

## NEWS ANALYSIS

## *Biden Ran on Competence and Empathy. Afghanistan Is Testing That.*

The chaotic endgame of the American withdrawal has undercut some of the most fundamental premises of President Biden's presidency.



By Peter Baker

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For most of the last week, in the fires of the worst foreign policy crisis of his young administration, the president who won the White House on a promise of competence and compassion has had trouble demonstrating much of either.

The chaos in Kabul and his own conflicting messages have left President Biden struggling to assert command over world events and seemingly more intent on washing his hands of Afghanistan than expressing concern over the humanitarian tragedy unfolding on the ground.

Mr. Biden's team argues that it will not matter in the long run because Americans agree with his decision to pull out after 20 years of war and do not care what happens in Afghanistan as long as their fellow citizens are extracted safely. Afghanistan is America's longest war, stretching through four presidencies, and none of those presidents found a way to disengage successfully.

But the tumultuous endgame of Mr. Biden's withdrawal has nonetheless undercut some of the most fundamental premises of Mr. Biden's presidency — that unlike his erratic, self-absorbed predecessor, he brought foreign policy seasoning, adults-in-the-room judgment and a surfeit of empathy to the Oval Office.

"I just had the feeling that he was so wrapped up in the decision itself that he forgot the basics of implementation," said Leon E. Panetta, the former defense secretary who served alongside Mr. Biden in President Barack Obama's administration. "The American people may be with you on the decision, but if they see chaos, they're going to be very concerned that the president doesn't have his act together."

David Axelrod, a former strategist for Mr. Obama, said he had no doubt that most Americans agreed with Mr. Biden that it was time to wrap up the Afghanistan operation. "The way it's ending, at least thus far, is more problematical," he said, "and cuts against some of his core perceived strengths: competence, mastery of foreign policy, supreme empathy. It's as if his eagerness to end the war overran the planning and execution."

After days of withering criticism from allies as well as adversaries, Mr. Biden tried to repair some of the damage on Friday with a half-hour appearance in the East Room of the White House where he asserted that the evacuation operation had "made significant progress" while acknowledging that images of desperate Afghans chasing planes and handing a baby over barbed wire have been "heartbreaking" and "gut-wrenching."

Faulted earlier in the week for not consulting with allies, Mr. Biden made a point of noting that he had now called the leaders of Britain, Germany and France. Mocked for spending time at Camp David, where he had gone for summer break, while Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, Mr. Biden delayed plans to fly Friday afternoon to his home in Wilmington, Del., until Saturday.

Mr. Panetta said Mr. Biden seemed to have realized that he had mishandled the message, at least, and needed to make adjustments. "I just had a sense that he was back on his feet today as opposed to earlier in the week," he said.

Beyond repeating that "the buck stops with me," however, Mr. Biden conceded no mistakes of his own and again deflected the harsh reviews by focusing on his desire to end the war rather than directly addressing what many consider the botched execution of that decision.

"There will be plenty of time to criticize and second-guess when this operation is over," Mr. Biden said. "But now, now, I'm focused on getting this job done."

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As he has all week, Mr. Biden made assertions seemingly at odds with reality. His description of a smoother evacuation contrasted with the continuing confusion at the Kabul airport, where flights were halted for hours on Friday until they resumed late in the day. His claim that there was “no question of our credibility” with NATO allies belied the deep frustration in European capitals. And while Mr. Biden hailed the “degree of precision” of the operation, he could not say how many Americans were still in danger.

Those comments came after other suspect statements earlier in the week. A month after he said it was “highly unlikely” the Taliban would take over Afghanistan and there was “no circumstance” that would lead to a chaotic, Saigon-like exit, Mr. Biden told George Stephanopoulos of ABC News this week that chaos was in fact always inevitable. While multiple reports indicated that military leaders argued to keep a small force in Afghanistan rather than pull out entirely, Mr. Biden insisted that “no one said that to me that I can recall.”

At points, the president has evinced little sense of the human toll as the Taliban swept back to power. Asked about pictures of fleeing Afghans packed into planes and some even falling to their death after trying to sneak aboard, Mr. Biden interrupted. “That was four days ago, five days ago,” he said, when in fact it was two days earlier and hardly made less horrific by the passage of a couple of sunsets.

While largely disavowing any errors, Mr. Biden instead has pointed the finger at his predecessor Donald J. Trump, the now-deposed Afghan government, the vanishing Afghan security forces and even Afghan civilians who he said resisted being evacuated earlier. He has avoided blaming the Taliban, presumably to avoid antagonizing them while executing the evacuation.



Taliban forces in Kabul on Friday. Mr. Biden's team argues that Americans agree with the pullout after 20 years of war and do not care what happens in Afghanistan if their fellow citizens are extracted safely. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Losing the public perception of basic competence can be hazardous for a presidency. Jimmy Carter learned that during the Iran hostage crisis that began in 1979 and ultimately cost him re-election a year later. George W. Bush learned that during the mishandled response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Mr. Trump's critics never considered him particularly apt in office, but his handling of the coronavirus pandemic undermined him further.

Mr. Biden's stumbles have been particularly striking given that the longtime senator and former vice president brought more experience in national and international affairs to the White House than any newly inaugurated president in more than three decades. But his aides maintain that Americans will look beyond the turmoil of recent days to the bigger picture.

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**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.

“What Americans are seeing is a president who has the courage of his conviction that this is the right decision for our country, even when that decision is hard,” said Kate Bedingfield, the White House communications director. “They are seeing a president who promised to end America’s longest war and kept his word, and who takes responsibility when things don’t go perfectly because the buck stops with him.”

The Biden team’s cold political calculation is that the outrage expressed by the Washington political class and the ghastly images shown by the national news media will have little lasting effect on Americans who will soon forget the messy departure but remember that the president got the United States out of a failed war.

They may be right. By Friday, newspapers in places like Phoenix, Fresno, Jacksonville, Minneapolis and Providence had no stories about Afghanistan on their front pages. Americans historically have not voted much on foreign policy unless it directly involved Americans, which is why Mr. Biden’s main priority has been to get his own citizens out without casualties or a hostage situation.

“Biden thinks he gets away with this as long as there are no Americans that are killed on the ground, which is a big if because a lot of things could go wrong,” said Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, a geopolitical risk firm. “But I happen to agree with him. I think that’s right.” At the same time, he added, “I’m amazed at how he’s mishandled this with the allies.”

The political danger for Mr. Biden may be that the chaotic exit provides fodder for a broader Republican argument that he is not up to the job and has left the United States humiliated on the world stage. The pictures of bedlam are like political manna for campaign ad-makers who no doubt will try to paint Mr. Biden as another Mr. Carter.

Some of those who have criticized Mr. Biden nonetheless said the final verdict was yet to be written. It will hinge, they said, on whether he can ensure the safety not just of Americans trying to leave the country but also the Afghans who worked with the United States over the past two decades, even if it takes longer than Mr. Biden’s Aug. 31 deadline.

“The president still has a lot of agency over how this will be perceived and the impact on our reputation for compassion and competence,” said Representative Tom Malinowski, a Democrat from New Jersey. “It all depends on whether he’s willing to do what it takes and to allow our military to do what it’s capable of doing to rescue everybody we can without regard to any artificial deadline.”

That chapter may be written in the next few days and weeks.