

ABC News Special Report [via WJLA and ABC News Live]
August 31, 2021
3:56 p.m. Eastern

DAVID MUIR: Martha, it was very clear the President was aiming to be forceful in making his case to American people that it was time to end America's longest war, to bring our men and women home. But this President also aware that he's going to face some very tough questions about these final weeks, and perhaps one of the most painful chapters of this war.

MARTHA RADDATZ: Exactly, David. He was doubling down, but it was a very successful evacuation. We did get more than 120,000 people out of there. But he's conflating the withdrawal with the evacuation. The evacuation occurred because the withdrawal was — they did not realize the Taliban would take over so quickly. They did not realize the Taliban would fall in 11 days and that's why you ended up with this chaos. That's why you ended up with so many desperate people. Just on July 8th, the President was saying there's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan. They were clinging to airplanes in those early days. He was touting the Afghan forces, saying I trust the capacity of the Afghan military. The President said they were ready, they were prepared for this, but no one was prepared for 11 days for the Taliban to take over. The President also promising on July 8th that we can guarantee the safety of the interpreters. There are thousands of interpreters in Afghanistan right now who are desperate and frightened. And just about a month ago, he told our George Stephanopoulos that he would get all Americans out. They've gotten 90 percent of those out and that 10 percent right now is scared and still does not know exactly how they're going to get out, David.

MUIR: You're absolutely right, Martha. With time comes clarity and the question over those 11 days, 11 days it took, for the Taliban to sweep through that country and take control. President Biden, his national security team and military leaders could not predict that would happen that quickly, and certainly that the 300,000 Afghan nationals who had been trained by our military would drop their weapons so quickly. I do want to bring in Ian Pannell on this notion that Martha just brought up at the end. His promise to George and to others that all Americans who wanted out would get out. We know that there are some that remain in Afghanistan. He said for them, there is no deadline, but of course, Ian — you and I have talked about this on the air for several nights now. How does that look? That means continued cooperation with the Taliban. We heard the President talk about trying to get the airport back up and running. But again, this is going to take a lot of coordination with the Taliban, who we have learned and, for the course of many years, cannot be trusted.

IAN PANNELL: Yeah, I mean, it's a very difficult situation. It seems an [sic] intent by the President to burnish his record, in some senses and there was a lot of blame attributed to many, many people. He also seemed to cast some doubt on whether all the Americans who were in the country had expressed to get out. Secretary of State Blinken seemed to imply that actually they had just a day earlier. Certainly, there are people in the country who may have variegated early on, but now definitely want to get out. The SIV applicants, the Afghans have been unequivocal that they did want to get out. But, yes, the airport is in some state of disarray. We're seeing

videos emerging constantly now of some of the damage there. The Americans — General McKenzie was insisting that they hadn't done any retrograde to the actual infrastructure, that the airport itself would work. But the Taliban are going to need help. I was speaking to a government official, someone in the region here. They were suggesting that they will be willing to assist. It's reasonable to expect that the Pakistanis, the Qataris, others might help get that airport up and running. But the key question is, can you trust the Taliban? And the President, again, referred to Taliban statements and promises that are being made. Well, talk to any Afghan and they'll tell you, yes, the Taliban make a lot of promises but the reality on the ground is very different. I think it is true that, if the Taliban are true to the word that they want to have external relations, they want to be able to have good relations with America which is what Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for the Taliban said, only today at the airport, then they're going to have to come good. They're going to have to make a deal with the Americans but we have to wait and see.

CBS News Special Report
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NORAH O'DONNELL: And there you have it. The commander in chief, President Biden, offering a detailed and defensive speech about his decision to withdraw American forces out of Afghanistan, to end our two-decade commitment there, talking about the costs to our American service men and women. The cost to our nation, \$2 trillion, 300 million a day for two decades. As he said, "I refuse to continue a war that is no longer in the vital service of the United States of America." Let's bring in our senior White House correspondent Weijia Jang. And the President — this really — I used the word detailed and defensive because it was point-by-point addressing each of his critics, including those who said, "well, we could have continued a low grade or low risk, you know, small number of troops there in Afghanistan." He took on that criticism.

WEIJIA JIANG: Norah, you're right he took on every criticism that we have heard on the last few days, especially from Republicans who have really hammered at the President not only for his decision to withdraw, but the way that he did it. And he went down the line responding to that. He also talked about his decision not to extend presence beyond August 31st even though he had said that is exactly what he would order, if there were Americans who remained in Afghanistan, who were still trying to evacuate. And we know that about 100 to 200 Americans are trying to do just that. He pledged that he would continue the diplomatic effort to reach out to them and help them get back home. I do think it was interesting that he made a point to say the U.S. had tried to contact them since March and contacted them nearly 20 times to let them know if they wanted to return, the plan to put that in motion was now. But, Norah, much of what he said just now was not new. This was a defense of his decision to leave Afghanistan and he made clear he was not going to pass this war on to a fifth president, Norah.

O'DONNELL: Weijia Jiang, thank you. National security correspondent David Martin is at the Pentagon. And, David, first, part of this is about, in the President's word — words, not

continuing this war for a third decade, but also he said this is not an — an expensive war that is not in the national security interests of the United States. He used that word ending an era, turning the page to deal with other threats that face America. And he talked about Russia and China. Explain that larger national security focus that the President was talking about?

DAVID MARTIN: Well, ever since the Obama administration, the U.S. has been trying to focus on China as the great threat in the rest of this century. And every time it tries to focus on China, something pops up in the Middle East again. It's either Iran or the continuing cost of maintaining the war effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan. And even for this final pullout, they had to divert an aircraft carrier, had to hold troops on station, in order to conduct this evacuation. Those are all resources that the U.S. has, for many years now, wanted to devote to China and the Pacific.

O'DONNELL: And — and David. I want to ask you that. Because you're — you're reporting, you have learned some really interesting details about those final moments on the ground in Afghanistan. And if you want to criticize the President for the policy, the way that the military handled this final evacuation of our troops was done with great precision.

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MIKE MEMOLI: By my count, this is the sixth time that the President has delivered extended remarks to the American people since the fall of Kabul on August 14th, and what we heard from the President today is much of what we had heard in those previous five times. It's clear that the conversation and the debate that the President and members of administration are most comfortable is on this larger question of whether to extend the mission in Afghanistan. You heard the President refer to the agreement that was reached by his predecessor, by former President Donald Trump with the Taliban saying that he now was faced with a decision of whether to expand or to end the U.S. military mission and ultimately he made that decision to end it. But what I thought was interesting is what the President, in fact, led with. He acknowledged those chaotic, those messy and yes, the tragic scenes that Americans have witnessed over the last two and a half weeks as the effort was made to evacuate as many Americans and as many of our Afghan allies as possible. He did say that under any scenario, when you saw the fall of a capital, when you saw the end of the war, you would see the rush to the airport. He did acknowledge, again, a flawed assumption, as he put it, that the Afghan government that the U.S. had supported over the last 20 years would be able to withstand the Taliban surge for longer. But he reinforced that notion because of the bravery of the U.S. military and because of their capacity to carry out this mission, this was largely a success — one of the most successful airlift evacuations in our history, but ultimately what the President returned to was reframing his broader foreign policy mission, which was framing the debate of the 21st century as one between autocracies between Russia and China and democracies like the United States and he said China and Russia would like nothing more than to see the U.S. continue to be bogged down in Afghanistan. He said the terror threat that we went to Afghanistan to confront

has now metastasized beyond our borders. This is now a mission of diplomacy rather than deployments.

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3:57 p.m. Eastern

LLAMAS: I have a question for you because the president also said what is vital to the nation and our interest is that Afghanistan can never be used again to be a launching pad for terrorism, but you've reported on this, and even former CIA Director Leon Panetta was talking about this today, that's not the case. That's not the reality in Afghanistan right now. The Taliban still with very close ties to all kinds of terror groups.

RICHARD ENGEL: We will see if Afghanistan ever again is used as a launchpad for — for terrorists, but already ISIS is accommodating with the Taliban to a degree. I spoke to a Taliban commander and he said that their approach is going to be to fight ISIS, but also to bring them into the fold, to bring them into the ranks. Al-Qaeda still has very close connections to — to al — to the Taliban. They have fought side by side together for the last 20 years and there are reports that al-Qaeda leaders are going back in, going back home, being welcomed in some cases as heroes back in Afghanistan, and then there is also the inspirational aspect of all of this. It doesn't necessarily have to be that the next Osama bin Laden is sitting in Tora Bora, is sitting in Afghanistan. It is the example of what has just happened. The example that a small group of Islamist fighters can push out a super power that could inspire the next bin Laden. So President Biden talked a lot about the — this war being yesterday's threat, that it had gone on too long, and a lot of Americans support leaving — leaving Afghanistan, but he didn't talk very much about the current dangers, the current situation, the threats that we face today because a state in central Asia has collapsed. It is now being controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban still have relations with other extremist groups. No real indications that they're going to break those — those — those ties, and the region itself is very, very nervous about further instability. Iran is spreading its influence. Pakistan, which has 200 million people and nuclear weapons, shares a border with — with Afghanistan. Many tribal connections, many militant groups just on the Pakistani side of the border who could very easily be inspired by what has happened in the — in Afghanistan. So, when you talk about future threats, I think you need to recognize that what has happened right now is also extraordinarily dangerous for Afghan, for the regions, and potentially also for Americans.

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4:01 p.m. Eastern [via NBC News Now]

COURTNEY KUBE: But in addition to him laying — the President laying out that the U.S. would continue to hunt down these ISIS-K fighters, he also said that they will maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, but he said we don't need to fight a ground war to do it. It's not just ISIS-K who is very real and persistent threat in Afghanistan. But the concern is that they will grow — as the Taliban now are in charge of that country — and there will be ungoverned spaces

there. The worry is that other ISIS fighters will move into that country and potentially that al-Qaeda fighters moving to the country as well, that those networks will grow, that they will regenerate and that they will be able to do what they haven't been able to do for the past several years: Conduct attacks against the west and transnational attacks. We heard yesterday from General McKenzie that ISIS now is up to 2000 hardened fighters. That's due in part to the fact that the Taliban, as they rolled through that — this country over the summer, they emptied prisons, letting out many of these the most dangerous — of the most dangerous ISIS fighters. General McKenzie saying that the Taliban now in charge of security for that country, are going to have a really tough time dealing with that ISIS threat, but they will reap what they sow, Tom.

LLAMAS: Courtney, you know, so much of the propaganda and strategy of these terror groups including of the Taliban is — is to show images that will sort of be broadcast all over the world and we've seen those images today, the images of the Taliban surrounding the U.S. military, equipment surrounding helicopters, combat choppers, and taking, you know, what looks like selfie videos. What type of effect is this having on our own military leaving back this equipment? We understand the Pentagon has been saying that — that none of this is operable. These machines will not work right now, but — but what kind of message does this send to our own troops and to the — the world at large.

KUBE: So — and there were two groups of equipment that the Taliban now has control of. One is the one you're referencing in that video that the U.S. Left behind at the Kabul airport, and the reality is, Tom, they prioritized lives in these final days, getting individuals — people on these evacuation flights and deciding to leave behind a tremendous amount of — of equipment. More than 70 aircraft. More than 70 large vehicles, Humvees, and these critical counter rocket and mortar C-Ram — that — C-Ram's that we're protecting the airport from incoming rockets over these last few days. Those were left behind. They were dismantled. Sometimes, they literally just smashed them so that they couldn't get in the hands of the Taliban. But in addition to that, there is the — that the ammunition and the weapons, the vehicles that aircraft that the U.S. gave over to the Afghan security forces over the course of these last several years. Now, much of that is in the hands of the Taliban. The U.S. — before the Taliban took over — conducted airstrikes taking out as much of that equipment as they could. The Taliban still has a lot of it under control, though, Tom.

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4:08 p.m. Eastern

LLAMAS: He clearly wanted to project strength. So the question is, Chuck, why did he want to speak at this hour right now. This is four o'clock on the east coast. It's one o'clock out west.

CHUCK TODD: Yeah.

LLAMAS: You would think this'd be a prime time address.

TODD: No, it is a you know, they're — they're sort of tiptoeing around this. On one hand, they

want to own the larger picture here, put a period on this sentence in American history. But I do get the sense that they didn't even — that this was a this felt like a tale of two speeches when you see it and perhaps it had multiple contributors into the speech because the first part was extraordinarily defensive at points. He even sounded like he was raising his voice when he went through his rationale for doing the withdrawal the way it was done. You can tell that clearly has gotten under his skin — the backseat driving on this because he seems to be extraordinarily defensive. I thought his speech and the rationale on the bigger picture got stronger in the second half when he made it about the larger idea. Why did we go to Afghanistan in the first place. As Andrea pointed out, we're getting a sense of sort of what the — what a Biden — Biden doctrine is — is looking I guess where you could say we're seeing the contours of it. But I can tell you, you can tell the political concerns were hovering over his head, hovering the decision in the first part of that speech because it was awfully defensive. It once again wanted to make it clear — wasn't his idea to work with the Taliban, that President Trump put him in this position, that he had no choice, the Taliban was stronger than ever so that defensiveness came through, I think, very awkwardly, I think, I'll be honest at the beginning of the speech. You do wonder, like I said, the second half of the speech had a — had a — had a much more coherent sort of case that he was trying to make. The first part of the speech felt like he was doing political spade work, if you will, just desperately trying to push back on the near-term criticism he's been getting. And look, we're not going to get a resolution on that for some time.

LLAMAS: Ok, Chuck, we thank you for that. I want to bring in Michael Beschloss. He studies presidents for a living. Michael, you know, history will look at this in and they're going to remember two things: The images that we saw in the days leading up to August 31st. But there was also a President who promised to withdraw from Afghanistan. And that's exactly what he did.

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: It is what he did. And you're so right, Tom, because you look at history, Americans and historians reward presidents who do what they promise. Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, when he was running for president said I'm going to go to Korea. I'm going to negotiate an end to the Korean war. Once he was President, he did that within about five or six months. Richard Nixon in 1968 said — suggested I have a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam. Yet, for the next 4 years. America was still fighting. That's one reason why the campuses blew up and why there was so much anger at Richard Nixon.