

The End of the Afghanistan War Was Even Worse Than Anyone Realized

[Fred Kaplan](#) Dec 17, 2021 12:34 PM



A U.S. Air Force aircraft takes off from the airport in Kabul on Aug. 30. Aamir Qureshi/Getty Images

It is now widely conceded that America's 20-year war in Afghanistan, the longest in our history, was a tragic bungle of monumental proportions. However, we are just beginning to learn that the final phase of the war—not so much the frantic evacuation but the entire last three years, as we tiptoed toward the exits—was disgraceful in its own appalling way.

The unsettling details are documented by Steve Coll and Adam Entous,

whose long article, [“The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,”](#) appears in the most recent New Yorker. Coll is the author of [Ghost Wars](#), not just the best book on the run-up to the Sept. 11 attacks, but one of the best books on U.S. foreign policy ever. The New Yorker article, he notes, is based on hundreds of pages of mostly classified meeting notes, transcripts, memoranda, and emails, as well as interviews with U.S. and Afghan officials.

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This vast pile of evidence, Coll and Entous write, amounts to “a dispiriting record of misjudgment, hubris, and delusion.” They could have added to that list of adjectives: *self*-delusion, incompetence, and sheer mendacity. Not that getting out of Afghanistan was a bad idea. But the way our leaders got out should shock even a jaded observer of shady politics.

Presidents Donald Trump *and* Joe Biden, as well as some of their top aides, come off rather badly in the article. It is no secret that Trump wanted out of Afghanistan from the get-go. After a brief spell, when his generals convinced him to try out their new strategy of victory ([which was neither new nor much of a strategy](#)), he hired Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-born-and-bred diplomat (and former U.S. ambassador to Kabul), to negotiate a deal with the Taliban. The real goal of these talks, an aide to Khalilzad told the New Yorker reporters, was to get our troops out of there in six to nine months.

Khalilzad is a well-known Washington figure, an experienced operator with a debonair flair. In this story, he’s also a self-aggrandizing snake. It has long been reported that he kept Afghan President Ashraf Ghani out of his negotiations with the Taliban; that’s what Trump wanted him to do. It turns

out he kept U.S. officials in the dark as well. Ryan Crocker, a former ambassador to Iraq, is quoted as likening Khalilzad's evasive approach to an Arab proverb: "It is good to know the truth and speak it, but it is better to know the truth and speak of palm trees."

In September 2019, a car bomb exploded in Kabul, killing a dozen people, including an American soldier. In response, Trump called off the negotiations, to the relief of many U.S. officials, who thought the talks were giving too much to the Taliban. Khalilzad was ordered home. Instead, he secured the release of two professors—an American and an Australian, who had been kidnapped a few years earlier. Pleased by the feat, Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, allowed Khalilzad to resume the peace talks.

Khalilzad reentered the talks with unearned arrogance. As Coll and Entous report, one of Ghani's aides urged him to change his approach. The Taliban, he warned, weren't interested in a political settlement; they were, rather, "on a victory march." Khalilzad told the aide not to worry. "I've cornered them," he said. "There will be a political settlement." Of course, there was no such thing.

Under the deal that Khalilzad signed, the Taliban agreed not to attack U.S. troops as they were withdrawing, but they were expressly allowed to continue fighting Afghan troops. The Taliban also insisted that the Afghan government free 5,000 prisoners. U.S. military officers who took part in the negotiations vowed to walk out if the Taliban got the release without agreeing to a cease-fire. Khalilzad, though, agreed to the release; the Taliban wouldn't agree to a cease-fire; the talks continued anyway.

Ghani complained to Pompeo, who pressed Ghani to release the prisoners anyway. Pompeo assured Ghani that U.S. troops would leave "only when

there is a political resolution." However, according to the New Yorker, Pompeo added that this promise might be revoked "if we have no progress in the talks." It turned out there was no progress in the talks, mainly because the Taliban didn't want progress, so Pompeo felt he wasn't being duplicitous when his commitment wasn't honored.

[As should have been clear at the time](#), an unconditional U.S. withdrawal clinched the collapse of the Afghan military and, with it, the government. Once U.S. troops started to withdraw, American contractors—no longer having the troops' protection—pulled out as well. Without the contractors, the Afghan air force could no longer maintain their planes or helicopters. Coll and Entous report that officers at U.S. Central Command offered to provide "tele-maintenance," talking Afghan officers through maintenance procedures over the phone. They also offered to set up an aircraft repair shop in the United Arab Emirates—1,000 miles away, beyond the range of most Afghan planes. Were they serious, cynical, harebrained? Hard to say.

In any case, by the time Joe Biden entered the White House, the Afghan government was doomed. During the transition, Jake Sullivan and Antony Blinken, who would become national security adviser and secretary of state respectively, warned Biden in a memo that the peace talks were going nowhere. They were fully aware of what was happening. Still, Biden asked Khalilzad to stay on as emissary, at least through the spring, for continuity's sake.

Two days after Biden's inauguration, Sullivan assured Ghani's national security adviser that if the Taliban didn't get serious at the peace talks, "they will bear the consequences of their choices." Sullivan explained that this did not mean the U.S. would "escalate the conflict"—only that we would "take a hard-nosed look at the situation." The level of cliché here is remarkable.

Meanwhile, Blinken and Khalilzad discussed a new idea: abandoning the peace talks and skipping ahead to a summit in Turkey, where the Taliban and Ghani's government would negotiate a peace-sharing deal. That called for a new constitution, a transition government, new courts, and a national conference. Blinken told Biden he wanted to explore the idea of delaying the U.S. troop withdrawal until after the Turkey summit—before anyone had agreed to hold such a summit. Did either Khalilzad or Blinken think this plan was remotely plausible?

On April 15, the day after Biden announced the coming withdrawal of all U.S. troops, the Taliban announced they would not attend any summit in Turkey. (Why should they? The game was over, and they'd won.) On Aug. 5, as the withdrawal date neared, Blinken assured Ghani that Khalilzad was working on yet another proposal to the Taliban—a one-month cease-fire in exchange for the freeing of another 3,000 prisoners. Ghani rejected the unserious idea out of hand.

The next day, the Taliban captured the capital of Nimruz province. The following day, the U.S. Embassy urged all Americans to leave the country. On Aug. 10, Ghani, who was still trying to boost the morale of his Cabinet and citizens, announced a new infrastructure project on his Facebook page. Leaders in Washington and Kabul were living in a fantasy—or pretending that they were.

Five days later, the Taliban entered Kabul in force, and Ghani fled the country. On Aug. 30, the last of the U.S. troops—who had been reinforced for the sole purpose of handling a massive evacuation—left the country as well. The 20-year war was over, at least for us.

Duplicity reigned in this war from the very beginning. [President George W. Bush and his crew](#) thought the war was over when the anti-Taliban rebels

conquered Kabul and a Western-chosen president, Hamid Karzai, was installed, thus allowing U.S. troops to thin out and invade Iraq. In fact, the Taliban, who had never left, resumed the fight. Under President Barack Obama, when the U.S. effort escalated and switched to a strategy of nation-building, the [generals sent rosy-eyed assessments from the front](#), claiming progress and promising more, knowing that they were at the very least exaggerating. (Obama eventually caught on, drew down the troops, and switched to a less ambitious strategy.) Trump wanted to get out of Afghanistan; his negotiator tried to maneuver the Taliban into a deal that gave a win to all parties, but he was the one maneuvered. Biden's team thought—or pretended to think (it's unclear which)—that a semblance of victory could be pried from abject defeat. All of these players were dishonest, with their allies, their adversaries, and, most damagingly, themselves.

[“The first casualty when war comes is truth,”](#) some wag remarked more than 100 years ago. Those who skirt the truth might have in mind the line from Aeschylus in the fifth century B.C.: “God is not averse to deceit in a holy cause.” Self-delusion is an ennobling way to continue justifying these evasions. The patterns are probably inevitable in warfare, especially among the leaders who are shocked to find themselves on the losing side.

Democracies are equipped with the tools and safeguards—oversight, investigations, legislative control over the budget, and, in the case of U.S. democracy, the War Powers Act—to contain the spread of these evasions. Voters and lawmakers should use these tools more often.