

Timeline of U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Key decisions by two administrations determined to end America's longest war

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The blame game has begun over who lost Afghanistan.

The fact is, President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, were both eager to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan and end what Biden referred to in his [Aug. 16 speech](#) as “America’s longest war.”

The Trump administration in February 2020 negotiated a [withdrawal agreement](#) with the Taliban that [excluded the Afghan government](#), freed 5,000 imprisoned Taliban soldiers and set a date certain of May 1, 2021, for the final withdrawal.

And the Trump administration kept to the pact, reducing U.S. troop levels from about [13,000](#) to [2,500](#), even though the Taliban [continued to attack](#) Afghan government forces and [welcomed al-Qaeda](#) terrorists into the Taliban leadership.



Biden delayed the May 1 withdrawal date that he inherited. But ultimately his administration pushed ahead with a plan to withdraw by Aug. 31, despite obvious signs that the Taliban wasn’t complying

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with the agreement and had a [stated goal](#) to create an “Islamic government” in Afghanistan after the U.S. left, even if it meant it had to “continue our war to achieve our goal.”

Biden [assured Americans](#) last month that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was “not inevitable,” and denied that U.S. intelligence assessed that the Afghan government would likely collapse. But it did — and quickly.

Here we lay out many of the key diplomatic decisions, military actions, presidential pronouncements and expert assessments of the withdrawal agreement that ended the U.S. military’s 20-year war in Afghanistan — a war that has “taken the lives of nearly 2,500 U.S. servicemen and servicewomen, cost a trillion dollars, and occupied the attention of four presidential administrations,” as the Afghanistan Study Group [put it](#) in a February report.

Trump Strikes a Deal

Feb. 29, 2020 — U.S. and Taliban sign an [agreement](#) that sets the terms for a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, but do not release two classified annexes that set the conditions for U.S. withdrawal. At the time of the agreement, the U.S. had about 13,000 troops in Afghanistan, [according to](#) a Department of Defense inspector general report.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops is contingent on the “Taliban’s action against al-Qaeda and other terrorists who could threaten us,” Trump says in a [speech](#) at the Conservative Political Active Conference. (U.S. withdrawals, however, occurred despite the fact that the Defense Department inspector general’s office repeatedly reported that the Taliban worked with al-Qaeda.)

The pact includes the release of 5,000 Taliban fighters who have been held prisoners by the Afghanistan government, which is not a party to the agreement.

March 1, 2020 — Afghan President Ashraf Ghani objects to a provision in the agreement that would require his country to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners. “Freeing Taliban prisoners is not [under] the authority of America but the authority of the Afghan government,” Ghani [says](#). “There has been no commitment for the release of 5,000 prisoners.”

March 4, 2020 — Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley [tells](#) the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Taliban pledged in the classified documents not to attack U.S. troops and coalition forces or launch “high-profile attacks,” including in Afghanistan’s 34 provincial capitals. “[T]he Taliban have signed up to a whole series of conditions ... all the Members of the Congress have all the documents associated with this agreement,” Milley says.

Despite the agreement, the Taliban [attack](#) Afghan forces in Helmand province, and the U.S. responds with an air strike.

March 10, 2020 — Under pressure from the U.S., Ghani [orders the release](#) of 1,500 Taliban prisoners, but at the rate of 100 per day.

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May 19, 2020 — In releasing its [quarterly report](#) on Afghanistan, the DOD inspector general’s office says the U.S. cut troop levels in Afghanistan by more than 4,000, even though “the Taliban escalated violence further after signing the agreement.”

“U.S. officials stated the Taliban must reduce violence as a necessary condition for continued U.S. reduction in forces and that remaining high levels of violence could jeopardize the U.S.-Taliban agreement,” [according to](#) the report, which covered activity from Jan. 1, 2020, to March 31, 2020. “Even still, the United States began to reduce its forces in Afghanistan from roughly 13,000 to 8,600.”

Aug. 18, 2020 — In releasing a [report](#) that covered activity in Afghanistan from April 1, 2020, to June 30, 2020, the Defense Department inspector general’s office says, “The Taliban did not appear to uphold its commitment to distance itself from terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. UN and U.S. officials reported that the Taliban continued to support al-Qaeda, and conducted joint attacks with al-Qaeda members against Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.”

Sept. 3, 2020 — Afghanistan [releases](#) the final 400 Taliban prisoners, as required under the U.S.-Taliban agreement, clearing the way for intra-Afghan peace talks to begin.

Sept. 12, 2020 — After seven months of delays, Afghanistan government officials and Taliban representatives [meet in Qatar](#) for peace talks. The U.S.-Taliban agreement called for the first peace talks to begin on March 10.

Sept. 16, 2020 — The Taliban continued attacks on government forces. The Voice of America [reported](#) that “Taliban attacks in three provinces across northern Afghanistan since Tuesday killed at least 17 people, including six civilians, and wounded scores of others even as a Taliban political team was negotiating peace with Afghan government representatives in Doha, Qatar.”

Sept. 18, 2020 — At a press conference, Trump [says](#), “We’re dealing very well with the Taliban. They’re very tough, they’re very smart, they’re very sharp. But, you know, it’s been 19 years, and even they are tired of fighting, in all fairness.”

Nov. 16, 2020 — Congressional Republicans, responding to [news reports](#) that the Trump administration will rapidly reduce forces in Afghanistan, [warn](#) of what Sen. Marco Rubio calls “a Saigon-type of situation” in Afghanistan. “A rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan now would hurt our allies and delight the people who wish us harm,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell says.

Nov. 17, 2020 — Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller formally [announces](#) that the U.S. will reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 by Jan. 15, 2021.

On the same day, the Defense Department IG’s office [released a report](#) for the quarter ending Sept. 30, 2020, that said the peace negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives had stalled and violence increased. “At the same time, the Taliban increased its attacks against Afghan forces, leading to ‘distressingly high’ levels of violence that could threaten the peace agreement,” the report said.

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Dec. 2, 2020 — After past false starts, Afghan and Taliban negotiators [agree](#) on a framework to govern peace negotiations. “At the same time, the Taliban continued its ‘fight and talk’ strategy, increasing violence across the country to increase its leverage with the Afghan government in negotiations,” the Defense Department IG’s office said a [quarterly report](#) covering this period.

The IG report also continued to warn that the Taliban was apparently violating the withdrawal agreement. “This withdrawal is contingent on the Taliban abiding by its commitments under the agreement, which include not allowing terrorists to use Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies,” [the report said](#). “However, it was unclear whether the Taliban was in compliance with the agreement, as members of al-Qaeda were integrated into the Taliban’s leadership and command structure.”

Jan. 15 — “Today, U.S. force levels in Afghanistan have reached 2,500,” Miller, the acting defense secretary, [says](#) in a statement. “[T]his drawdown brings U.S. forces in the country to their lowest levels since 2001.”

Afghanistan’s First Vice President Amrullah Saleh [tells the BBC](#) that the Trump administration made too many concessions to the Taliban. “I am telling [the United States] as a friend and as an ally that trusting the Taliban without putting in a verification mechanism is going to be a fatal mistake,” Saleh says, adding that Afghanistan leaders warned the U.S. that “violence will spike” as the 5,000 Taliban prisoners were released. “Violence has spiked,” he added.

Biden Follows Through

Feb. 3 — The Afghanistan Study Group, which was created by Congress in December 2019 and charged with making policy recommendations for a peaceful transition in Afghanistan, [releases a report](#) recommending changes to the agreement with the Taliban. “The most important revision is to ensure that a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops is based not on an inflexible timeline but on all parties fulfilling their commitments, including the Taliban making good on its promises to contain terrorist groups and reduce violence against the Afghan people, and making compromises to achieve a political settlement,” it said.

Feb. 19 — Biden reiterates his [campaign promise](#) to bring U.S. troops home from Afghanistan, saying during [remarks](#) at the Munich Security Conference, “My administration strongly supports the diplomatic process that’s underway and to bring an end to this war that is closing out 20 years. We remain committed to ensuring that Afghanistan never again provides a base for terrorist attacks against the United States and our partners and our interests.”

March 7 — Secretary of State Antony Blinken [tells](#) Afghanistan President Ashra Ghani that, despite future U.S. financial assistance, he is “concerned that the security situation will worsen and the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.”

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March 25 — Gen. Richard Clarke, commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, [tells](#) the Senate Armed Services Committee that “it is clear that the Taliban have not upheld what they said they would do and reduce the violence. While...they have not attacked U.S. forces, it is clear that they took a deliberate approach and increased their violence...since the peace accords were signed.”

March 25 — During a [press conference](#) at the White House, Biden says “it’s going to be hard to meet the May 1 deadline. Just in terms of tactical reasons, it’s hard to get those troops out.” He assures that “if we leave, we’re going to do so in a safe and orderly way.” Without committing to a pullout date, Biden says, “it is not my intention to stay there for a long time. But the question is: How and in what circumstances do we meet that agreement that was made by President Trump to leave under a deal that looks like it’s not being able to be worked out to begin with? How is that done? But we are not staying a long time.”

April 14 — Saying it is “time to end the forever war,” Biden announces that all troops will be removed from Afghanistan by Sept. 11.

In a [speech](#) explaining the decision, Biden says he became convinced after trip to Afghanistan in 2008 that “more and endless American military force could not create or sustain a durable Afghan government.” Biden says the U.S. achieved its initial and primary objective, “to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again” and that “our reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear.”

Biden says he “inherited a diplomatic agreement” between the U.S. and the Taliban that all U.S. forces would be out by May 1. “It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something,” Biden says, adding that final troop withdrawal would begin on May 1.

“We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit,” Biden says. “We’ll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely.” Biden assures Americans that the U.S. has “trained and equipped a standing force of over 300,000 Afghan personnel” and that “they’ll continue to fight valiantly, on behalf of the Afghans, at great cost.”

April 15 — In response to Biden’s decision to delay full withdrawal until Sept. 11, the Taliban releases a [statement](#) that says failure to complete the withdrawal by May 1 “opens the way for [the Taliban] to take every necessary countermeasure, hence the American side will be held responsible for all future consequences.”

April 18 — In a [released statement](#), Trump criticizes Biden’s Sept. 11 withdrawal deadline saying, “we can and should get out earlier.” He concludes, “Getting out of Afghanistan is a wonderful and positive thing to do. I planned to withdraw on May 1st, and we should keep as close to that schedule as possible.”

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May 18 — The Defense Department IG [releases a report](#) for the first three months of 2021 that says the Taliban had increased its attacks against Afghanistan government forces during this period and appears to be preparing with al-Qaeda for “large-scale offensives.”

“The Taliban initiated 37 percent more attacks this quarter than during the same period in 2020,” the report said. “According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Taliban maintained close ties with al-Qaeda and was very likely preparing for large-scale offensives against population centers and Afghan government installations.”

May 18 — In a [House hearing](#) on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, downplays the prospect of a swift Taliban takeover when U.S. forces leave. “If they [Taliban] pursue, in my judgment, a military victory, it will result in a long war, because Afghan security forces will fight, other Afghans will fight, neighbors will come to support different forces,” [Khalilzad says](#).

Later [Khalilzad added](#), “I personally believe that the statements that the [Afghan] forces will disintegrate, and the Talibs will take over in short order are mistaken. The real choices that the Afghans will face is between a long war and negotiated settlement.”

June 8 — Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid [tells](#) Foreign Policy that after foreign forces leave Afghanistan the group’s goal is to create an “Islamic government,” and “we will be compelled to continue our war to achieve our goal.”

June 26 — At [a rally](#) in Ohio, his first since leaving office, Trump boasts that Biden can’t stop the process he started to remove troops from Afghanistan, and acknowledges the Afghan government won’t last once U.S. troops leave.

“I started the process,” Trump says. “All the troops are coming back home. They [the Biden administration] couldn’t stop the process. 21 years is enough. Don’t we think? 21 years. They couldn’t stop the process. They wanted to, but it was very tough to stop the process when other things... It’s a shame. 21 years, by a government that wouldn’t last. The only way they last is if we’re there. What are we going to say? We’ll stay for another 21 years, then we’ll stay for another 50. The whole thing is ridiculous. ... We’re bringing troops back home from Afghanistan.”

July 6 — The U.S. [military confirms](#) it has pulled out of Bagram Airfield, its largest airfield in the Afghanistan, as the final withdrawal nears.

July 8 — Saying “speed is safety,” Biden moves up the timeline for full troop withdrawal to Aug. 31. Biden [acknowledges](#) the move comes as the Taliban “is at its strongest militarily since 2001.” Biden says if he went back on the agreement that Trump made, the Taliban “would have again begun to target our forces” and that “staying would have meant U.S. troops taking casualties. ... Once that agreement with the Taliban had been made, staying with a bare minimum force was no longer possible.”

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Biden assures Americans that a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan “is not inevitable,” and denies that U.S. intelligence assessed that the Afghan government would likely collapse.

Asked if he sees any parallels between the withdrawals from Vietnam Afghanistan, Biden responds, “None whatsoever. Zero. ... The Taliban is not the south — the North Vietnamese army. They’re not — they’re not remotely comparable in terms of capability. There’s going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of a embassy in the — of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable.”

Biden adds that “the likelihood there’s going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.”

Biden also promises to help accelerate the issuance of special visas for Afghan nationals who helped the U.S. during the war.

July 24 — At [a rally](#) in Phoenix, Trump again boasts, “I started the move out of Afghanistan,” adding “I think it was impossible for him [Biden] to stop it, but it was a much different deal.”

Trump says that when he was president, in a phone conversation with the leader of the Taliban, he warned that after U.S. troops leave if “you decide to do something terrible to our country ... we are going to come back and we are going to hit you harder than any country has ever been hit.” Trump says he believes the two “had a real understanding” but that after Trump left office “now they’re going wild over there.”

Aug. 6 — The Taliban [takes control](#) of its first province — the capital of Nimroz province in Afghanistan — despite the agreement it signed with the U.S.

Aug. 15 — Taliban fighters [enter](#) the Afghanistan capital Kabul; the Afghan president [flees](#) the country; U.S. [evacuates](#) diplomats from its embassy by helicopter.

Aug. 16 — In a [speech](#) to the nation, Biden says, “I do not regret my decision to end America’s warfighting in Afghanistan,” and deflected blame for the government’s swift collapse.

“The truth is: This did unfold more quickly than we had anticipated. So what’s happened? Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight,” the president said. “If anything, the developments of the past week reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision.”

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