

The U.S. War in Afghanistan: How It Started, and How It Ended

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By David Zucchino

Oct. 7, 2021

The American mission in Afghanistan has come to a tragic and chaotic end.

The U.S. military departed the country on Aug. 30, a day ahead of schedule, ending a 20-year occupation and leaving Afghanistan in the Taliban's hands. As the last evacuation flight departed, it left behind at least 100,000 people, by one estimate, who might be eligible for expedited U.S. visas.

A ferocious summertime offensive had delivered victory to the Taliban on Aug. 15, hours after the president, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country. Taliban leaders took his place in the presidential palace, driving tens of thousands of people to the country's borders. Others flooded to the international airport in Kabul, where crowds scrambled to be part of the evacuations of foreign nationals and their Afghan allies.

Days of chaos at the airport were punctuated by a suicide attack on Aug. 26 that killed as many as 180 people, including 13 American troops. It was one of the deadliest attacks of the war, and the troops were the first American service members to die in the country since February 2020.

The collapse of the Afghan government, after the United States spent billions to support it and the Afghan security forces, was a crushing and violent coda to the U.S. military mission in America's longest war.

That combat mission dogged four presidents, who reckoned with American casualties, a ruthless enemy and an often confounding Afghan government partner, as well as a nominal ally, Pakistan, which supplied and supported the Taliban while providing the militants a safe haven.

How did the U.S. withdrawal go?



U.S. and other coalition soldiers boarding helicopters to leave Bagram Air Field in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

In mid-April, President Biden, declaring that the United States had long ago accomplished its mission of denying terrorists a safe haven in Afghanistan, announced that all American troops would leave the country by Sept. 11. He later moved the date up to Aug. 31.

Mr. Biden said that after nearly 20 years of war, it was clear that the U.S. military could not transform Afghanistan into a modern, stable democracy.

Responding in July to critics of the withdrawal, the president asked: “Let me ask those who wanted us to stay: How many more? How many thousands more of America’s daughters and sons are you willing to risk?”

The United States had planned to leave behind about 650 troops to secure its embassy in Kabul. But the sudden and shocking Taliban victory forced the embassy into a swift, panicked shutdown as staffers shredded and burned sensitive documents before a makeshift embassy compound was set up at the Kabul airport.

With Taliban gunmen controlling the streets of Kabul and other cities, dread has set in across the capital and elsewhere in Afghanistan.

In Kabul, Taliban gunmen have gone door-to-door in some neighborhoods, searching for anyone who had supported the government or the American effort. And despite public promises by Taliban leaders of a more moderate approach to governing, restrictions have been imposed on women, and the Taliban have cracked down on some independent journalists.

“This did unfold more quickly than we had anticipated,” Mr. Biden said in a speech on Aug. 16, adding that he stood by his decision to end American military involvement in Afghanistan.



An American B-52 bomber circling above Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains in 2001. Joao Silva/The New York Times

Why did the United States invade Afghanistan?

Weeks after Al Qaeda attacked the United States on Sept. 11, President George W. Bush announced that American forces had launched attacks against the terrorist group and Taliban targets in Afghanistan.

Mr. Bush said the Taliban, which then governed most of Afghanistan, had rejected his demand to turn over Al Qaeda leaders who had planned the attacks from bases inside Afghanistan. He said he intended to bring Al Qaeda leaders to justice, adding, “Now the Taliban will pay a price.”

“These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime,” the president said.

Even then, the president warned that Operation Enduring Freedom would entail “a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen.”

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By December 2001, Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al Qaeda, and other top commanders had fled to safety in Pakistan, a nominal U.S. ally. American forces did not pursue them, and Pakistan ultimately evolved into a safe haven for Taliban fighters, who in subsequent years crossed the border to attack American and Afghan forces.

Inside Afghanistan, American troops quickly toppled the Taliban government and crushed its fighting forces.

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In December 2001, the Taliban's spokesman offered an unconditional surrender, which was rejected by the United States. In May 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced an end to major combat operations in the country.



Hamid Karzai, the leader of Afghanistan's interim government, after his inauguration in Kabul in December 2001. James Hill for The New York Times

How did the mission in Afghanistan evolve?

After routing the Taliban, the United States and NATO turned to rebuilding a failed state and establishing a Western-style democracy, spending billions trying to reconstruct a desperately poor country already ravaged by two decades of war, first during the Soviet occupation of the 1980s and then during a civil war.

There were early successes. A pro-Western government was installed. New schools, hospitals and public facilities were built. Thousands of girls, barred from education under Taliban rule, attended school. Women, largely confined to their homes by the Taliban, went to college, joined the work force and served in Parliament and government. A vigorous, independent news media emerged.

But corruption was rampant, with hundreds of millions of dollars in reconstruction money stolen or misappropriated. The government proved unable to meet the most basic needs of its citizens. Often, its authority evaporated outside major cities.

In 2003, with 8,000 American troops in Afghanistan, the United States began shifting combat resources to the war in Iraq, started in March of that year.



Afghan soldiers rushing a wounded police officer to an American helicopter in Kunar Province in March 2010. Moises Saman for The New York Times

What happened on the battlefield?

Despite the presence of American and NATO troops and air power, the Taliban rebuilt their fighting capabilities.

In 2009, President Barack Obama began deploying thousands more troops to Afghanistan in a “surge” that reached nearly 100,000 by mid-2010. But the Taliban only grew stronger, inflicting heavy casualties on Afghan security forces.

In May 2011, a U.S. Navy SEAL team killed Osama bin Laden in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where he had been living for years near a military training academy. In June, Mr. Obama announced that he would start bringing American forces home and hand over security duties to the Afghans by 2014.

By then, the Pentagon had concluded that the war could not be won militarily and that only a negotiated settlement could end the conflict — the third in three centuries involving a world power. Afghan fighters defeated the British army in the 19th century and the Russian military in the 20th century.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

With the war at a stalemate, Mr. Obama ended major combat operations on Dec. 31, 2014, and transitioned to training and assisting Afghan security forces.

Nearly three years later, President Donald J. Trump said that although his first instinct had been to withdraw all troops, he would nonetheless continue to prosecute the war. He stressed that any troop withdrawal would be based on combat conditions, not predetermined timelines.

But the Trump administration also had been talking to the Taliban since 2018, leading to formal negotiations that excluded the Afghan government, led by President Ashraf Ghani.

Ahead of the planned withdrawal in August, the Taliban's summer-long military campaign had forced widespread surrenders and retreats by beleaguered Afghan government forces. In many cases, they gave up without a fight, sometimes following the intercession of village elders dispatched by the Taliban. At the same time, civilian casualties soared to some of the highest levels of the two-decade old war.



Taliban prisoners lining up at Bagram before being released in May last year. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

What about the peace talks last year?

In February 2020, the Trump administration signed an agreement with the Taliban that called for all American forces to leave Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, though Mr. Biden would later extend that deadline. In return, the Taliban pledged to cut ties with terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, reduce violence and negotiate with the American-backed Afghan government.

But the agreement included no mechanisms to enforce the Taliban commitments. And the exclusion of the Afghan government from the deal strained its relations with the United States.

After the deal was signed, the Taliban stopped attacking American troops and refrained from major bombings in Afghan cities. The United States reduced air support for government forces.

The primary objectives of the 2020 deal were for Afghan leaders and the Taliban to negotiate a political road map for a new government and constitution, reduce violence and ultimately forge a lasting cease-fire.

But the government accused the Taliban of assassinating Afghan government officials and security force members, civil society leaders, journalists and human rights workers — including several women shot in broad daylight.

Because of their strong battlefield position and the U.S. troop withdrawal, the Taliban maintained the upper hand in talks with the Afghan government, which began in September in Doha, Qatar, but eventually stalled. The Pentagon has said the militants did not honor pledges to reduce violence or cut ties with terrorist groups.



A battle-weary Afghan police unit in Zabul Province in February 2020. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

Why were Afghan security forces unable to hold off the Taliban?

Military and police units in Afghanistan have been hollowed out by desertions, low recruitment rates, poor morale and the theft of pay and equipment by commanders. They have suffered high casualty rates, which American commanders have said were not sustainable.

How the Taliban Captured Afghanistan

The brutal campaign by the Taliban to recapture Afghanistan gained ground earlier this year, when officers in rural outposts began to surrender. It picked up steam almost immediately after American troops began to withdraw on May 1 and on Sunday, the Taliban swiftly captured Kabul, seizing control over the country.

October 1, 2017

Mazar-i-Sharif

AFGHANISTAN

May 5, 2021

Mazar-i-Sharif

Sheberg

Sar

Kabul

AFGHANISTAN

Kabul

Herat

AFGI

Farah

Kandahar

Kandahar

Lashkar Gah

Zaranj

Source: FDD's Long War Journal (control areas as of Aug. 16) • By Scott Reinhard and Taylor Johnston

Even though the United States has spent at least \$4 billion a year on the Afghan military, a classified intelligence assessment presented to the Biden administration this spring said Afghanistan could fall largely under Taliban control within two to three years after the departure of international forces.

The fall was much swifter than that.

"Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country," Mr. Biden said, accusing the military of laying down their arms after two decades of U.S. training.

As Taliban fighters took over provincial capitals, government counterattacks fought to retake a handful of bases and districts. Some former Afghan warlords mobilized private militias, while other Afghans joined volunteer militias, many of them armed and financed by the government.

But the Taliban still overtook a string of provincial capitals before moving into Kabul — a frightening development for many who thought that they could build a life under the protection of their American allies.

Once in power, the Taliban said that they would ensure order and public safety, and that they were seeking relations with other global powers, including Russia and China, in part to receive economic support.

Jacey Fortin, Carlotta Gall and Alan Yuhas contributed reporting.