley: 2021?

General Milley: Oh yeah.

Senator Hawley: So it was this calendar year.

General Milley: I think so, yeah. Sure.

Senator Hawley: Well, I just am wondering, clearly this is a priority for you. You did these on the record, by the way? All these interviews are on the record with these reporters? Did they quote you?

General Milley: I do interviews on the record, off the record, and I do background interviews, and I do all of that
with print media, television media, books, documentaries, all kinds of things.

Senator Hawley: Why would you do background and off-the-record interviews -- backgrounds means they cannot quote you -- background and off-the-record interviews if the goal is transparency?

General Milley: The transparency goes to the fact to make sure that we are explaining ourselves and make sure that these authors have correct information.

Senator Hawley: Is that attributable to you?

General Milley: You know, Let us take Woodward, for example. Probably 200 people interviewed and they approach my guys to say, "Are these facts true? This is what we heard," and we clarify and mitigate any incorrect information.

Senator Hawley: Interesting. Well, it is interesting. I mean, you are doing these interviews. You are doing them in 2021. It just makes me wonder, all of these books, were you maybe a little distracted, maybe a little distracted about what was going on in Afghanistan?

Here is why I am asking. General Miller testified to this committee that he warned about the rapid erosion of the military situation in Afghanistan as early as March of 2021. He further testified that he informed you about his view on this. He also testified that he said that the collapse of
the Afghan Security Forces and the Afghan government could come very fast in 2021.

General Milley: Hard and fast.

Senator Hawley: And he said that he informed you of this. He also said that he informed Secretary Austin of this.

General Milley: He did.

Senator Hawley: Now at the same time, however, in June, you were saying, and I quote you now, "An outright takeover by the Taliban is unlikely." That is at an Armed Services Committee meeting in the House, June 23rd. In July, you said the Afghan Security Forces had the capacity to sufficiently fight and defend their country. You also said that they were well equipped. On June 17th, you told the Senate Appropriations Committee the Afghan government had a 325,000 to 350,000 person security force, which we now know is a drastic overestimate, yet a few days later you lowered that to 300,000, which we still now is a drastic overestimate.

Your generals on the ground, your commander on the ground is saying one thing, the Taliban has a massive offensive underway from May 1st on, but yet you told us very different things in public. How do you reconcile those things? What am I missing?

General Milley: Well, first of all, Scott Miller did
say "hard and fast," and he also meant that, at least to me
and to others, that he meant that to be in the fall --
October, November, maybe even December time frame.

Senator Hawley: I heard you say that earlier. I am
curious about that. I would have to say that was not his
testimony to this committee.

General Milley: Well, what he said in the committee
was "hard and fast." He did not put a date on it, is the
readouts to me. I do not know. Did he put a date on it?

Senator Hawley: No, he did not put a date on it.

General Milley: But he did put a date on it.

Senator Hawley: That is what intrigues me.

General Milley: But he did put a date on it with me,
and to us. And when pressed it was after we leave -- that
was point one, which was 31 August -- and probably into the
October time frame, maybe Thanksgiving. And that is about
more or less where many of the intel assessments were --

Senator Hawley: He said he was a dissenter on the
intel assessment.

General Milley: He did. That is right.

Senator Hawley: And he did not put any of those
qualifies on his testimony to us. So are you saying he
shifted his testimony, General Miller, that he was not --

General Milley: No. I am saying what he told me was
it was likely to be in the October time frame. The intel
assessments were centering around November, Thanksgiving, at the latest, Christmas. Some intel assessments went into the next year.

Here is my point, Senator, is the intel assessments had two basic things, in my view, was the scale and scope plus the speed. All the intel assessments, all of us, got that wrong. There is no question about it. That was a swing and a miss on the intel assessment of 11 days in August. There is nobody that called that.

Senator Hawley: Well, can I just -- my time is about -- I appreciate that you have made these points. I do not mean to cut you off. It is just that my time is about to expire. I just want to say this. It seems to me that you put a high priority on making sure that you were favorably portrayed by the D.C. press corps. You spent a lot of time doing that. Fair enough if that is your priority. But at the same time, we had a rapidly deteriorating, frankly disastrous situation in Afghanistan, which resulted in the death of 13 soldiers, including one from my home state, hundreds of civilians, and hundreds of Americans left behind. And in my view, that mission cannot be called a success in any way, shape, or form, logistical or otherwise.

General, I think you should resign. Secretary Austin, I think you should resign. I think this mission was a catastrophe. I think there is no other way to say it, and
there has to be accountability. I respectfully submit it should begin with you. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Senator, your time has expired.

Senator Hawley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Senator Tuberville.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, you have spoken today a lot about civilian control of the military. I appreciate the statements made about that today. On June 10th, though, I asked formal questions for the record about Bagram Airfield, and I pointed out that having a major air base within 500 miles of Iranian and Chinese borders would be a strategically, very strategically and valuable. I asked you about the feasibility of retaining Bagram Airfield as a U.S. base. I am still waiting for a reply. I hope you do see today ignoring, you know, questions that might come up from civilian oversight sometimes backfires on you a little bit. You apologized for being late with your statement today, the hearing. But you have just got to understand the pattern here. I heard Senator Blackburn say about the book. You know, you have got to see how demissive it looks to Congress that you have had time to interview and do all these interviews but questions are not answered. So I am just troubled by some of those things.

And also, on August 18th you said, quote, "There is
nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated the
collapse of the army and this government in 11 days," end
quote. I find it unbelievable, with your staff of 3,200
people and a budget of $419 million taxpayer dollars that we
did not see the obviously. But I do think you saw it,
because July 11, 2019, you said, quote, "I think pulling out
prematurely would be a strategic mistake," end quote. You
also said that here today. Do you agree?

General Milley: I 100 percent agree.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you.

General Milley: May I comment?

Senator Tuberville: Yeah. Go ahead.

General Milley: On your first two points. On the
intel piece, I stay with what I said. Nobody called it, 11
days in August. There was nobody who did that. And I
brought the intel reports, and when we go into classified
session I am happy to go over all of them, on the first
thing. And then the Bagram thing, I did put a very lengthy
response in my written statement. I do not know if you had
an opportunity to read it yet. I would encourage you to
read it. It is also something that General McKenzie put in
his. And I can assure that we looked at that whole Bagram
issue very, very carefully.

Senator Tuberville: And here is what I am struggling
with, General McKenzie. In 1945, we left Japan. They are
one of our biggest allies today and we are still there.

Germany is the same way. Korea, the same way. We had 2,500 troops. The war stopped in 2014, and we started Operation Resolute Support, and we are having all these people -- we have got to get out here. Folks, we are going to pay for what we just did. I mean, I have got young kids. You all got kids and grandkids, and we are going to be back in there fighting.

What are your thoughts about that, General McKenzie?

And I know we are not talking about the President. You know, what do you think about the future of what we have got to do in Afghanistan?

General McKenzie: So we have very few levers in Afghanistan right now, because we have completely pulled out.

Senator Tuberville: Will we be back?

General McKenzie: I think we are always going to reserve the right to go in, to go after ISIS and Al Qaeda targets as they present themselves. We have been very clear on that. And that is not going to be easy, and we will talk a little bit more about that in the closed session. It will not be easy to do that. It will be possible to do that.

As for larger engagements, with the Taliban or whatever government follows them, I mean, that is going to be hard road, from where I sit, and I see a very small slice of
that. That is really a question, you know, for diplomats and others to talk about how our future relationship with the government as a whole will be.

But I think, my judgment will be they are going to regress significantly in every sphere of activity in Afghanistan over the next few years with the Taliban in charge.

Senator Tuberville: We can afford to survive with our military. We have got that kind of money. And it just burns me up that we are eventually going to have to go back there. We are going to have problems here. I think we should have looked at it, and I know President Biden wanted to get out. He told people. President Trump wanted to get out. I disagreed with it. I mean, we gave up the best base in that area, and it is just amazing to me that we are going to have to go back, and hopefully we do not lose its challenge. What are your thoughts about it, as we end it up here, Secretary Austin?

Secretary Austin: I do not think it is preordained that we are going to have to go back, Senator. I would tell you that what you have heard us say is that we recognize that transnational terrorists will migrate towards ungoverned spaces. We also are committed to not allowing Al Qaeda to regenerate and be able to export terror from Afghanistan to the United States of America. And we will
remain laser-focused on that going forward, and we will do
everything within our power to make sure that that does not
happen.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you. Could I ask you one
question? Are you against dishonorable discharges to the
military for not taking a vaccine? You are the leader of
the DoD.

Secretary Austin: I am the leader, and again, we have
a nonjudicial -- excuse me, a UCMJ that really addresses all
of the issues in the military, and gives our leadership what
they need to be able to enforce standards.

Taking the vaccine is a requirement, and again, I will
just leave it at that.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator
Tuberville. Gentlemen, thank you very much. This has been
a long day, and we still have a closed session in SVC-217.
There is a vote ongoing now, so I would suggest we reconvene
in SVC-217 at 3:45. We will give an opportunity for a brief
respite, a very brief respite.

With that I will adjourn the open session.

[Whereupon, at 3:24 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]