George W. Bush says the events in Afghanistan fill him 'with deep sadness.'

By Shashank Bengali

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President George W. Bush, who ordered the 2001 U.S.-led invasion that drove the Taliban from power, said this week that he felt "deep sadness" at the group's takeover of Afghanistan and defended his decision to launch what would become America's longest war.

"Our hearts are heavy for both the Afghan people who have suffered so much and for the Americans and NATO allies who have sacrificed so much," the former president and his wife, Laura Bush, wrote in a letter released on Monday.

Mr. Bush was in his first year in office, with little experience in foreign affairs, when the Sept. 11 attacks prompted him to deploy troops to Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban government that had sheltered the terrorist leader Osama bin Laden.

But then Mr. Bush turned his focus to invading Iraq, the costly military campaign that would come to define his presidency, leaving the Afghanistan mission to drag on with ill-defined goals and little oversight.

In his letter, Mr. Bush addressed U.S. troops who had served in Afghanistan, including thousands who did multiple tours, arguing that he had not sent them to war in vain.

"You took out a brutal enemy and denied Al Qaeda a safe haven while building schools, sending supplies and providing medical care," he said. "You kept America safe from further terror attacks, provided two decades of security and opportunity for millions and made America proud."

Many of the gains ushered in by the two-decade U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan — more opportunities for women, more girls enrolled in school, a freer news media environment — could be at risk under the Taliban.

The hard-line Islamist group banned popular music and carried out public executions when it ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s, and as an insurgent movement it was known for suicide bombings that killed thousands of civilians and members of ethnic and religious minorities.

Mr. Bush called on the Biden administration to take in more Afghan refugees and speed the process of evacuating Afghans and U.S. citizens threatened by the Taliban. He urged the U.S. government to "cut the red tape."

"We have the responsibility and the resources to secure safe passage for them now, without bureaucratic delay," he said.