

White House press briefing [via NBC News YouTube]

09/28/21

1:37 mark

2 minutes and 12 seconds

ZEKE MILLER: Why don't we start with a testimony on Capitol Hill that's ongoing with General Milley and General McKenzie testifying that they believe that 2,500 U.S. troops needed to stay in the Afghan government and hold off the Taliban. The President — there seems to be disconnect between that and how the President described the advice from his military advisors in that ABC interview six or seven weeks ago when he said — he denied the Pentagon wanted to be too much of a troop presence there. So did the President mislead the American public about the advice of his military advisers?

JEN PSAKI: Well, let me give you a full — a couple of specifics from the actual transcript, because I know it's been shorthand a bit. No mal-intent. But the question asked by George Stephanopoulos was, "But your top military advisers warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops." President said, "No, they didn't. It was split. That wasn't true. That wasn't true. It was split." I think that's a pretty key part of that phrasing there. Later on, he — George Stephanopoulos says, "So no one told, your military advisers did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops. It's been a stable situation for the last several years. We can do that. We can continue to do that?'" "No. No one said that to me, that I can recall." I would note today in the testimony that was given by Secretary Austin, by General Milley, they made clear, Secretary Austin specifically said, "If you stayed there at a forced posture of 2,500, certainly you'd be in a fight with the Taliban and you'd have to reinforce." So what should everybody take from that? There was a range of viewpoints as was evidenced by their testimony today that were presented to the President, that were presented to his national security team as would be expected, as he asked for. He asked for a clear — clear-eyed, didn't ask them not to sugar coat it what their recommendations were. It was also clear and clear to him that that would not be a long standing recommendation, that there would need to be an escalation, an increase in troop numbers. It would also mean — it would also war with the Taliban. And it would also mean the potential loss of casualties. The President was just not willing to make that decision. He didn't think it was in the interest of the American people or the interest of our — of our troops.

(...)

5:06 mark

2 minutes and 37 seconds

TERRY MORAN: Back on Afghanistan, the President said his military commanders were split. We now know that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley, head of CENTCOM, General McKenzie and the commander on the ground, General Miller, all recommended the President keep 2,500 troops. So who in his military advisors told him it'd be fine to pull everybody out?

PSAKI: Look, I'm not going to get in specific details of who recommended what, but I can — I would reiterate a little bit of what I conveyed before, which is that there were recommendations made by a range of his advisors, something he welcomed, something he asked them to come to him clear-eyed about to give him candid advice. What is also clear, though, and I'd also note again, what Secretary Austin said today is that was not going to be a sustainable, over-the-long-term troop presence. We were always to look at escalating the numbers, at potentially going back to war with the Taliban, at risking casualties. That was not a decision the President was going to make. But, of course, he welcomes advice. He welcomed advice. Ultimately it's up to the commander in chief to make a decision. He made a decision it was time to end the 20 year war.

MORAN: But you are saying here that military advisers to the President said it was okay to pull all the troops out? That it'd be fine?

PSAKI: That's not what I said. What I said was they recommended — I think we should not dumb this down for anybody here. We're talking about the initial phase, post-May 1. We're not talking about long-term recommendations. There was no one who said, five years from now we could have 2,500 troops and that would be sustainable. And I think that's important for people to know and to understand.

MORAN: But the President pulled —

PSAKI: It's also important to know that the risks we were talking about here were the possibility, the likelihood of increasing a troop presence, which we now know to absolutely have been the reality given it required 6,000 troops to just protect the airport. Something we now know.

MORAN: — but the President pulled all U.S. troops out. You are saying that there were military commanders who advised him that that was a good idea — to pull all the American troops out and that General Milley, General McKenzie, General Miller, they said something else. But the President's top military advisers, others, who you won't name, told him, sure, we can pull everyone out?

PSAKI: That's not how these conversations go. It's a risk assessment for every President about what is in the interest of the United States of America, our military and our national interests. And if we had kept 2,500 troops there, we would have increased the number of troops, we would have been at war with the Taliban, we would have had more U.S. casualties. That was a reality. Everybody was clear-eyed about. There are some, as is evidenced by people testifying today, who felt we should have still done that. That is not the decision the President made. It's up to the commander in chief to make those decisions.

(....)

2:18:50 p.m. [via CBSN]
7 minutes and 49 seconds

WEIJIA JIANG: It might be helpful if you just tell us what do you mean by split. What were they

split between?

PSAKI: What's confusing about that?

JIANG: Well, it's either, one, they were advising that 2,500 troops should remain on the ground or, two, that someone was advising that it should be zero.

PSAKI: Well, again, Weijia, I don't think — I think it's important for the American people to know that these conversations don't happen in black and white or like you're in the middle of a movie. These conversations are about a range of options about what the — the risk assessments are about, every decision and, of course, there are individuals who come forward with a range of recommendations on what the right path forward looks like. I'm not going to detail those from here. They're private conversations and advice to the President of the United States. Ultimately, regardless of the advice, uh, it's his decision. He's the commander in chief. He's the President. He makes decisions about what's in the national interest and he believed we should end the war.

JIANG: More broadly, who — who does he consider to be his top military advisors?

PSAKI: He considers of course, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary — the Joint — the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He considers a range of advice from his national security team, his Secretary of State, his national security advisor, and others who can give him — he asked for candid advice from.

JIANG: Thank you. Today, General Milley also testified that he spoke with several authors for their books about the former President. Does President Biden think that's appropriate?

PSAKI: I'm not going to make an evaluation on that from here. Obviously, the Chairman makes his own decisions about that.

JIANG: Oh, but does he though? Does the — does White House not have to sign off any time an SAO — senior administration official, sorry, speaks to the press?

PSAKI: We certainly give people advice on — on what people are writing about and whether it's constructive for them to engage with it. But individuals do make a range of decisions, Weijia.

JIANG: So, did you advise him before he spoke to those authors?

PSAKI: I don't have anything more for you, Weijia. Go ahead.

KELLY O'DONNELL: As we sit here today, does President Biden believes that his military advisers supported his decision to withdraw all U.S. troops based on their own judgments?

PSAKI: Uh well, Kelly, I think what you heard them say during their testimony is that — about — certain stages, they gave a variety of advice, which is accurate and something the President, of course, welcomes. He ultimately had to make the decision as the Commander in chief about what

is in our national interest. You also heard Secretary Austin make clear about the commitment of delivering on what the President had decided And the fact that if we left troops in their past September 1, we would have been at war with the Taliban. So, I think what's important for people to take away from the testimony today is that it reiterated and confirms a lot of what we've been talking about over the past couple of months about what the risks were of keeping troops on the ground, what the Taliban's intentions were, what the impact was of the deal that was struck by the prior administration, directly with the Taliban that released 5,000 Taliban fighters into the, uh, into Afghanistan without the engagement of the Afghan government. Those are all the repercussions and the impact and yes, they gave their advice, as they should. And then they implemented the president's decision.

O'DONNELL: So, knowing that the President gets to make this decision, knowing he may have to make further decisions going down the line, so not looking at the history —

PSAKI: Mmhmm.

O'DONNELL: — but I think the public wants to know, if the generals and military advisors give advice, how will the President use and process that and how will he talk about it publicly? That matters to the public. Did the President convey accurately what these generals were saying to him?

PSAKI: He conveyed — in the interview? In what aspect?

O'DONNELL: Well, in the interview and then going forward, can they understand how the President will use that kind of information when we see there's a conflict between what the generals were saying and the President's public statements with respect to Afghanistan?

PSAKI: Well, the President made clear that the advice was split. He didn't outline what every individual, uh, conveyed to him and private advice is — I don't think anyone in the American public would expect. Obviously they're testifying before Congress today, they're answering questions accurately. They're providing more detail on their advice as they should. That's how that process works and as they should. I think what the American people should know is the President is always going to welcome a range of advice. He asked for candor. He asked for directness and in any scenario, he's not looking for a bunch of yes men and women and what that means is that, ultimately, he's going to have to make the decision about what's in the best interest of the United States. If there's conflicting advice given by necessity, some people, uh — some people's advice will not be taken. Go ahead.

STEVEN PORTNOY: So, what is the White House's reaction to some other aspects of General Miller's testimony? He said, among other things, that it was a mistake for two successive American presidents to have a data-based or date certain withdrawal, that it ought to be conditions based. He also indicated in his testimony the idea of the U.S. credibility would be damaged would be a word that should be looked at. What's the White House's response to those aspects of his testimony today?

PSAKI: Well, first, I would say that, um, Secretary Austin spoke directly about our credibility in the world during the same testimony and he said our credibility remains solid and people place great trust and confidence in America. And what we also look at is the fact that, um, the NATO secretary general has affirm that our allies were consulted on the President's decisions. We communicated to the Afghans and to our allies. And since the time of the withdrawal, we worked to get 100 countries together to unite, uh, in an effort to make clear that the international community's expectations — what they are of the Taliban-led government. That shows the United States still has power still has trust, still has partnerships in the world, even as it relates to Afghanistan. I — what was the first part of your question?

PORTNOY: General Milley specifically said that he believed it was a mistake for there to be a date certain withdrawals versus conditions based. He said that was a lesson he learned. Does the President agree with that? Does this White House acknowledged that it was a mistake? And is there any — not to say second guessing, but is there any thought that perhaps a mistake was made.

PSAKI: In which peace? When did we set a deadline for withdrawal? You're talking about September 1st?

PORTNOY: The general said that two successive American Presidents made the mistake of setting dates. So the President — this President had, first, September 11th and then he adjusted to August 31st. General Milley indicated that that was a mistake.

PSAKI: Well to be clear, we had, um, a first timeline with no plan. We had a deadline and no plan for withdrawal that we walked into when the President was inaugurated and took office. The September 1st timeline was related to — was based on the recommendations on the of the military, on — on the timeline needed to operationally effectively and safely withdraw troops once the president made the decision to withdraw our troops. So, it's not the same thing.

PORTNOY: Let me ask you one more question. General Milley also said that he wasn't asked about whether to keep troops on the ground until August 25. Is that true?

PSAKI: Say that one more time?

PORTNOY: General Milley said he wasn't asked by the president whether to keep troops on the ground until August 25.

PSAKI: Past September 1?

PORTNOY: Past September. I suppose that was the question. But — but can you confirm?

PSAKI: Well, the context of that's pretty important, isn't it?

PORTNOY: Sure. So, what — what more context can you add?

PSAKI: Um well, I'm saying that because when you say August 25, people would — would infer that to mean that he wasn't asked for his point of view on what our approach should be until then. That's not accurate. There were ongoing daily discussions in the Situation Room where the President asked for advice, for viewpoints from the military, from his national security team about how we should proceed as it related to August 31. That's no secret. We made that clear, certainly at the time. I'd also note that during the testimony, uh, General Milley also made clear that we would have gone to the war with the Taliban had we not withdrawn before, uh, September — by September 1. That was also advice he gave privately.

(...)

2:29:26 p.m.

29 seconds

PHIL MATTINGLY: General Milley was asked if he echoed the President's term using extraordinary success for what transpired in August and Milley said it was a logistical success, but a strategic failure. I think those are two different things. Is that kind of an accurate assessment of your guys view of what transferred in August?

PSAKI: Well, he later made clear and clarified that he was referring to the 200-year war as a strategic failure. And of course the President agrees we were there for far too long. We should have withdrawn sooner and that it was a war that was long overdue to come to an end.

(...)

2:33:28 p.m.

1 minute and 35 seconds

MICHAEL SHEAR: You guys have made a lot of — the administration officials have been a lot about the idea that the cost of the program is zero and by that I expect you mean net zero to the — to the treasury once you sort of take into account the money that's raised versus the money that's spent, correct?

PSAKI: Yes, it doesn't. I know none of us are mathematicians, otherwise we wouldn't be here. But yes,

SHEAR: But — but — but

PSAKI: — of the investments that were proposed, uh, including tax cuts and the pay fors, including making the tax system more fair, zero.

SHEAR: But do you guys acknowledge the sort of broader truth that it's not, uh, that it does cost somebody, right? That — that the cost of the investments the President wants to make, don't simply — they're not simply a free lunch, right? Whether they're going to cost people who smoke cigarettes or they're going to cost business people or they're gonna cost companies or they're

going to cost rich people, like, the cost of what the President wants to do over the course of the next decade and beyond falls on somebody, right?

PSAKI: But there's a clear difference between what we're talking about as it relates to taxpayer funds, right? Or funding that are lead to our debt — right — which I know a lot of Republicans are supposedly concerned about. And, uh, and uh, and asking businesses, 50 of the top companies last year in 2020 paid, not a dollar in taxes. A lot of high income net — net — high — or high income individuals pay lower tax rates than nurses and teachers. Nobody thinks that's fair. Yes, they — we're asking them to pay more. Yes. So it will cost them more.

(....)

2:38:04 p.m.

3 minutes and 58 seconds

JACQUI HEINRICH: And then, President Obama said on ABC about the border —

PSAKI: President Obama or President Biden?

HEINRICH: — President Obama —

PSAKI: Okay.

HEINRICH: — on ABC said immigration is tough — this was an interview that aired on *Good Morning America* —

PSAKI: Got it. Okay, yes.

HEINRICH: — “immigration is tough. It’s — It has always been because on one hand, I think we're naturally people that wants to help others. At the same time, we're a nation state, we have borders. The idea that we can just have open borders is something that, as a practical matter is unsustainable.” Does President Biden agree with President Obama that open borders is unsustainable?

PSAKI: We don't have open borders. So yes, he agrees.

HEINRICH: And then did the White House of any discussions with ABC, or President Obama about the content of that interview?

PSAKI: Not that I'm aware of. Obviously, the current President, the former President are friends and they engage on a regular basis, but I'm not aware of any conversations about it.

HEINRICH: And then I wanted to ask about Secretary Mayorkas yesterday. He said that the administration is continuing to message to the diaspora community that migrants should not take the journey. But he also said in the same sentence that now 13,000 have been released into the

U.S. is an appropriate figure and a function of our operational capacity. How should migrants hear both of those messages at the same time and not think that they should come and expect the same treatment?

PSAKI: Well, by the same treatment, these — the 13,000 or 12,000 individuals we're talking about here are put into immigration proceedings, right? wWhen they're put into immigration proceedings, it does not mean they get to stay in the United States. There are some exceptions, as the secretary spoke about when he was here on Friday to Title 42, which were still continuing to administer. Uh, that includes if you are um, you know, uh if individuals have immediate health concerns, uh, if they are expressing fear, um, you know, and these are considered and they are — as a part of our immigration proceedings and our immigration process. But when they go into immigration proceedings, they are given a notice to appear. Many are — have ankle bracelets. Uh, their biometric data is taken um, and they are expected to appear back in immigration court, so it is not accurate to suggest or for anyone who is contemplating coming to the border to think that they are going to come to the border and be allowed to stay long term in the United States. There's an immigration process, immigration proceedings. Of course, people get their day in court, but they are arbitrary — there are — they go through that process.

HEINRICH: They're taking 2.5 years on average. I mean, to people are living in conditions that they're trying to flee, that is long term.

PSAKI: Well, I would say first that, uh, we are still applying Title 42, we are still sending people away at the border. Uh, and again, individuals who come who do meet any of those criteria go through an immigration process, immigration proceedings. But, you know, some of those conditions are being an ICE detention facilities. Some of those conditions are being secured with ankle bracelets or give — again, giving their biometric data. Uh, it's not an easy process or an easy system and absolutely nothing is guaranteed. It has to go through our own immigration process. But again, our system is broken, needs to be fixed. That's what we love to work with Republicans.

HEINRICH: Is the administration doing anything to prepare for this second group that we're now expecting on the southern border within the next month or so? There have been reports that the numbers could be between 15 and 20,000 more migrants.

PSAKI: We're continuing to apply Title 42 at the border. We are continuing to convey through a range of means, communicating directly with people through paid media and otherwise, this is not the time to come. I would note that, uh, while there are a number of people who are in the immigration proceedings process, there are also thousands of people who went back across the border when they realized they could not stay here and could not stay in the camp and would not be able to stay in the United States, so there are some deterrence mechanisms that have been put in place. Obviously, our Department of Homeland Security continues to prepare in any scenario as we look to migrants coming to approach the border.

(...)

2:55:04 p.m.
40 seconds

KIMBERLY HALKETT: Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Scheller, a Marine officer who questioned the withdrawal and questioned, essentially, the commander in chief has been put in jail. Does President Biden believe that that is appropriate, given that President Biden called Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman a hero for speaking out against his commander in chief — even testified on Capitol Hill in uniform? So, how is this different? Especially since you've just said the President welcomes the candor and the advice of his military advisers. Does the President also see Lieutenant Colonel Stewart Scheller as a hero?

PSAKI: I don't have all the details on these circumstances. I understand that's gonna be frustrating to you, um, but we will work to get you an answer on it.

(....)

2:56:33 p.m.
3 minutes and 13 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: The President has not shied away from the historical implications of leaving Afghanistan. He's noted that it was time to end a 20-year war. He has said that he is not going to pass this war on to a fifth president. So, given that he understands the gravity and he has framed it in the historical context, I know that you said you're not going to detail private conversations, but can you give us a little bit more of an explanation as to why not? Don't the — you know, doesn't the American public, given the historical gravity of that decision, don't they deserve to know who is advising the President, who is on the other side of that argument about leaving troops in Afghanistan?

PSAKI: I — I would say, first, that what the American public can know and understand is that the President will welcome and take and ask for and push for a range of opinions on every national security decision that he makes, um and we're not going to detail those uh private discussions, private decisions that happened in the situation room for the public. What the President has also been very candid and clear about and will continue to be and you outlined much of this is why he made the decision that he made and even as it relates to the recommendation on 2,500, it's also important for the American public to understand that was not going to be a sustainable number over the long term. And what the decision he was making was about was not sending their daughters, their sons, their grandchildren back to fight a war that the Afghans would not fight themselves and it was about a phase, not a longterm recommendation.

WEGMANN: And then two quick follow ups. Yesterday, I asked you about the, um, Uighur Forced Labor Prevention Act —

PSAKI: Yeah.

WEGMANN: — which sailed through the Senate with bipartisan support. Can you tell us where

the President stands in that legislation? And then another follow up, you mentioned the monitoring devices, uh, such as ankle bracelets and biometrics that some of these folks are being outfitted with as they await their court date. Is there a percentage that you can tell us about how many folks have, you know, be issued that biometric?

PSAKI: Um, that's part of the process.

WEGMANN: But can you tell us how many have been already issued that or is that how many —

PSAKI: A biometric that's required as — as it relates to putting people back into the immigration proceedings?

WEGMANN: Yeah.

PSAKI: The Department of Homeland Security can give you the rundown, but that's part of the standard process.

WEGMANN: Okay, and uh — and then about the Uighurs.

PSAKI: Sure. So, we, of course — the President has, of course, expressed concern, as you know, in the past about the treatment of Uighurs — has of course raised that — as it has been raised directly with the Chinese. As it relates to the legislation, we don't have a position at this point in time on this particular piece of legislation. Uh, it does include, um — but I will note that we have implemented concrete measures to promote accountability for individuals and entities implicated in human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang. This includes steps we've taken on our own, I should say: visa restrictions, global Magnitsky and financial sanctions, export controls, import restrictions, the release of a business advisory and committed to taking action to ensure all global supply chains are free from the use of forced labor at the G-7. I know it's passed the Senate, but I don't think it has moved in the House at this point in time — at the status. Thank you.