

The Betrayal

America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan added moral injury to military failure. But a group of soldiers, veterans, and ordinary citizens came together to try to save Afghan lives and salvage some American honor.

By [George Packer](#) January 31, 2022, 6 AM ET



Afghans camp near Hamid Karzai International Airport, in Kabul, on August 24, a week before Joe Biden's declared deadline for the evacuation of allies. A U.S.-military C-17 transport aircraft takes off overhead. (Andrew Quilty / Agence VU')

I. The End

It took four presidencies for America to finish abandoning Afghanistan.

George W. Bush's attention wandered off soon after American Special Forces rode horseback through the northern mountains and the first schoolgirls gathered in freezing classrooms. Barack Obama, after studying the problem for months, poured in troops and pulled them out in a single ambivalent gesture whose goal was to keep the war on page A13. Donald Trump cut a deal with the Taliban that left the future of the Afghan government, Afghan women, and al-Qaeda to fate. By then most Americans were barely aware that the war was still going on. It fell to Joe Biden to complete the task.

From our March 2022 issue

Check out the full table of contents and find your next story to read.

[See More](#)

On April 13, 2021, the day before Biden was to address the country about Afghanistan, a 33-year-old Marine Corps veteran named Alex McCoy received a call from a White House speechwriter named Carlyn Reichel. McCoy led an organization of progressive veterans called Common Defense, which had been waging a lobbying campaign with the slogan "End the forever war." McCoy and his colleagues believed that more American bloodshed in a conflict without a definable end could no longer be justified. "The president has made his decision," Reichel told McCoy, "and you'll be very happy with it." She explained that it was now too late to withdraw all troops by May 1, the deadline in the agreement signed in early 2020 by the Trump administration and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. But the withdrawal of the last several thousand American troops would begin on that date, in the hope that the Taliban would not resume attacks, and it would end by September 11, the 20th anniversary of the day the war began.

On April 14, Biden, speaking from the White House, raised his hands and declared, "It's time to end the forever war." The withdrawal, he said, [would not be "a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely."](#) The president ended his speech, as he often does, with the invocation "May God protect our troops." Then he went to pay his respects at Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, where many of the dead from the 9/11 wars are buried.

Afterward, Ron Klain, Biden's chief of staff, said, "When [someone writes a book about this war](#), it's going to begin on September 11, 2001, and it's going to end on the day Joe Biden said, 'We're coming home.'" With firm resolve, Biden had done the hard thing. The rest would be logistics, while the administration turned its attention to domestic infrastructure. Alex McCoy framed the front page of the next day's *New York Times* and hung it on the wall of his Harlem apartment.

But the war wasn't over—not for Afghans, not even for some Americans.

A week after Biden's speech, a group of refugee advocates—many of them veterans of the 9/11 wars—released a report on the dire situation of the thousands of Afghans who'd worked at great risk for the United States during its two decades in their country. In 2009, Congress had [created the Special Immigrant Visa](#) to honor the service of qualified Afghans by bringing them to safety in the U.S. But the SIV program set up so many procedural hurdles—Form DS-230, Form I-360, a recommendation from a supervisor with an unknown email address, a letter of employment verification from a long-defunct military contractor, a statement describing threats—that combat interpreters and office assistants in a poor and chaotic war zone couldn't possibly hope to clear them all without the expert help of immigration lawyers, who themselves had trouble getting answers. The program, chronically understaffed and clogged with bureaucratic choke

points across multiple agencies, seemed designed to reject people. Year after year, [administrations of both parties failed to grant even half the number of visas](#) allowed by Congress—and sometimes granted far less—or to meet its requirement that cases be decided within nine months. By 2019, the average wait time for an applicant was at least four years.

Toward the end of 2019, Representative Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat, visited the U.S. embassy in Kabul and found a skeletal staff working on visas only part-time. "This was no accident, by the way," Crow told me. "This was a long-term Stephen Miller project to destroy the SIV program and basically shut it off." Miller, the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim Trump adviser, along with allies throughout the executive branch, added so many new requirements that amid the pandemic the program nearly came to a halt. By the time Biden gave his speech, [at least 18,000 desperate Afghans](#) and tens of thousands of family members stood in a line that was barely moving. Many feared that the Americans would now leave without them.

[Tom Nichols: Afghanistan is your fault](#)

Najeeb Monawari had been waiting for his visa for more than a decade. He was born in 1985, the oldest son among 10 children of a bus-mechanic father and a mother who devoted herself to keeping them alive amid the lethal hazards of Kabul. He grew up in a neighborhood turned to apocalyptic rubble by the civil war of the early 1990s. He and his friends took turns walking point along mined streets on their way to swim in the Kabul River. During the Taliban's rule, his family was under constant threat because of their origins in the Panjshir Valley, the last base of the Northern Alliance resistance.

With the arrival of the Americans in 2001, power flipped and Panjshiris became the top dogs. "We were the winners, and Panjshir Valley people

were misusing their power," Monawari told me, "driving cars wildly in the road, beating people. We were the king of the city." In 2006, barely 20, Monawari lied to his parents about his destination and traveled to Kandahar, the Pashtun heartland of the Taliban, where he signed on with a military contractor as an interpreter for Canadian forces. "I spoke three English words and no Pashto," he said. But his work ethic made him so popular that, after a year with the Canadians, Monawari was snatched away by U.S. Army Green Berets. He spent much of the next four years as a member of 12-man teams going out on nonstop combat missions in Afghanistan's most dangerous provinces.

In the Special Forces, Najeeb Monawari found his identity. "I was dreaming to go to America, to hold the flag in a picture."

In the Special Forces, Monawari found his identity. The Green Berets were so demanding that most interpreters soon washed out, but the Americans loved him and he loved them. On missions he carried a gun and used it, came under fire—he was wounded twice—and rescued other team members, just like the Americans. He wore his beard full and his hair shaved close like them; he tried to walk like them, bulk up like them, even think like them. In pictures he is indistinguishable from the Green Berets. The violence of the missions—and the fear and hatred he saw in the eyes of local elders—sometimes troubled him, and as a Panjshiri and a combat interpreter, he carried an automatic death sentence if he ever fell into the hands of the Taliban. But he was proud to help give Pashtun girls the right to attend school.

In 2009, when a team leader told Monawari about the SIV program, he applied and collected glowing letters of recommendation from commanding

officers. He wanted to become an American citizen, join the U.S. military, and come back to Afghanistan as a Green Beret. "This was totally the plan," he told me. "I was dreaming to go to America, to hold the flag in a picture."

Monawari's application disappeared into the netherworld of the Departments of State and Homeland Security, where it languished for the next decade. He checked the embassy website five times a day. He sent dozens of documents by military air to the immigration service center in Nebraska, but never received clear answers. His medical exam kept expiring as his case stalled, so he had to borrow money to take it again and again. "We have reviewed the State Department records and confirm that your SIV case is still pending administrative processing in order to verify your qualifications for this visa," he was told in 2016.

In January 2019, Monawari was summoned for an interview—his third—at the embassy in Kabul. By then he had gone to work for Doctors Without Borders as a logistician, managing warehouses and supply chains. The carnage of fighting had traumatized him—he found it impossible to be alone—and he liked the gentle, unselfish spirit of the humanitarians. He rose through the organization to overseas positions in Sierra Leone, Lebanon, and finally a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. He flew back to Afghanistan for the interview at the embassy and found himself faced with a consular officer who had been angered by the previous applicant. When it was Monawari's turn, she almost shouted her questions, and other Afghans in the room could hear the details of his case. "Can you calm down?" he asked her.

"Oh, am I too loud?" The interview was brief and unfriendly.

In April, Monawari received a notice from the Department of Homeland Security, headed "Intent to Revoke": "It was confirmed by Mission Essential Personnel that you failed multiple polygraphs and background

investigations." Monawari had taken regular polygraphs with the Green Berets, and a few times they had come back inconclusive before he ultimately passed. He wrote to explain this to DHS, though he didn't know what long-lost evidence he could submit to prove it. "It is very sad, I have been waiting more than 8 years to move to a safe place (USA)," Monawari wrote. "Please be fair with me I was wounded twice in the mission and I worked very hard for US special force to save their life please check all my recommendation letters (attached) don't leave me behind :("

[Mike Jason: A military officer on what we got wrong in Afghanistan](#)

A month later, a second notice arrived: "The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has determined that you worked as a procurement manager and not as a translator/interpreter." To limit immigration, the Trump administration had restricted SIVs mostly to interpreters. Monawari had served for three years as a combat interpreter with the Green Berets, but his final year as a procurement manager was used to disqualify him. To deny him a visa, the U.S. government erased all his shared sacrifice with Americans who might not have survived in Afghanistan without him. He would have to try again from zero.

The subject is almost too unbearable for Monawari to discuss. "When I received the revocation—denied for nine years, 10 years—it's so painful," he said. "SIV is like a giant, a monster, something scary. There is no justice in this world. There is no justice, and I have to accept that." By 2019 his beard was going white, though he was only 34. He attributes every aged hair to the Special Immigrant Visa.

In October 2020, Kim Staffieri, an SIV advocate with the Association of Wartime Allies, phoned her friend Matt Zeller, a former CIA officer and Army major. Zeller had made the cause of America's Afghan allies his full-time

passion as a means to atone for an air strike in Afghanistan in 2008 that had killed 30 women and children, for which he felt some responsibility. His frenetic work on the issue had made him so sick with ulcers that he'd had to step away in 2019. Staffieri was calling to get him back on the field.

"Matt, it doesn't matter who wins the election; we're leaving next year," she said. "The SIV program is broken, and we don't have enough time to get them all out. We're going to need to evacuate."

Zeller proposed that they draft a white paper with ideas for the next administration. They wrote it over the holidays. Their recommendations included the mass evacuation of SIV applicants to safety in a U.S. territory, such as Guam, while their cases were processed. The "Guam option" had two successful precedents: Operation New Life, in 1975, which evacuated 130,000 South Vietnamese to Guam when their country fell to North Vietnam; and Operation Pacific Haven, in 1996, when the U.S. brought 6,600 Kurds facing extermination by the army of Saddam Hussein out of northern Iraq.

Staffieri and Zeller were finishing their white paper as President Biden took office. Three of Zeller's friends occupied key positions in the administration, and on February 9 he sent them copies. Two of them—one a good friend of Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser—never replied. The third promised to bring the proposals to a top aide of the newly confirmed secretary of state, Antony Blinken. But nothing came of it.

The [report was published on April 21](#) by the Truman Center for National Policy, Human Rights First, and Veterans for American Ideals. The ties between these organizations and the new administration were nearly incestuous. Blinken, a longtime supporter of refugees, had been vice chair of the board of Human Rights First; Sullivan had served on the Truman board,

as had his top deputy, Jon Finan. A former correspondent with *The Washington Post*, Finan had helped start an organization called the Iraqi (later International) Refugee Assistance Project in 2008, while he was in law school. IRAP had become the leading legal-assistance group for SIV applicants. Samantha Power, the author of [“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide](#), had sat on IRAP's board; she was the new head of the U.S. Agency for International Development. The highest level of the Biden administration was staffed with a humanitarian dream team—the best people to make Afghan allies a top priority.

The outside advocates drew on their personal relationships with insiders to lobby for urgent action. “By every back channel available, we let people know,” Mike Breen, the chief executive of Human Rights First, and an Army veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, told me. Breen was a co-founder of IRAP in law school with Finan. “The Guam option has been in the ether for a long time. It's something that we talked about a lot.”

Many of the advocates were in favor of ending the war. With the sand now running out, they made their case for early evacuations on moral and strategic grounds. If, on the way out of Afghanistan, America broke its promises to people at great risk of revenge killings, its already battered international reputation would be further damaged. Such a failure would also injure the morale of American troops, who were now staring at a lost war, and whose code of honor depended on leaving no one behind.

The advocates omitted one person from their calculations: the president. But Biden's history in this area should have troubled them.

On April 14, 1975, as North Vietnamese divisions raced toward Saigon, the 32-year-old first-term senator from Delaware was summoned to the White House. President Gerald Ford pleaded with him and other senators for

funding to evacuate Vietnamese allies. [Biden refused](#). "I feel put-upon," he said. He would vote for money to bring out the remaining Americans, but not one dollar for the locals. On April 23, as South Vietnam's collapse accelerated, Biden repeated the point on the Senate floor. "I do not believe the United States has an obligation, moral or otherwise, to evacuate foreign nationals" other than diplomats, he said. That was the job of private organizations. "The United States [has no obligation](#) to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese."

This episode did not define Biden's career in foreign affairs—he went on to build a long record of internationalism. In the 1990s he pressed for U.S. military intervention in Bosnia during its genocidal civil war. In the winter of 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, he went to Kabul and found himself confronted by a young girl who stood straight up at her desk in an unfinished schoolroom with a single light bulb and no heat. "[You cannot leave](#)," she told the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"I promise I'll come back," Biden said.

"You cannot leave," the girl repeated. "They will not deny me learning to read. I will read, and I will be a doctor like my mother. I will. America must stay."

Biden recalled the encounter for me in an interview the following year. He interpreted the girl's words to mean: "Don't fuck with me, Jack. You got me in here. You said you were going to help me. You better not leave me now." It was, he said, a "catalytic event for me," and upon his return to Washington he proposed spending \$20 million on 1,000 new Afghan schools—modest nation-building. But there was little interest from either the White House or Congress.

[George Packer: A debt of honor](#)

When I interviewed Biden again in 2006, the disaster of the Iraq War and the persistence of corruption and violence in Afghanistan were turning him against armed humanitarianism. At a dinner in Kabul in 2008, when President Hamid Karzai refused to admit to any corruption, Biden threw down his napkin and walked out. He was finished with Afghanistan.

In late 2010, Richard Holbrooke, Obama's envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, came into Vice President Biden's office to talk about the situation of Afghan women. [According to an audio diary Holbrooke kept](#), Biden insisted, "I am not sending my boy back there to risk his life on behalf of women's rights." (Biden's son Beau, a member of the Delaware National Guard, had recently been deployed to Iraq for a year.) He wanted every American troop out of Afghanistan, regardless of the consequences for women or anyone else. When Holbrooke asked about the obligation to people who had trusted the U.S. government, Biden said, "Fuck that, we don't have to worry about that. We did it in Vietnam; Nixon and Kissinger got away with it." During the 2020 campaign, an interviewer repeated some of these quotes to Biden and asked if he believed he would bear responsibility for harm to Afghan women after a troop withdrawal and the return of the Taliban. Biden bristled and his eyes narrowed. "No, I don't!" he snapped, and put his thumb and index finger together. "[Zero responsibility.](#)"

"Where are the American forces to save you? Where are their helicopters? Where are their airplanes? You're an infidel, a traitor! You helped them for a decade! Where are they now?"

Human rights alone were not grounds for committing American troops—it was a solid argument, based on national interest. But it didn't explain the

hardness, the combativeness. Questions about Afghanistan and its people made Biden rear up and dig in. During the 2020 campaign he was seen as deeply empathetic, but the fierce attachments of "Middle-Class Joe" are parochial. They come from personal ties, not universal concerns: his family, his hometown, his longtime advisers, his country, its troops. The Green Beret interpreter and the girl in the unfinished schoolroom now stood outside the circle of empathy.

II. "Traitors"

On January 20, 2021, an Afghan named Khan was waiting to celebrate the inauguration of President Biden when he received news he'd been awaiting for three years: His SIV application had cleared an important step, approval from the U.S. embassy. (For his family's safety, I'm not using his full name.) Khan, a 30-year-old employee of a U.S. military contractor, lived in a village in southeastern Afghanistan with his wife, their 2-year-old son, a dog, two cats, and extended family in a house next to an orchard of almond and apple trees. He had received three death threats from the Taliban and survived three suicide bombings and four armed assaults that had killed scores of people. The Trump years had been disastrous for SIV applicants like Khan. Ten minutes after receiving the longed-for email, he was thrilled to watch the swearing-in of the new American president.

Mina, Khan's 22-year-old wife, who was pregnant with their second child, had 10 family members working for the Americans. This was unusual for a family of Pashtuns, and dangerous in a region where the Taliban controlled much of the countryside. Her sister's husband, Mohammad, had worked for several years at the U.S. embassy and was now employed in the same military office as Khan. Mohammad had been waiting on his SIV application for 10 years. The previous October, Taliban insurgents had killed his uncle,

nephew, and cousin at a wedding ceremony where they had intended to kill him. On January 27, Mohammad was driving to the office with his 10-year-old son when a Toyota Corolla blocked his way. From behind a low concrete wall two gunmen opened fire. Mohammad managed to drive 50 feet before a stream of bullets cut him down. When his wife heard the news, she ran a mile barefoot to the hospital, but by the time she got there Mohammad was dead.

Their son stopped speaking for a week. When he was finally able to describe the attack, he repeated the words that the Talibs had yelled: "Where are the American forces to save you? Where are their helicopters? Where are their airplanes? You're an infidel, a traitor! You helped them for a decade! Where are they now?"

If not for an errand in Kabul, Khan would have been in the car with his brother-in-law. He started working from home, and he and Mina left his village and moved between rented houses in the provincial capital. They took shifts on the roof day and night to keep watch for strangers who might try to plant an explosive in the yard. In the spring, the Taliban closed in on the city. One night in May, Khan's dog barked incessantly, and the next morning Khan found a note at his back gate. It said: "You have been helping U.S. occupier forces, and you have been providing them with intelligence information. You are an ally and spy of infidels. We will never leave you alive and will not have mercy on your family, because they are supporting you. Your destiny will be like your brother-in-law's." He went around to check the front gate. A grenade was wired to the bolt, set to explode when the gate was opened.

Khan and Mina moved to another rented house. In June, Talibs raided his family home in the village. They expelled Khan's parents and siblings, smashed windows, destroyed furniture, stole Mina's jewelry and Khan's car, and burned all of his books.

SIV applicants and their families numbered about 80,000 people. But after 20 years, far more Afghans than these had put themselves in danger by joining the American project in their country: rights activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, judges, students and teachers at American-backed universities, special-forces commandos. A full accounting would reach the hundreds of thousands. Many of them were women, and most were under 40—the generation of Afghans who came of age in the time of the Americans.

The U.S. and its international partners had failed to achieve most of their goals in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and armed forces remained criminally weak, hollowed out by corruption and tribalism; violence kept increasing; the Taliban were taking district after district. But something of value—always fragile and dependent on foreigners—had been accomplished. “We created a situation that enabled the Afghans to change their own society,” Mark Jacobson, an Army veteran and former civilian adviser to U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, told me. “We created a situation that enabled the Afghans to nation-build.”

After the U.S. and the Taliban signed their agreement in Doha in February 2020, attacks against American troops stopped—but hundreds of Afghans in civil society, [especially women](#), were targeted in a terrifying campaign of assassinations that shattered what was left of public trust in the Afghan government and seemed to show what lay in store after the Americans left. Carter Malkasian, the author of [The American War in Afghanistan](#), who worked for years as a civilian adviser to the U.S. military and later spoke with Taliban negotiators during the peace talks, told me they never expressed any mercy toward Afghans who'd worked with the Americans: “The Taliban have always been very lenient toward the killing and execution of people they consider spies.”

[Caitlin Flanagan: The week the left stopped caring about human rights](#)

In a restored Islamic Emirate, everyone's fate would be up to the Taliban. Not just to the political leaders in Doha and Kabul, but to local gunmen in remote provinces with no media around, carrying out the will of God, settling scores, or just enjoying themselves. Some Afghans would be marked for certain death. Many others would face the destruction of their hopes and dreams. No law required the U.S. government to save a single one—only a moral debt did. But just as ordinary Talibs could act on their own to punish "traitors," so could ordinary Americans try on their own to help their friends.

In July, the Taliban conquered the home district of Wazir Nazary, a 40-year-old Afghan woman. Taliban assailants broke into her home and shot her in the face, wounding both eyes. (Victor J. Blue)

A U.S. Army captain I will call Alice Spence knew a group of Afghan women who were especially endangered. (Because she is still active-duty military,

she asked for anonymity.) Spence, from a nonmilitary family in New England, had attended an Ivy League college. At 27, in the summer of 2014, she quit her job at an accounting firm and joined the Army. The recruiter warned that she wouldn't get very far—she was too old and barely made the minimum weight requirement (her wrists and biceps were about the same size). But Spence became an officer and deployed to Afghanistan, where she trained Afghan units called Female Tactical Platoons.

[FTP's were attached to Special Operations Forces and went on missions with male commandos](#)—American and Afghan men and women flying on the same helicopters, humping heavy kits up the same mountains, the women joining the men on violent night raids against Taliban or Islamic State targets. The main job of the female troops was to search and question local women and children, but they also fired their weapons and were fired upon. The FTPs were particularly hated by the Taliban for being elite troops, [for being women](#), and for being overwhelmingly Hazara—the Shiite minority that the Taliban continually targeted with suicide bombings and assassinations.

[George Packer: Biden's betrayal of Afghans will live in infamy](#)

Hawa, a young Hazara woman from Bamiyan, in the center of the country, joined the army at age 18, in 2015. She loved watching war movies, and when military recruiters visited her high school she was drawn to the uniforms, the weapons, the bravery, the chance to serve her country. (I am using only her first name for her family's safety.) Hawa's parents vigorously opposed her choice—the army was too dangerous for their daughter. But she was determined. "It doesn't matter if you say no," Hawa told them. "You will see when I go there."

Lieutenant Hawa met Captain Spence at Bagram Air Base. "Oh my God, you're an FTP?" Spence asked her, laughing. "You're so short. How did you

get into the military?" Hawa replied that Spence looked like a skeleton and gave her the call sign *Eskelet*; Spence's for Hawa was *Tarbooz*, for the watermelon she loved to eat at the base's dining facility.

Spence formed a close bond with Hawa and another FTP member named Mahjabin. The women exchanged language lessons, and Spence learned a variety of jokes and vulgarities in Dari. They worked out together, shared midnight meals, and fell into hysterics over whoopee cushions.

The Afghan women saw the war with the fatalism of hard experience. They expected no final victory, only a long, perhaps permanent struggle to hold on to the gains for which they'd sacrificed so much. "I truly loved, admired, and respected them," Spence told me. "There's very few bonds that exist on this Earth like those between people who walk towards death together."

After the Doha agreement, American Special Forces stopped going on missions against the Taliban with the Afghans. In the summer of 2020, Spence, now stationed in Hawaii, got a message from Hawa. Talibs had told the imam of the Shiite mosque in her family's Kabul neighborhood that they would kill any local Hazara soldiers they might later find if he didn't give up their names now. Hawa asked for Spence's help to get out of Afghanistan. Spence put together an SIV application, but it was rejected—as a member of the Afghan National Army, Hawa lacked a letter from a U.S. employer.

After Biden declared the end of the war in April, Spence began to panic. "Hawa my friend are you still in Afghanistan?" she wrote in June. "I need to get you out somehow. I will try."

[Read: The Taliban's return is catastrophic for women](#)

"Please talk to a lawyer tell him/her how you can help me to get to the USA," Hawa replied. "I know it is difficult but I need you to go out. Here is very

dangerous for me now I need your help dear. I will compensation when I come to there."

"No compensation, you are my azizam," Spence wrote—"my dear."

Spence and a few other female soldiers collected a list of FTPs in need of visas. They wrote their own employment-verification letters on Army letterhead. With Mahjabin's help, they tracked down elusive birth dates, regularized spellings of Afghan names, and gathered details about threats. "Two months ago, the Taliban made three big explosions in the school nearest my house," Hawa wrote in her statement. "My younger sister was there, but survived. Many of her classmates died in the attack." (The bombings killed at least 90 people, most of them Hazara schoolgirls.) "She is very scared and cannot go to school anymore. They also killed my cousin in the explosion. I know they will kill me too if they find me."

Spence and her colleagues assembled packets of documents and fed them into the sluggish gears of the bureaucracy as the last American troops left Afghanistan.

III. "Optics"

On April 21, one week after Biden's speech, 16 members of the House of Representatives—10 Democrats and six Republicans, led by Jason Crow and Seth Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat—announced the formation of the Honoring Our Promises Working Group. Its purpose was to offer bipartisan support for bringing Afghan allies to safety. "The goal was: Let's not let politics get wrapped up in this," Peter Meijer, [a Michigan Republican](#) and an Iraq War veteran, told me. "'Honor our promises! This shouldn't be that hard' was the sentiment that many of us had." The next day, April 22, General

Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. of Central Command affirmed that the military, if so ordered, would be able to bring Afghans out of harm's way as it withdrew.

At the White House, Jon Finer, the deputy national security adviser, held meetings on Afghanistan with the No. 2 officials from relevant agencies at least once a week. The subject of SIVs was also discussed at meetings of Cabinet principals led by Jake Sullivan. These discussions focused largely on ways to improve the visa program—adding staff in Kabul and Washington, identifying choke points, speeding up processing. But bringing all the SIV applicants to safety would still take at least two years. And it would leave tens or hundreds of thousands of other Afghans, who had American affiliations but were ineligible for the visas, with no hope of getting out. Advocates [pressed the administration](#) to create a new program that would give these Afghans priority access as refugees to the U.S.

It was too late to rely on fixing a broken bureaucracy. A catastrophe was coming. But April turned to May, American troops began to leave Afghanistan, and still the fate of endangered Afghans remained unclear. "Studying a problem for too long is an excuse to do nothing," Becca Heller, a co-founder of IRAP who is now its executive director, told me. "You don't study a problem in an emergency."

IRAP and other groups created an unusual coalition of veteran, humanitarian, and religious organizations called Evacuate Our Allies. They were given meetings with mid-level White House officials who listened and took notes, saying little. At one meeting, when an advocate mentioned that some NATO allies were already bringing Afghans to their countries, an official suddenly perked up: "Which countries are willing to take people?" The official had misunderstood—the allies were taking their own Afghan partners, not America's.

By late May, American troops were leaving Afghanistan so quickly that the last ones—except for a force of about 1,000 to protect the embassy and the airport—would be out by early July, far sooner than Biden's September 11 deadline. The pace caught the administration's top policy makers by surprise. "Speed is safety" was the Pentagon's mantra, and the withdrawal was a superb example of military planning and logistics. Bases across Afghanistan were efficiently packed up, closed down, and handed off to the Afghan army without a single American casualty, and C-17s made hundreds of flights out with the remaining matériel of the American war, computers and coffee makers all accounted for, leaving the Afghans who worked on the bases behind.

On May 26, a small group of senators from both parties met with senior White House advisers in the Situation Room. The senators argued for mass evacuations—not just of SIV applicants, but of other Afghans at risk because of their association with the United States. Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut later told me, "I remember our expressing the sense very directly that there had to be an evacuation, beginning right then, of thousands of our Afghan partners to Guam. The response basically was 'We're on it. Don't worry. We know what we're doing.'"

That same day, General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [told reporters](#), "There are plans being developed very, very rapidly here" to bring out "not just interpreters but a lot of other people that have worked with the United States." Asked about an airlift, Milley replied, "That is a way of doing it."

But the White House immediately shut the chairman down. "I can tell you that we have no plans for evacuations at this time," a National Security Council spokesperson said. "The State Department is processing SIV applications in Kabul. They are focused on ensuring that the system

functions quickly and consistent with U.S. security and other application requirements." There would be no more talk of airlifting Afghans to safety.

As troops departed, the Taliban launched a spring offensive and closed in on provincial capitals throughout the south. Insurgent checkpoints blocked the roads to Kabul. "I'm gravely concerned for a very precipitous dissolution of the security environment," Crow, a member of the House Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, told me last March. "We are underestimating the timeline for what would happen for a post-U.S. withdrawal in Afghanistan. I think it would be far quicker and more devastating than our current assessments indicate."

Alex McCoy of Common Defense, the progressive veterans group, viewed the Biden administration as the best hope for a new U.S. foreign policy of restraint, based on human rights, not militarism. This meant not just ending the war but also saving the Afghans whose lives would be jeopardized by an American departure. McCoy was seen as an ally by the NSC; he spoke frequently with a senior official in the White House. On May 24, McCoy texted the official asking to talk about the lack of progress on SIVs. The official called him late that night as she was driving home from the White House.

The official told McCoy that Guam raised legal problems as a U.S. territory. This confused McCoy—the whole point of Guam was to house Afghans somewhere on U.S. territory that was safe for them and that would allay American fears of terror on the mainland while their cases were processed. The governor of Guam, where 8,000 hotel rooms stood empty because of COVID-19, would soon put out a welcome mat. But the State Department was concerned that setting foot in Guam would give Afghans a legal right to claim asylum in the U.S. even if they didn't pass security vetting. This was a risk that might involve a tiny fraction of refugees, and by law those found to

be potential threats would be sent back.

The official moved on to the larger problem. National-security officials were in favor of evacuations, she said—but the president's political advisers worried that the right would hammer Biden for resettling thousands of Muslims while historic numbers of Central American refugees were already overrunning the southern border. The Afghan evacuees would become part of one giant immigration disaster, exploited hourly on Fox News, when the administration still had to pass a trillion-dollar infrastructure bill. "Remember, this kind of crisis was coming at the worst possible time," a senior administration official told me. "In the spring there was wall-to-wall coverage of the border—'Who are these people coming into our country?'—and at the same time we're contemplating bringing in tens of thousands of Afghans. I feel passionately about it, but politically it could be risky."

The administration countered every urgent proposal with objections so unconvincing that they suggested a deeper, unexpressed resistance. The Guam option—already suspect because of the notional Afghans who might fail screening and need to be returned—was downgraded to highly unlikely by the approach of typhoon season. When, in mid-June, I asked another senior administration official about Afghans who lived outside Kabul and were quickly losing any exit route, he replied, "The vast majority of SIV applicants, based on the work that could be done on this, are in or around Kabul." This was untrue. Using a Facebook group that his white-paper co-author, Kim Staffieri, had created, Matt Zeller polled SIV applicants and received 4,000 responses: Half of them were outside Kabul, with little or no way of safely reaching the capital with their family; hardly any international flights were taking off from provincial cities.

Vietnam was the nightmare scenario that no one wanted to discuss. In July, when a reporter asked Biden if he foresaw any parallels in Afghanistan, the

president retorted the way he had when he'd answered the question about his moral responsibility for Afghan women's rights: "None whatsoever. Zero." The Taliban had nothing like the strength of the North Vietnamese army, he insisted. "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." But the Vietnam precedent was inescapable. On a trip to Kabul in 2016, I had heard that American diplomats were studying old cables sent between the Saigon embassy and Washington in the last days of South Vietnam. In 2015 the Obama administration had conducted a secret analysis of a potential final drawdown of troops from Afghanistan, and Vietnam always lurked in the background of discussions, according to a former White House official who took part. The analysis showed that, if the U.S. reduced its troops to a reinforced Kabul embassy, there would be two dire consequences. First, the former official told me, the ability to gather intelligence on the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State would "drop precipitously."

Second, any evacuation of thousands of Americans from a landlocked country with poor or nonexistent infrastructure would come down to "a single point of failure" at the Kabul airport, and it would be "dangerously vulnerable" to attack. "This was extremely risky short of paratroopers coming in," the former official said. He added that the disturbing evacuation analysis was likely "a major factor" in Obama's decision to keep almost 10,000 troops in Afghanistan.

[From the April 2010 issue: Robert D. Kaplan on the U.S. in Afghanistan](#)

The Vietnam analogy raised the specter of what Washington insiders call "optics." Mass evacuations would evoke images of one of the most vivid humiliations in the history of U.S. foreign policy, and those images would conjure an impression of chaos and defeat. It would make the reality all too clear: America had lost another war. The September 11 withdrawal date was

an effort to blur that fact, suggesting the honorable completion of what had started exactly 20 years before—not its tragic failure.

"Every week, someone was using the word *optics* to me," Chris Purdy, the director of Veterans for American Ideals, a project of Human Rights First, told me. "'We have to be concerned about optics.' I'm thinking, *They're going to be murdered in the streets—that's pretty bad optics.*"

Taliban fighters on top of a Humvee they seized from Afghan forces when they took Kabul (Jim Huylebroek)

Most efforts to avoid bad optics avoid the truth and result in worse optics. In Vietnam, the last American ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, and his boss, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, believed that early evacuations of South Vietnamese, when the fall of Saigon might be weeks or months off, would cause the government's abrupt collapse. Biden-administration

officials made the same argument about Afghanistan. "The combination of two things—our belief that we had more time, a lot more time, and that we didn't want to precipitate a crisis of confidence in the government—that's what led us to the pace at which we were doing this," Antony Blinken told me. A senior White House official argued that if early evacuations and the announcement of a priority refugee program had been followed by the collapse of the Afghan government, "the charge would have been that we undermined them." (No White House official would speak with me on the record about Afghanistan.)

In June, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, came to the White House and asked Biden to hold off on evacuating Afghans, to avoid initiating mass panic. Afterward, Ghani met with a few members of Congress. Jason Crow used his time to make the case for evacuations. "I know what you're trying to do, Mr. Crow," Ghani replied with some heat. "It's undermining what we're trying to do in creating some stability and security." Ghani didn't move Crow, but he gave the administration another reason not to do what it already didn't want to do. Biden later [made Ghani's plea public](#).

The spectacle of airlifts out of Hamid Karzai International Airport, of Afghans from civil society crossing borders to take advantage of a new American refugee program, would indeed have signified a lack of confidence in the Ghani government, and perhaps induced something like the chaos that would come in late summer. But Afghanistan's fate was sealed the moment Biden gave his speech in April. No one in Washington or Kabul honestly believed that the Afghan government could survive the Americans' departure. "They were done with us," Hamdullah Mohib, Ghani's national security adviser, told me. "The allies were fed up with us, and the Afghan people were also fed up with us." The pretense of supporting a stable government gave everyone in power a chance to save face at the expense of ordinary Afghans.

[David Frum: The one thing that could've changed the war in Afghanistan](#)

The Biden administration thought Kabul wouldn't fall before 2022. Most outside experts agreed. "I can tell you, having sat through every single meeting that took place on this topic and having read every single intelligence assessment, military document, State Department cable," the senior White House official told me, "there was nobody anywhere in our government, even up until a day or two before Kabul fell, that foresaw the collapse of the government and army before the end of our troop withdrawal at the end of August, and most of the projections were that there would still be weeks to months before we would face the very real prospect of the collapse of Kabul."

But while waiting for Kabul to fall, the administration could have timed the military withdrawal to support evacuations, rather than pulling out all the hard assets while leaving all the soft targets behind. It could have created an interagency task force, vested with presidential authority and led by an evacuations czar—the only way to force different agencies to coordinate resources in order to solve a problem that is limited in scope but highly complex. It could have assembled comprehensive lists of thousands of names, locations, email addresses, and phone numbers—not just for interpreters like Khan, but for others at risk, including women like Hawa. It could have begun to quietly organize flights on commercial aircraft in the spring—moving 1,000 people a week—and gradually increased the numbers. It could have used the prospect of lifting sanctions and giving international recognition to a future Taliban government as leverage, demanding secure airfields and safe passage for Afghans whom the Americans wanted to bring out with them. It could have used airfields in Herāt, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Kandahar while those cities remained out of Taliban control. It could have drawn up emergency plans for Afghan evacuations and rehearsed them in interagency drills. It could have included NATO allies in

the planning. It could have shown imagination and initiative. But the administration did none of this.

The VA augmented its mental-health hotline in case Afghanistan veterans began to see their interpreters beheaded on social media.

Instead, it studied the problem in endless meetings. While studying the problem, the government accelerated visa processing and reduced the wait time from four years to just under two. The number of SIV holders and family members reaching the U.S. rose from fewer than 300 a month through the winter and spring to 513 in June. That month, a COVID outbreak at the embassy stopped interviews for several weeks. With Afghanistan visibly collapsing, new applications arrived in record numbers. The administration looked for countries where applicants could be flown and housed while their cases were processed. Negotiations with various European allies, Central Asian countries, and Persian Gulf kingdoms consumed the State Department's time and energy, but no firm deals were made. Why would other countries accept U.S.-affiliated Afghans whom America regarded as too potentially dangerous to bring onto its own soil?

These efforts were always several steps behind the deteriorating reality in Afghanistan. This sluggishness in the face of impending calamity continued the same self-deception, prevarication, and groupthink—the same inability to grasp the hard truths of Afghanistan—that had plagued the entire 20-year war.

As the advocates' desperation grew, some of them began to harbor a suspicion that they were being played by the administration—that all the meetings in the Situation Room and the backgrounders with mid-level

officials were meant to give an impression of movement that would never result in action.

[From the May 1980 issue: Afghanistan, crossroads of conflict](#)

“What they thought they were going to do was pull all the U.S. assets out, and the Afghan government would hold on long enough so that, when it collapsed, there would be no photographs of the evacuation,” Mike Breen, of Human Rights First, told me. “There [wouldn't be a Saigon moment](#), because there wouldn't be any Americans around and any American helicopters to hang off. They thought the Afghan military was going to die in place to buy them time.” This scenario recalled the “decent interval” that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had sought between the end of the American war in Vietnam and the demise of the South Vietnamese government, to avoid the optics of an American defeat. As Biden had put it to Richard Holbrooke, this was how Nixon and Kissinger tried to get away with it.

[Read: “This is not Saigon. This is worse than Saigon.”](#)

Steve Miska, a leader of Evacuate Our Allies, concluded that the main obstacle must be the president. Nothing else made sense. Miska, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, thought that if he could just find a way to reach Biden, the president would understand the issue's importance to veterans. *If only Beau were alive*, Miska thought, *he would have been able to get through to his father*. Miska approached Denis McDonough, the secretary of veterans affairs, who immediately grasped the implication for his constituency. The department augmented its mental-health hotline in case Afghanistan vets began to see their interpreters beheaded on social media.

Sam Ayres, a law student and former Army Ranger who had served three tours in Afghanistan as an enlisted infantryman, sent a letter to several people he knew in the administration, explaining why the issue mattered so

personally to many veterans. He wrote that the faces and voices of individual interpreters stayed with American troops long after they returned home. He described driving past Dover Air Force Base, where the caskets of two of his Army teammates had arrived in 2018 and 2019. "For the next couple hours of my drive, I was thrust back into the ongoing debate in my mind about whether our service—and the loss of teammates, American and Afghan—was all a waste," Ayres wrote. "Many of us veterans will spend the rest of our lives grappling with this question. At the very least, I hope we'll be able to feel we did something honorable over there in our small corner of the war. That would provide some solace. But coming to that conclusion will be even harder if the Afghans who went out on missions with us are left to die at the hands of our onetime enemies." The letter received a pro forma response.

During the final withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden's main—at times, it seemed, his only—focus was on keeping the number of American casualties as close to zero as possible. He didn't reckon with the invisible harm of adding moral injury to military failure.

Within the administration, a few indicators were starting to flash red. By July the CIA, which had given the Afghan government a year back in April, now judged that it might fall in a matter of weeks. As it moved out of its bases around the country, the CIA decided to keep open a base called Eagle, near the Kabul airport, as a transit point in the event that the agency's counterparts in the Afghan National Directorate of Security, along with their families, had to be evacuated quickly.

On July 13, Secretary Blinken received a "[dissent-channel cable](#)" from the embassy in Kabul, written by diplomats who disagreed with official policy. The cable warned that the Taliban were making rapid advances, and that the collapse of the Ghani government could happen within weeks. It urged the Biden administration to begin emergency evacuations of Afghan allies.

Around the same time, the Atrocity Early Warning Task Force, an executive-branch committee, began drafting an assessment of how to prevent massacres in Afghanistan after a Taliban takeover.

Throughout the summer, the National Security Council held weekly virtual briefings for friendly groups like Common Defense, to enlist their help in amplifying the administration's message and defusing criticism. Alex McCoy attended the briefings, but by July he had become so skeptical of what he was hearing that he began to secretly record the sessions. The briefing official was Carlyn Reichel, the White House speechwriter who had phoned him with the good news in advance of Biden's speech in April. Week after week, in answer to increasingly pointed questions about SIVs and evacuations, Reichel kept offering the same vaguely positive phrases, which had the effect of deflating any hope of action: "We are exploring all options and planning for every contingency"; "I can assure you that we are working on it and that it has very senior levels of attention in this building."

On July 14, Reichel informed McCoy and others that the president was about to announce a new initiative, called Operation Allies Refuge. The U.S. government would soon begin bringing SIV holders on flights to America. Reichel called them "relocation flights for interested and eligible Afghans." The phrasing was curious; it avoided the word *evacuation*, and it suggested that some visa holders didn't want to leave Afghanistan. On July 8, Biden had claimed that ["fewer than half" of SIV holders had chosen to leave](#). This became a [persistent talking point](#), and a false one: Almost all of the remaining Afghans with visas were in official limbo, waiting for the United Nations to put them on flights to the U.S., or for family members to receive passports and visas. The president, echoed by his officials, was trying to blame the Afghans for their own entrapment.

Still, with a presidential speech, a named operation, and planned flights, the

administration finally appeared to be taking action. "It seemed like they were belatedly meeting the concerns we were raising," McCoy later told me. But nothing happened until July 30, when one charter flight brought 221 SIV holders and family members to Fort Lee, outside Richmond, Virginia. These were Afghans whose visas had already been approved; the U.S. government was simply accelerating their arrival. McCoy began to think that Operation Allies Refuge was a "performative stunt," intended to convince ordinary voters in, say, Michigan and Pennsylvania who might have seen something on TV about endangered Afghans that the administration had it covered.

After the military's lightning withdrawal, the embassy was still moving at the pace of a mission with months to go. "From our perspective, the State Department was relying on a lot of hope that things weren't going to fall apart in the face of increasingly bleak intelligence reports on a daily basis," a soldier who remained in Afghanistan throughout the summer told me. "The military was just waiting for a decision point or guidance from the State Department, and it never came until things fell apart."

On August 2, the administration [finally announced a priority refugee program](#), which it had been discussing since the spring, for several categories of vulnerable Afghans who didn't qualify for SIVs. But no Afghan could use the program—it existed only on paper, because there was no infrastructure for processing refugees in the neighboring countries to which they might flee. More relocation flights brought more interested and eligible SIV families to the U.S.; by mid-August the total was just under 2,000 people. The administration continued to explore all options and plan for every contingency. Major cities across Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. The Atrocity Early Warning Task Force finished its assessment on potential massacres and was about to start planning for ways to prevent them. An official who worked on the assessment later told me, "It was finalized the week before everything went to shit."

IV. Flowers

When Hawa, the Afghan special-forces lieutenant, learned from the media that her U.S. counterparts were about to leave Bagram Air Base, she was stunned. "Really?" she asked the American women on the base. The Americans apologized—they hadn't believed it would happen either. To Hawa the Americans were still needed, and the future looked dire without them.

The shock in the Afghan army was widespread. The departure of foreign troops, contractors, technical support, and military intelligence dealt a fatal blow to morale. The Afghans' job was now to hold out for a few months and then die in place.

Hawa was transferred to the Afghan special forces' base in Kabul. A few days later, in the predawn darkness on July 2, the Americans packed up Bagram, switched off the electricity, and flew out of the nerve center of the war without telling the new Afghan commander.

In Kabul, Hawa trained new Female Tactical Platoons and awaited word on her visa application from Captain Alice Spence. On July 15, Spence texted her about Operation Allies Refuge: "Hi sweet Hawa, USA has good news and will evacuate many Afghans soon. I am still working on your application. Please stay safe and we will get you out."

"That's really good news," Hawa replied. "Thank you so much my kind azizam." She asked if her younger sister could be included in the evacuation. Spence said that she would try. By July 31 she and her group of U.S.-military women had completed paperwork for several dozen FTPs and sent it to the State Department.

Talibs had a practice of killing any female troops they found. In early August,

as the Taliban conquered province after province, Hawa's commander told the FTPs to take 20 days' leave and go home for their own safety. Hawa knew that this was the end of her service. "That day was the bitterest day of my life," she told me. And yet she still didn't believe that the men with beards, long hair, and AK-47s would be able to enter the capital. Kabul was reinforced with the Afghan army's best troops, including commandos she had fought alongside. Hawa thought they would keep the Taliban out at any cost. The foreign forces wouldn't allow it, either. They would return and defend the Afghan government—or what had all the fighting and suffering been for?

In southeastern Afghanistan, Khan was closely following news from Washington. The announcement of Operation Allies Refuge raised his hopes; so did a bill passed by Congress at the end of July that increased the cap on Afghan SIVs by 8,000 and allowed applicants to defer their medical exam until they reached the U.S. But the sound of fighting kept getting closer to the center of his town, and the electricity kept going out in the rented house where he, Mina, and their small son were hunkered down. When the Taliban announced a new policy of clemency for interpreters who confessed and asked for forgiveness, Khan saw a trap to keep Afghans like him from trying to escape, so they could then be slaughtered. The murder of his family members and the threatening letter at his back gate had made the Talibs' views on interpreters clear enough.

Khan's family's interview at the U.S. embassy, one of the last steps before visas would be issued, was canceled in June because of the COVID outbreak. They were given a new appointment on July 29. The Taliban had set up several checkpoints along the road to Kabul, where they had beheaded an interpreter in May. Khan and Mina decided to hire a more expensive ambulance taxi to the capital rather than risk a regular one. Her pregnancy gave them a good cover story, backed by a copy of her

ultrasound and a bottle of prescription medicine. She hid their documents and a USB flash drive under her robe. Khan had grown his beard out, put on ragged clothes, and wiped his phone clean—the Taliban looked at everything, even Google search histories.

On the road they encountered two Taliban checkpoints. They were allowed through the first without being stopped; at the second they were stopped and insurgents glanced inside before letting the ambulance continue. But Khan saw them questioning passengers in other vehicles, mostly young men in their 20s and early 30s with no turbans or beards. "I think they were searching for people who worked with U.S. forces," he told me later.

In Kabul the family had to keep changing their lodging as each place began to seem unsafe. Khan heard accounts of targeted killings of government workers that went unreported in international media. The city was filling up with refugees from the fighting in other provinces. He finally found a room in a cheap hotel, near the international green zone, that was a way station for Afghans like him—interpreters and others hoping for a flight out.

A bus convoy full of Afghans seeking to flee the country drives through the night toward the Kabul airport on August 22. It navigated checkpoints manned by both Taliban fighters and CIA-backed paramilitaries before entering the airport via the northwestern gate. (Andrew Quilty / Agence VU')

The interview at the U.S. embassy lasted no more than five minutes. Khan mentioned Mohammad's death, the threatening letter, Mina's pregnancy—a few more weeks and she would no longer be allowed to fly. They had barely left the embassy when Khan received a text with instructions for their medical exams. Ordinarily the wait would have been months, but the exams took place on August 2, at a cost of \$1,414 for the family. Khan was running out of money.

Everything was moving quickly now. The office of Jason Crow, the Colorado congressman, brought the family to the attention of the State Department, which expedited Khan's case (I had alerted Crow's office to their situation and provided Khan's family with other help). His lawyer from IRAP, Julie

Kornfeld, was trying to obtain plane tickets with the help of an organization called Miles4Migrants. Khan went to a travel agency and found a scene of panic. Seats were going at famine prices. "If you do not book tickets soon, they will not be available, because people are leaving," the travel agent told Khan. The visas might still take weeks to be issued, and Khan was down to his last \$50. But if he returned to his hometown he might never get out. All of these clocks were ticking against him and his family: money, visas, tickets, Mina's pregnancy, the Taliban.

Khan decided to stay in Kabul and wait.

Even with the scenes of chaos at travel agencies and banks and passport offices, even with the Taliban just 20 miles away, a paralyzing denial settled over people in Kabul. It was possible to know that the city was in imminent danger and at the same time to believe that it couldn't fall. A surprising number of Afghan Americans traveled to Kabul in the summer of 2021 for weddings or family visits. The same denial prevailed in Washington: On the weekend of August 14–15, most of the senior leadership of the Biden administration was away on vacation. The fall of Kabul would always happen sometime in the future.

[From the November 1985 issue: The Soviet invasion and the ordeal of Afghanistan](#)

"It was like a joke to me," Hamasa Parsa, a 23-year-old Afghan army captain who worked as an assistant in the defense minister's office, said. "I never thought that the Taliban would come to Kabul, even when Joe Biden said that our war is finished."

On hearing Biden's speech in April, Parsa (whose name has been changed for her safety) had cried and wondered whether the president felt any regret. But she was sure that Kabul, where she had grown up under American

protection, was too big and modern to fall to the Taliban. "Kabul is a city full of younger generations," she said, "full of girls and boys who can talk, who can fight with their writing, with their speaking." Parsa loved to read and write novels, and after work she would meet three of her friends at a crowded coffee shop in downtown Kabul called Nosh Book Café. "It was like a heaven for us," she said. Young men and women sat together at tables, the girls' scarves falling back onto their shoulders, everyone talking, working at laptops, smoking cigarettes.

For such a city to fall would mean the end of the only life Afghans like Parsa had ever known. The rest of the country might now belong to the Taliban—perhaps it always had—but not Kabul. This Afghan illusion, widespread until the very end, was nourished by American illusions—by our refusal to face that we had neither the will nor the ability to create something durable in Afghanistan, that one day we would abandon them.

In early August Najeeb Monawari was in Bangladesh, so focused on the news from his homeland that he was unable to work. His foreign postings with Doctors Without Borders had kept him safely out of Afghanistan as the country descended into extreme violence, but he worried constantly for his family back home. His wife begged him to get her and their three small children out too, and he researched every possible way. The \$125,000 purchase price for citizenship in a Caribbean country was too expensive. He even looked into immigrating with his family to Sierra Leone.

As the Taliban swept through Afghanistan, Monawari read online that the Canadian government was setting up a new emergency immigration program for Afghans with connections to Canada. Monawari immediately applied. On August 7, he received an email from the Canadian government: "We received your application and you are being invited to an appointment for biometric collection (fingerprints)." Monawari had worked with the

Americans for four years, then waited 10 years for a U.S. visa that was finally, unjustly denied. He had worked with the Canadians long ago for a year, and they answered his prayers in a few weeks. "Hello dear Sir/Madam," he wrote back, "thank you very much for saving my family and myself life."

Monawari was now determined to get to Kabul. His mother told him that he would be crazy to come back at this moment. So did his colleagues in Bangladesh, including one who warned him that the Kabul airport would close before he could get his family out. So did a retired Green Beret weapons sergeant in Texas named Larry Ryland, who got back in touch with his former interpreter during the Taliban offensive and practically ordered him to stay in Bangladesh. Even the Canadian government warned him off. On the morning of August 8, a second email arrived: "Dear Sir, PLEASE DO NOT TRAVEL TO KABUL."

Monawari disregarded all the advice. He was in the grip of a furious monomania: He had to get to Kabul, be fingerprinted, and fly out with his family. Maybe to Canada, maybe even to the U.S.—he hadn't lost faith in his second try for an SIV. He could summon intense optimism while feeling intense pain. "I just put myself on fire," he later told me. "When you want to survive, you get blind, you just struggle."

Monawari arrived in Kabul on the night of Wednesday, August 11. First thing the next morning, he and his wife brought their passports and the email invitation to a Canadian military camp near the airport—the embassy was now closed to visitors—and talked their way past an Afghan guard. No one was on duty except one elderly Canadian, who took their fingerprints.

On Saturday, August 14, Monawari went to the bank where he kept his savings. He had intended to withdraw only a little, but when he saw the large and panicky crowd he thought the bank might shut its doors. He took out

almost all the money he had and left with his pockets bulging with euros, sweating, tensed for someone in the crowd to pull a gun on him.

Khan, hiding with Mina and their son in the center of Kabul, kept refreshing a State Department website showing the status of his visa every 20 or 30 minutes. At 3 p.m. on August 11, it suddenly went from “refused” to “administrative processing” and then “issued.” Two minutes later, Mina’s and their son’s status also changed. But Khan waited the next three days for a summons to pick up their passports at the embassy, and his emails went unanswered. On August 14, unable to wait any longer, he left the hotel where they were staying and ventured into Kabul’s fortified green zone. Outside the U.S. embassy a guard couldn’t make sense of the various emails with which Khan had armed himself. Another guard told him to come back on a better day. Khan didn’t realize that, inside the embassy, in preparation for evacuation to the airport, diplomats were smashing up hard drives, destroying American flags and other symbols that could be used for Taliban propaganda, and filling sacks with documents for burning. Khan insisted that his case was urgent, and he was finally allowed inside.

At the consular office the family’s passports were waiting, miraculously stamped with the Special Immigrant Visas that had eluded Khan and thousands of other Afghans for so long. They’d been ready since August 11. Khan and his family could have left Afghanistan by now, but the embassy had neglected to summon him. It didn’t matter—Julie Kornfeld had booked three tickets to the U.S. via Istanbul and Brazil on Tuesday, August 17, three days away. When Khan got back to the hotel room and shared the news with Mina, now 34 weeks pregnant, their toddler twirled across the floor in a celebratory Afghan dance.

They still needed COVID tests, and a doctor’s report that would allow Mina to fly. Their hometown fell that day. Khan figured that Kabul had another

month.

On August 12, three U.S. infantry battalions in the region—one of them staged there for this purpose—were ordered to secure the Kabul airport primarily for the evacuation of U.S. diplomats and American citizens. Two days later another 1,000 troops followed.

Alice Spence wrote to Hawa: "USA is sending 4,000 soldiers to help with SIV."

"Wow that's great. For which peoples they will help?"

"For you and others who are waiting."

On August 14, Spence told Hawa to have a bag packed and her visa documents printed or stored on her phone. "I am very hopeful now. Maybe this week. Do not tell anyone." She added an American flag, a heart, and an Afghan flag.

That night Hamasa Parsa, the Afghan captain who loved to read and write fiction, had a dream. Her best friend in the army appeared before her dressed in clothes covered with flowers that she had gathered off the ground where they'd fallen. "Do you know why I picked them up?" her friend asked. Parsa didn't know. Her friend, with a face and voice of unbearable sadness, said, "Hamasa, they are all dead." Then Parsa understood that the flowers on her friend's dress were the Afghan people. Her friend started to cry, and Parsa cried too, and when she woke tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She called her friend at once, though it was the middle of the night. "Are you okay?" Parsa asked. She reminded her that she'd seen her name on a death list sent by the Taliban to the defense minister's office.

"Hamasa, come on, stop crying, I'm okay," her friend said. "Nothing's going to happen. Go to sleep. We'll see each other tomorrow."

They had a plan to meet at the Nosh Book Café at 11 the next morning, Sunday, August 15.

V. The Airport

The next morning, most people in Kabul went to work as usual.

At the palace, Hamdullah Mohib, President Ghani's national security adviser—who had sent his wife and children out of the country—attended the regular 9 a.m. meeting of the president's top advisers. For three days Mohib had been talking with American diplomats in Kabul about transferring power to an interim government and sparing the city the urban warfare that had destroyed it in the 1990s. Ghani wanted to hold a *loya jirga*—a conference of political leaders—in two weeks. It would essentially hand power to the Taliban, but by constitutional means. Ghani wanted this to be part of his legacy. But he and Secretary Blinken hadn't discussed the idea until the night before, when Blinken agreed to send an envoy to Doha. At the Sunday-morning meeting, Ghani's advisers decided on a team that would fly to Doha that evening. Taliban representatives there had agreed that the insurgents would stay out of Kabul during negotiations. But Afghan intelligence knew that factions were competing to take the city, and that government forces would melt away rather than die in a pointless fight. That morning, Khalil Haqqani, whose Islamist network had inflicted numerous suicide bombings on Kabul, [called Mohib and told him to surrender](#).

Around 11 a.m., Ghani and Mohib were talking in a garden on the palace grounds when they heard automatic-weapons fire. They later learned that

guards at a nearby bank were dispersing customers trying to withdraw their money—but at the sound of gunfire everything fell apart. Staff began to abandon the palace. Guards took off their uniforms and went home in the civilian clothes they wore underneath. As Mohib prepared to escort Ghani's wife by helicopter to the airport for a flight to Dubai, the pilot told him that Afghan troops had prevented one of the presidential helicopters from leaving the airport and fired shots at another that was going to pick up the defense minister. These troops were not about to let their leaders save their own skins.

"When I heard that, I felt, *We are done*," Mohib told me. He quickly returned from the helipad to the palace. "It's time to leave," he told the president.

Ghani had been worried about the fate of his cherished library. He didn't even have his passport or a change of clothes. "I have to go upstairs and get some things," he said.

"No, there's no time," Mohib insisted.

Ghani, having convinced the Americans to leave his endangered people in harm's way, was flown by helicopter with his wife and a few advisers to safety in Uzbekistan.

Just before noon, Hawa was riding a bus to collect her uniform and papers, so her identity wouldn't be discovered if the base where she kept them was attacked, when her mother called. The Taliban were in their area of western Kabul, searching for military people, her mother said. Hawa should not come home.

Not knowing what to do, Hawa texted Alice Spence in Hawaii, where it was still Saturday night: "The Taliban come to our area. I am outside I don't know how should I go home ohhh."

"Oh God Hawa," Spence wrote back a minute later. "Ok where are you? You are not in Kabul?"

"Yes I am at Kabul. They came to Kabul."

"Fuck." Spence continued, "Ok it will be ok." She advised Hawa to find a safe way home and hide all her documents and anything suggesting military affiliation.

"Thank you dear sorry about the bad news," Hawa wrote.

"Don't be sorry the Talib they will be sorry."

"Okay dear. I really scared."

"I know. Please be brave Hawa. I will not go to sleep until you are safe."

Hawa was lucky to be wearing a long dress and a scarf that she'd put on to avoid trouble with the Pashtun women outside the base. She later heard that Talibs were ordering girls to cover themselves, and shot one who refused. They also shot a military woman discovered in her house. Hawa's face was recognizable—she had appeared in army recruitment ads on social media. With nowhere else to go, she searched for a taxi home, but no driver would take her, and she spent four hours trying to get there, through streets thronged with people running. For two days she didn't leave her house.

From his hotel room that morning Khan saw smoke rising above the U.S. embassy as the last burn bags were incinerated. They included the passports of Afghan visa hopefuls, who would now have to try to escape without them. It was protocol to destroy that kind of thing during a noncombatant-evacuation operation, and no one at the embassy was willing to break the rules and bring the passports to the airport. The removal of the embassy to the airport had been carefully planned at the Pentagon, but with

no discussion of how to bring out Afghans. Khan saw Chinook transport helicopters taking off from the embassy grounds every 15 minutes and clattering low over city streets the short distance to the airport.

["This is not Saigon,"](#) Blinken insisted on [a Sunday-morning news show](#).

Around noon, the hotel manager told Khan and the other interpreters lodged there to leave. With the Taliban in Kabul, the interpreters were now a security risk. Khan, Mina, and their son wept as they packed their bags. There were no taxis and most hotels were closed, so they walked for an hour and a half around central Kabul until they found a room in a dirty hotel. Talibs could be seen in the streets outside.

Afghans wait outside an entrance to Kabul's airport on August 22. In the background, U.S. Marines guard the wall.
(Jim Huylebroek)

The day before, with visas and tickets finally in hand, Khan had felt like one of the saved. Now the flight had been canceled and, because of the Afghan government's sudden demise, the airport was closed. "We came to a bad fate," Khan told Julie Kornfeld.

"I don't want to give you false hope," she said, "but I do still have a little." She urged him to get some sleep until there was news of flights out.

"I cannot sleep."

"Can you listen to soothing music, or take deep breaths, or, we have a saying, 'count sheep'? You need to do something to try and put your mind at ease."

"OK I will apply your prescription. But flights come and go in my mind."

That day, Najeeb Monawari's old Green Beret teammates flooded him with emails from Maryland, North Carolina, and Texas. One of them urged him to get to the airport immediately—the office of Senator Thom Tillis had put his name on a list. It was nearly midnight. When Monawari looked out the window he saw streets deserted of every living creature except stray dogs. Thinking this might be his only chance, Monawari woke his three children and prepared a backpack with food and printouts of SIV correspondence. He had to ask his neighbors to move their cars so he could get out. His mother told him that leaving the building at this hour tipped the neighbors off that he was a "traitor."

The airport was only 15 minutes away, but Monawari drove so fast that his father, who came along, warned him that the police might shoot at the car. But there were no police. Kabul was under no one's control, and looting had broken out around the city. The Taliban were [as unprepared as everyone else for the speed of their conquest](#). That day their leader in Doha, Mullah Abdul

Ghani Baradar, asked the head of U.S. Central Command, General McKenzie, whether the Americans wanted control of the city during the evacuation. McKenzie replied that his orders were to secure the airport and nothing else. U.S. troops were not to venture beyond its perimeter. "The Taliban were willing to let us do all that was necessary to control the terrain to get out," a former senior military officer told me. "When you consciously choose that the terrain you control is the fence line of the airport, you give up a lot of your prerogatives, and you permit yourself to be quite vulnerable to infiltration by suicide bombers." The exchange between Baradar and McKenzie would contribute to making the evacuation the nightmare that it became.

Monawari parked on a side street and left his father with the car. Hamid Karzai International Airport is small, with a cramped passenger terminal and a single runway. On the north side of the runway were a series of small bases belonging to NATO countries and the Afghan army. Civilians approaching from the city entered through the South Gate. The airport was ringed by miles of fortifications—concrete blast walls, Hesco bags, concertina wire—with about eight public or unofficial entry points.

With a pair of scissors, he cut to shreds his cherished Green Beret uniform and hat and patches. He put the remains in a garbage bag for his father to take outside and bury deep in the trash.

That night thousands of Afghans converged on the terminal at the South Gate. Monawari left his wife and children next to a wall for cover and tried to get close enough to find someone who could bring them inside. Four U.S. armored vehicles blocked the way, and Marines fired warning shots. People

were shouting and running back and forth based on rumors. Some Afghans, mostly single men with no American connections, had gotten inside the terminal and would eventually force their way, two with guns, onto C-17s intended to transport U.S. personnel and matériel to Qatar. Monawari spent the night looking for some authority with a list of names that included his. But there was no such authority. There was no list. On that first night Monawari learned what everyone who dared to come to the airport would have to find out for themselves during the next two weeks: There was no system, no plan. They were on their own.

[From the January 1958 issue: Afghanistan](#)

Shortly before dawn, a report flew around that Talibs were arriving. Afghan paramilitaries in civilian clothes suddenly disappeared. Monawari thought of running. Beyond the South Gate he saw a pickup with Taliban gunmen sitting in the bed, their legs hanging over the sides. This first sight of them in Kabul frightened him. He was their enemy, and they had the upper hand.

After daybreak the entrance road swelled with new crowds trying to reach the airport. Monawari and his family had spent nine hours outside the terminal. They had exhausted their crackers and water, and the kids were out of control. He decided to take the family home. "It is a big mess right now," he texted the Green Berets stateside.

At home he heard from a friend that Talibs would be searching houses that night. He burned his military certificates and SIV documents. He asked his mother if he could hide his Green Beret uniform, but she said that their apartment was too small—it would be found. With a pair of scissors, he cut to shreds his cherished uniform and hat and unit patches. He put the remains in a garbage bag for his father to take outside and bury deep in the trash.

Around midnight on Sunday, Sam Ayres, the former Ranger who'd sent the letter about veterans to Biden-administration contacts, texted his friend Alice Spence, whom he'd gone to college with. He was trying to find a way to help Khan, whose case he'd heard about.

"My FTP was hanged last week," Spence told him.

Mahjabin—the woman who, along with Hawa, was Spence's closest friend among the Afghans—had been killed in the bathroom of her in-laws' house a week before the fall of Kabul. It wasn't clear whether Talibs had done it, but Mahjabin's picture had been circulating around their checkpoints outside the city.

"Oh Jesus," Ayres wrote. "I'm so sorry."

"She was a magnificent person. I loved her so much." After a moment: "I refuse to let this happen to the rest of them."

In those first hours and days after the fall of Kabul, thousands of people in the U.S. and across the world began to live mentally in the city and its airport. Most of them had a personal connection to Afghanistan. More Americans cared about the country than the Biden administration had accounted for in its political calculations. Most of these Americans were in their 30s or 40s—the generation that came of age with the 9/11 wars, now reaching a calamitous end. Helping Afghans escape would become a way to avoid succumbing to a sense of waste and despair and helpless rage.

Veterans approached friends to offer or seek help for interpreters they knew, and these informal networks grew to a dozen or 50 people on Signal and WhatsApp, with smaller side groups connecting to military and political contacts and refugee organizations. Members of Congress with high profiles on the SIV issue received hundreds of texts on their personal phones from

complete strangers, some of them Americans looking for help, others desperate Afghans reaching for any name they could find. Jason Crow got a voicemail from a man who was barely audible, as if he was hiding somewhere: "I'm sorry if I bother you, but as you know better than me that the situation getting worse and worse in Afghanistan, especially for my people and my family. And this morning, they've killed one of the young boys." Congressional offices became 24-hour operations centers.

Some groups—West Point alums, retired Special Forces operators, women's-rights advocates—grew to several hundred and acquired names like Task Force Dunkirk and Task Force Pineapple. They spanned time zones and continents. Other groups consisted of three or four friends working their contacts. Mary Beth Goodman, the official who leads the State Department's global pandemic response, took two weeks off to spend every hour on evacuations, except the two or three at night when she slept, and even those hours were interrupted by phone calls, including one from an Afghan man in a convoy bound for the airport, whispering that ISIS terrorists had just boarded the bus, before the line went dead.

Using digital devices, foreigners tried to navigate Afghans thousands of miles away through the needle eyes of Kabul's airport gates. This global effort emerged spontaneously to fill the gaping void left by the U.S. government.

Afghans at Hamid Karzai International Airport prepare to be evacuated on August 22, 2021. Some from their bus convoy will wait on the tarmac for 48 hours. (Andrew Quilty / Agence VU')

In spite of three deployments, Sam Ayres had no close personal ties in Afghanistan. He wanted to help Afghans escape as a moral imperative, and out of loyalty to Alice Spence. Spence was propelled by the memory of her dead friend, whom she now had no time to grieve, and the distress calls of friends like Hawa who were still alive.

Several hours before dawn on Wednesday, August 18, Hawa got a message from Spence: She should be at the airport by sunrise. Spence instructed Hawa not to bring a suitcase, to wear a full face covering, and to hide her smartphone, keeping a simple Nokia in hand, in case she ran into Taliban checkpoints. The smartphone would have everything she needed to communicate with Spence and others and for them to share locations, as

well as important documents—but it could also give her away.

Spence and her colleagues were trying to bring a group of 16 FTPs and 10 dependents—husbands and children—into the airport. The SIV applications submitted in July had gone nowhere, but at least they provided the paperwork for identity packets to be sent to State Department inboxes, set up after the fall of Kabul as a clearinghouse for potential evacuees. The inboxes were soon overwhelmed, and the government asked people to stop sending names. What mattered most, Spence discovered—and this would be the key to all successful evacuation efforts—was having a contact inside the airport. “The people with the most power at that time were low-ranking gate guards,” she told me. “They had more power than any general in D.C., hands down.” Representative Tom Malinowski, a New Jersey Democrat, put it this way: “This was a situation where knowing the secretary of state and the national security adviser personally was vastly less valuable than knowing a Marine major on the airfield.”

Hawa packed a small bag with a change of clothes and her passport. She set out with her teenage sister for the North Gate, on the military side of the airport. At the gate—a barrier of concertina wire between sections of 16-foot blast walls—was a crush of human beings, including families with small children, all trying to push forward under the blinding sun until they could speak to a soldier. On the outer perimeter of security were Taliban guards, using whips, gun stocks, and bullets to intimidate the crowd. The middle layer consisted of a paramilitary force from the Afghan intelligence agency, which was under the command of overseas CIA agents via WhatsApp, and which was liberal with warning shots. Inside the gate, and often outside, were American troops, who sometimes used tear gas and flash-bangs for crowd control.

Spence put Hawa in charge of keeping track of the other 15 FTPs, who

arrived separately from around the city. "Can you please count how many FTPs are there," Spence texted. There was no answer for 20 minutes. "Hawa I need your help."

"They bring a lot of their families," Hawa finally replied. There were at least a dozen family members—parents, siblings—who had not been on the original list and had to be counted one by one in the crowd.

Spence encouraged her: "Yes I know but you are soldier." Keeping track of the families while pushing toward the gate was like a mission—the hardest Hawa had taken part in. She sent a head count and then asked if she could call her two other sisters to join them. Spence told her to hurry. It was eight in the morning and the group was 150 feet from the gate.

They waited all day. As they ran out of food and water, some of the FTPs began to faint. When Talibs found military papers on one woman, they set on her with fists and feet, leaving a swollen eye and a large purple bruise on her cheek. A round of gunfire nearly struck the baby of one of the women, who decided to go home. Hawa's teenage sister cried that she wanted to go home too. "If the Taliban come to our house you won't be able to go to school," Hawa told her; they had no future here.

One FTP reached the gate and showed an American guard a picture on her phone of an "emergency visa" that read: "Present this visa to security checkpoints and Consular Officers to access flights departing for the United States." It was a PDF that the State Department had created and emailed to SIV applicants. Now everyone in Kabul seemed to have a copy. The guard turned her away.

Spence was three degrees removed from a Defense Department civilian at the airport. At sunset she sent his photo to Hawa and told her to look for him. Hours went by. Then, after midnight, he emerged from the gate—a middle-

aged American in civilian clothes, with salt-and-pepper hair and a black mustache. The women shouted, "FTPs! FTPs!"

Two-thirds of the group made it inside, including Hawa and her sister. But when the crowd saw so many women getting through, it grew angry and blocked the others, including the ones with small children farther back.

It was 2:30 a.m. on August 19. The ordeal had lasted almost 24 hours. "Came in very hard," Hawa reported to Spence.

They had come in hard, and the others would have to be brought in later. But the operation had been a success. Spence would try to repeat it for other military women in the coming week and meet nothing but failure after failure.

VI. The Damned and the Saved

"By and large, what we have found is that people have been able to get to the airport," Jake Sullivan told the White House press corps a few hours before Hawa left her house. "In fact, very large numbers of people have been able to get to the airport and present themselves." Sullivan acknowledged that the Afghan government had fallen in spite of the Biden administration's decision to show support by refusing calls for early evacuations. He blamed the decision on bad advice from the Afghan government. "What you can do is plan for all contingencies," he said. "We did that."

Biden also pointed a finger at the Afghans. In a televised speech the day after Kabul fell, he blamed the lack of early evacuations on the Ghani government and SIVs who "did not want to leave earlier." He blamed Afghan troops for failing to defend their country, even though the monthly toll of those killed in action reached its highest level in years after his withdrawal announcement. "We gave them every chance to determine their own future.

What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future." His words, spoken at the very moment when Afghans were trying to escape with their lives, were chilling.

Biden had revised the deadline for the troop withdrawal to August 31, and he imposed the same deadline on the evacuation. Now the administration acted with the urgency that it had failed to show since April. A total of 5,000 troops were sent to Kabul, along with two dozen State Department consular officers. The U.S. government's priority was to evacuate American citizens and green-card holders first, then SIVs and other "at-risk Afghans." But the government, having failed to plan for an evacuation on this scale, didn't know who those Afghans were, where to find them, or how to get them into the airport.

Events were moving so fast that a paratrooper I talked with who arrived the weekend Kabul fell expected to go straight into a firefight with Talibs, while a Marine who landed two or three days later considered the Taliban "an adjacent friendly unit." The paratrooper soon realized that the most important tool of the mission was his phone. Texts poured in from friends back home, all asking for help getting Afghans they knew into the airport. In the first few days the paratrooper thought that a prioritized system of entry for each category of evacuees would soon be in place at assigned gates. He heard of plans to create safe areas around Kabul where U.S. forces could collect people and ferry them to the airport. But such a system was never created. With each day the chaos at the gates only grew. He learned details of the madness on the other side of the wall from people thousands of miles away who were in minute-by-minute contact with Afghans trying to get in.

"It's an absolute gut wrenching shit show," the paratrooper texted his friend Sam Ayres. Ayres connected the paratrooper with Julie Kornfeld, who sought information for Khan and her other clients about flights, paperwork, and

gates. But there was no consistent information to give. Everything depended on an Afghan getting to a gate, a guard being in the right place at the right time, the gate staying open long enough for the Afghan to be pulled through. And it never worked the same way twice.

The paratrooper's official job was to get U.S. matériel and personnel out of Afghanistan. He and other troops spent every spare waking hour—and they barely slept—fielding texts and working on what they called “recoveries.” To help them identify certain Afghans in the mob, the troops asked for photos, or identifying garments such as red scarves, or call-and-response passwords: “Detroit” – “Red Wings”; “What do you like to drink?” – “Orange juice.” The paratrooper argued with consular officers who wanted to send people back out of the airport for lack of paperwork. “SIV to me meant nothing, because that thing will take 24 months,” he said. “What, are we going to expect them to get on Wi-Fi and fill out a quick application on State.gov while they're waiting outside the gate? ‘You washed dishes at the embassy—you're in.’”

Most of the paratrooper's activity was unofficial. The chain of command almost certainly knew, could have stopped it, and would have done so if the troops had made serious mistakes. So they were careful not to venture too far outside the gate—less out of fear for their safety than worry that a firefight with a Talib would shut the whole thing down.

Just inside the perimeter, consular officers had to make instant decisions about whom to admit, torn between their fluctuating rules and the human faces in front of them. Though State Department officials from around the world had volunteered to go to Kabul, only 40 consular officers were on hand to deal with the huge flow at the airport. On August 19 John Bass, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, arrived to oversee the evacuation. His top priority was getting American citizens, green-card holders, and Afghan

embassy staff into the airport. Talibs kept blocking entry for some evacuees and shutting down gates when the crowds became unmanageable; the Americans also closed gates when they received intelligence about terror threats. Bass resorted to using unmarked gates to avoid the crowds at the public ones; at times, to keep this official evacuation going, he had to refuse entry to groups of Afghans who were part of the unofficial effort.

When Representatives Seth Moulton and Peter Meijer made an unannounced visit on August 24, two senior diplomats broke down in tears and told Moulton they were "completely overwhelmed."

Children and parents lost each other. Troops saw children trampled underfoot. A Marine saw a Talib knife a boy who was climbing over a wall. A tear-gas canister struck the side of an 8-year-old girl's face, melting her skin. A new mother staggered through the gate with her baby, who had just died, sobbing so hard that she threw up on the shoes of a consular officer checking documents. By the East Gate, a stack of corpses baked in the sun for hours. Outside the North Gate, the crushed bodies of four babies floated in a river of sewage.

To avoid the besieged gates, U.S. troops brought women and children over the 16-foot blast wall using ladders under cover of darkness. They paid Afghan paramilitaries and even American Marine guards in cigarettes to let people through. They had to make up their own priority list and find immediate grounds for saying yes or no to the immense volume of equal desperation on their phones: military women, then interpreters, then male commandos, then embassy staff. Women, but not men; families, but no children over 15. "It's an awful thing to make a decision about," one soldier told me.

An Afghan family hurries to join a group awaiting access to the northwestern gate of the Kabul airport on August 24. (Andrew Quilty / Agence VU')

Many of the troops quickly realized that escorting a newly orphaned child onto a plane to a new life would be the most important mission of their lives. "This is going to be our legacy," the paratrooper said, "whether we do two years in the Army, or 20 years, or 40 years."

Khan was expecting a State Department email that would tell him when to go to the airport and where, but it never came. (No SIVs received specific instructions like this throughout the evacuation.) Kornfeld was trying to get him on a flight, military or commercial. On Monday, August 16, he went with Mina and their son to the North Gate. They spent all day in the sun, unable to get past the Taliban fighters and the crowd of thousands. Khan saw that all kinds of people were trying to escape—ordinary shopkeepers, young men

without even a national-identity card—while Afghans like him, who had checked every box, couldn't get inside. At one point Mina was pushed to the ground. She was afraid she would miscarry.

The next day Khan returned by himself, but Talibs with guns and horsewhips kept him from getting anywhere close.

Before dawn on August 18, the family tried again. Khan had all of 500 afghanis—about \$6—in his pocket. They left small travel bags with a food peddler and, with just biscuits and water, their documents hidden under Mina's clothes, they waded into the crowd at the North Gate as the sun was coming up over the Hindu Kush mountains. They decided that they would stay at the airport until they got out or died. Talibs were firing in the air, and several of them kicked Khan and beat him with rifle butts and a lead pipe. His son screamed at the sight of the men with long hair and beards. Mina kept encouraging her husband, telling him not to lose hope.

They abandoned the North Gate and walked for almost an hour along the airport perimeter to the Abbey Gate, on the southeast side. Here the troops were British and Canadian, and the family wasn't allowed through.

"Say you have a pregnant wife!" Kornfeld texted. "Say she's in labor!"

It was no use. The family continued their odyssey until they arrived at the South Gate, the main entrance. Here there were U.S. Marines, but also thousands of Afghans. "Less than 300 have valid docs," Khan texted. "All the looters and others came." It was almost noon.

His phone rang. When he answered, an unfamiliar voice spoke his full name. "We found your number on your work desk. You supported the Americans. You distributed weapons and ammunition."

"You have the wrong number," Khan said. "I'm a university student in Khost."

"No. We know who you are."

There was no time to be unnerved, with the gunfire and tear gas and people running and falling. Mina kept getting squeezed, but she wanted to hold their position and refused to let Khan pull her out of the crush. Their son, in Khan's arms, was so traumatized by the Talibs that he kept flailing at his father.

Suddenly the Marines were firing warning shots and flash-bangs to disperse the crowd; people ran in every direction, and the way to the checkpoint was clear. Khan saw his chance and rushed forward. Mina cried out not to be left behind, but he kept going.

Through the smoke Khan saw the figure of an older man in civilian clothes and body armor. He was pulling in people with dark-blue U.S. passports. Seeing Khan's blue-green Afghan passport, the American pushed him aside, but Khan refused to be turned away. He opened to the page with his Special Immigrant Visa. The American looked it over. All the years of application forms and background checks and employment-verification letters and death threats and anxious waiting had brought Khan to this moment. Everything was in order. He asked to go back for his wife and son, 20 meters outside the gate. Did they have visas? They did. Khan ran out and waved them forward.

"How much luggage?" the American asked.

"About 300 grams of documents," Khan said.

They were inside the airport.

From Hawaii, Captain Spence and her American compatriots spent the days

after Hawa's successful escape trying to save the other FTPs. They needed an interpreter and seldom had one, relying instead on broken English and emoji. They had to persuade the women to go out after dark, despite a curfew enforced by Taliban checkpoints, because that was when they had the best chance. Spence relied on one particularly resourceful trooper in the airport who made the Afghan women his priority, bringing them in over ladders, darting outside the fence to grab a husband separated from his wife, a son from his mother. An attempted helicopter rescue that Spence helped arrange through a Pentagon contact failed on two successive nights. A few women gave up trying and fled by car to Mazar-i-Sharif or Pakistan. And all the while hundreds of others Spence didn't know, regular army women who had heard about her from the FTPs, were imploring her through her phone.

Everyone sensed that the window was closing. The evacuation of Afghans appeared to be ending after just one week.

"At first I said yes to everyone," she told me. "Then I started to say no to men; to people without docs; to people with docs but not for their families; to people writing me really long messages, because I didn't have time to read them. If it was a single woman, I would be more apt to talk to them. And then it was, honestly—it's really terrible—if a photo spoke to me, if their words spoke to me, if their English was good, if I sensed this person would be responsive and could get their stuff together." She called it "a really terrible *Sophie's Choice* situation."

Spence's Army boss allowed her to stay off the base until August 31. She sat in her living room alone with her phone, sleeping one or two hours a night, eating whatever she had in the cupboard, losing 15 pounds. When Hawa was

trying to get into the airport Spence threw up from exhaustion and stress, then felt annoyed because she didn't have time to throw up. Once, she looked outside and was startled to see a palm tree. She had thought she was in Kabul. Others working on evacuations around the clock from a Washington suburb or upstate New York had the same hallucinatory experience.

Everyone sensed that the window was closing. On August 24, the Taliban announced that only U.S.-passport and green-card holders would be allowed near the airport. The U.S. government was going to limit its efforts to the same group. The evacuation of Afghans appeared to be ending after just one week.

The difference between the damned and the saved came down to three factors. The first was character—resourcefulness, doggedness, will. The second was what Afghans call *wasita*—connections. The third, and most important, was sheer luck.

Najeeb Monawari possessed character and connections, but his ordeal suggested that a malign fate was working against him. He tried to get into the airport with his family four times through four gates and failed each time. Many of his relatives worked for the Afghan security forces, which controlled a "hidden" gate on the northwest side, but Panjshiris had lost their power overnight, and his relatives were unable to do anything. At the North Gate, Afghan guards—Pashtuns from an intelligence unit in Jalalabad—were letting in their ethnic relatives while jeering "Traitors!" at northerners like Monawari. At the Abbey Gate, when he took a picture of the crowd to show his Green Beret friends, an armed Talib grabbed him by the shirt and began dragging him off. Other Talibs whipped his back and yelled, "Take him to the boss!" Monawari was carrying printed email correspondence and the useless "emergency visa" PDF. If he uttered a word they would know he was Panjshiri

and kill him on the spot.

"This motherfucker took a picture of women!" the Talib told the boss's bodyguard.

"The boss is busy now," the bodyguard said. "Take his phone."

Monawari tried to open his phone, but his fingers kept mistyping the passcode. He finally managed to get it open. He deleted the picture. And then he took off, into the crowd, away from the gate, pulling off the white scarf that made him noticeable, soon losing his pursuers. He found his family and said, "Let's go home."

By the morning of August 19, Monawari and his wife and three kids were exhausted. His mother was alternately praying and berating him for coming back to Kabul. His phone rang: It was Larry Ryland, the Green Beret weapons sergeant. Ryland, who lived outside Houston, where he ran a military-contracting business, was in a rage at the failure to get his interpreter into the airport and out of Afghanistan. He was considering traveling to Qatar and appropriating a small turboprop plane to personally evacuate Monawari. "If anybody deserved it, it was him and his family," Ryland told me. "Dude, he was probably one of the top-five people in the world I'd trust."

Ryland was calling with a new plan. It depended on his contacts in the Special Forces world, who had eyes on Monawari from a "satellite country." They set up a route for him to get to the airport, with Afghans positioned along the way to create a diversion in case there was trouble at a Taliban checkpoint. The Special Forces operators connected Ryland with a U.S. soldier on the inside, who would come out for Monawari at a specific moment.

The plan also involved congressional letterhead. One of Monawari's

colleagues in Doctors Without Borders was the niece of Jim Coyle, the president of a New Jersey chamber of commerce, who in turn knew Representative Malinowski. Coyle asked Malinowski to sign a letter of support for Monawari's entry into the airport. "This letter is completely irregular and contrary to established procedures," the congressman replied. "Therefore I will be happy to sign it!" The letter and Ryland's word were enough to make Monawari—a rejected SIV applicant—the priority for the soldier inside the airport.

But the gate names were confusing, and the grid coordinates were slightly off, and Monawari and his family showed up in the wrong spot. There was no American looking for a letter from Malinowski. Then the soldier called Monawari and told him to go as fast as he could a mile east to another gate and look for a soft hat held high on a baton. A mile! They ran, and with the running and his children crying and a dehydration headache coming on he was too tired to answer the calls that kept coming—if he answered, he feared, he would take his last breath and die. At the second gate there was no phone signal, and no soldier holding a soft hat high on a baton. Then the hat and the soldier were there, 50 feet away, across the concertina wire, in front of the Hesco bags, and Monawari pushed his family through the crowd that grew denser and denser near the wire until he reached the barbed coils and his kids were gone—they must have fallen underfoot, trampled, if they weren't crying it meant they were dead, and he opened his mouth to yell but he couldn't make a sound, couldn't say that he'd come back to Kabul and done everything in his power to reach this place and now it had all turned to shit, they were gone, there was no reason to leave, and he started punching wildly to get people off his children.

"Your kids are here," a Marine said.

Another Marine was carrying his 9-year-old girl over the wire. Monawari

grabbed her younger sister, and as he lifted her, a Marine pulled him forward and he fell, the wire making a deep cut in his thumb. Then they were brought through an opening between the Hesco bags into the airport. Planes were waiting on the runway, with people standing in long lines. Immediately the pain of his headache and gashed thumb disappeared, and he was overcome with happiness.

In July Monawari had applied for Canadian immigration. At the airport he discovered that he had a choice: He could fly out with most of the other departing Afghans on a U.S. C-17 to Qatar. Or he could board an earlier Canadian military flight through Kuwait to Canada. He had waited 10 years for a U.S. visa—would his family have to wait another year in Qatar? He had always wanted to be an American. He now owed his life to American friends and strangers who had used every means to bring his family to safety. But Monawari didn't want to wait any longer. He would become a Canadian.

On August 25, in Toronto, he received an email from a U.S. State Department official. "I want to apologize for the delay in response time and process," it said. "I want to assure you that we are working around the clock to help address these delays for applicants such as yourself during this very difficult time." The official reported that the U.S. embassy had approved him for a Special Immigrant Visa. It was welcome vindication, and it was too late.

On the afternoon of August 26, outside Abbey Gate, an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated a vest with 25 pounds of explosives, killing nearly 200 Afghans and 13 American troops who had left the protection of the wall and waded into the sea of desperation to bring people into the airport. After that, the chance for Afghans to get out dwindled quickly toward zero.

VII. Honor

The United States government [estimates that it airlifted 124,000 people](#) from Afghanistan before the last troops flew out on August 30, a day ahead of Biden's deadline. This total—which surprised many of those who struggled night and day to get a family of five through a gate—counted everyone who left Hamid Karzai International Airport: the 45,000 on private and non-U.S. aircraft, as well as approximately 2,000 U.S.-embassy personnel, 5,500 American citizens, 2,000 citizens of NATO countries, 3,300 citizens of other countries, 2,500 SIVs and family members, and 64,000 “at-risk Afghans,” including the many thousands who found a way into the airport regardless of status or threat. The Biden administration declared the evacuation a historic triumph.

The achievement belonged mainly to the troops and civilians who worked tirelessly at the airport, and to the ordinary people who worked tirelessly overseas on WhatsApp and Signal, and above all to the courage, born of mortal panic and tenacious hope, of the Afghans who lost everything. Without the unofficial evacuation efforts, many of them funded by private citizens, the number would have been far lower. But no one who took part described it as a success. The constant emotions of those days and nights at the airport were frustration and heartbreak.

September 11, 2021: A Taliban flag flies atop Bibi Mahru Hill, in Kabul. (Andrew Quilty / Agence VU')

Human Rights First estimates that 90 percent of SIVs—including some with visas in hand—were left behind with their families. The number of Afghans who remain in danger because of their association with the 20-year American presence in their country must be counted in the hundreds of thousands. By the end of August, Alice Spence and Sam Ayres and their colleagues had evacuated 145 military women and family members. They still had a list of 87 people whom they couldn't get out. After August 31, the list would continue to grow. "I can't even contemplate what I'm going to have to say to these women," Ayres told his paratrooper friend.

"Everyone wants to stay, including the leadership," the paratrooper texted Ayres on August 27. Many troops felt that they'd left the mission unfinished. During the final hours at the airport, one soldier received 120 calls for help.

"People are talking about the greatest airlift in history," he said, "when in reality it was a complete clusterfuck and a lot of people died that didn't need to." Ambassador Bass, who oversaw the evacuation, left Afghanistan deeply proud of his colleagues' efforts, he told me, but also "haunted" by the number of people who didn't get out. "I really felt just this enormous sense of regret."

Administration officials told me that no one could have anticipated how quickly Kabul would fall. This is true, and it goes for both Afghans and Americans. But the failure to plan for a worst-case scenario while there was time, during the spring and early summer, as Afghanistan began to collapse, led directly to the fatal chaos in August. The Taliban gave every indication of wanting to cooperate with the American withdrawal, partly because it hoped for a continued diplomatic presence. "They're still asking us today, 'Why did you leave?'" a senior official told me. But the administration never tried to negotiate a better way out with the Taliban, didn't establish green zones in Kabul and other cities with airfields. Instead, the evacuation came down to 10 days and one runway.

The end was always going to be messy. But through its failures, the administration dramatically compressed the evacuation in both time and space. It created a panic to squeeze perishable human beings through the dangerous openings of a fortress before they closed forever. It left the burdens to a 20-year-old infantryman trying not to make eye contact with a mother standing in sewage; to an Afghan woman choosing which sister to save; to an Army captain alone in her faraway house.

"There are a number of truths about the war that this evacuation yielded," Ayres told me, "and one of them is that shortsightedness and failures at the top created slack that had to be taken up by the men and women on the ground—by the Marines on the perimeter, by the families that couldn't get

through the crush of the crowds." Mike Breen, of Human Rights First, told me that the administration "took the life-and-death decisions that should have been at the highest level of the government and sent them down to the lowest level, which is a pretty good metaphor for the whole war. It ended as it was fought. Same old story."

Everyone who joined the unofficial evacuation was struck by its lack of partisanship. George Soros and Glenn Beck both sponsored charter flights. Trump-supporting veterans worked with Democratic members of Congress, and liberal journalists sought help from Republican Hill staffers. The quickest way to get kicked off a group chat was to make a political point. But an event as big as the fall of Kabul inevitably absorbed the poison of American politics. Early in the evacuation, a flock of progressive pundits suddenly all flew in the same direction and accused the administration's critics of using the crisis as an excuse to keep the war going forever. This same talking point had emerged during the White House's messaging campaign earlier in the summer. It shifted the argument from Afghanistan to the Washington foreign-policy "blob," as if the latter were the really important battleground. Those taking the brunt of the catastrophe were women and girls, members of religious and sexual minorities, civil-society activists, all of them people of color—groups that progressive pundits are supposed to care about. The end of the war was the first test of a new foreign policy based on human rights rather than military force. The administration and its defenders failed it.

The hypocrisy on the right was worse. Republican members of Congress and media figures heaped scorn on the Biden administration for a withdrawal policy that it had inherited from the Trump administration, then fomented outrage over Afghan refugees on U.S. military bases and in American towns. Biden's political advisers had not been wrong to think that Republicans would try to exploit the issue to stir up xenophobia.

But across the country, ordinary Americans rushed to embrace the arriving refugees. They left bundles of clothes and baskets of food at the gates of the military bases where the refugees were housed. They volunteered their communities, even their homes, for resettlement: in Houston, where Khan, Mina, their son, and their new American daughter now live; in Spokane, Washington, Hawa's choice for her new home as she seeks a chance to enlist in the U.S. military. A woman in Denver wrote to me: "When we posted on our neighborhood's [Facebook] page on a Wednesday that an Afghan refugee family with children would be staying with us starting in 2 days we had 100s of items of clothes, toys, toiletries, baby gear, and winter gear show up on our porch, in addition to a job offer and dental services for the family. People I didn't even know were dropping off donations with promises of more to come. People want to help!" It was as if Americans were seeking some way to feel better about their country.

The evacuation effort drew on a similar longing. It ran especially strong in the generation of Americans whose adult lives were shaped by the 9/11 wars—who experienced a kind of personal crisis at the way the era ended. "What I wanted out of this was to salvage a little bit of honor from this whole debacle," Ayres told me. "Every person we got out, I'd be able to look back on my service and my experience with slightly more pride."

Months after the end of the August evacuation, Ayres, Spence, and their colleagues are still working day and night to save Afghan allies, many of them women. Some are hiding in safe houses and selling their furniture to feed their children. After years of drought, and the economic collapse that followed the Taliban victory, Afghanistan has descended into a winter of starvation. Spence receives hundreds of messages a day from Afghans telling her that she is their only hope for rescue from the Taliban and hunger.

One of the women on Spence's list is Hamasa Parsa, the soldier-writer who

dreamed of dead flowers the night before Kabul fell. A friend gave her a number for Spence, who responded within 10 minutes. Parsa spends her days at home caring for her younger brothers and sisters, and limits the family to two meals a day. When she ventures out she fears being denounced by a neighbor, or forced by the Taliban into marriage. One day in November she went out fully covered to buy a phone charger. A Talib was in the store, weapon slung over his shoulder, playing the video game Ludo King on his phone. Suddenly he looked at Parsa. "It was my first time in my life that I looked into the eye of a Talib," she told me. She gasped, and her hand trembled. The Talib smiled, as if to say, *You're scared of me, right?*

A man keeps calling Parsa's phone. She knows him from her old office at the Ministry of Defense. He tells her to bring in the gun that she was issued, and she answers that she doesn't have a gun, though her family has buried it in their yard, along with military documents. The summons is a trap. She no longer trusts anyone. For the first time, she finds writing impossible. "I just don't know what will be the end," she told me. "That scares me. I want to find a happy ending for my book first." Recently, Spence told Parsa that it will be at least half a year before she has a chance to get out.

The U.S. government is not making it easy. It is chartering flights out of Kabul for SIV holders and others of high priority, but the effort is so sluggish, and the rules for authorizing passengers so onerous, that State Department officials have turned to private groups for help evacuating Afghans they know. At the same time, the department is reluctant to negotiate landing rights in other countries for private charters. Before Afghans can apply for the priority refugee program they must somehow get out of Afghanistan, but the U.S. government won't help them leave. The most direct way to bring at-risk Afghans to the U.S. is through a program called humanitarian parole; at least 35,000 Afghans have applied, for a fee of \$575 each, but the Department of Homeland Security is processing the backlog neither quickly

nor generously.

"The State Department always insists that we have to play by the rules," Representative Malinowski, who once served in it, told me. The department celebrates Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who forged passports to save Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. "But if any State Department employee tried to pull what Raoul Wallenberg did, he'd be fired in three seconds." This was the thinking of the period before the August evacuation. "And then, for two glorious weeks, we threw out the rules." Now the department is back to its risk-averse, pre-August thinking, with an obstacle for every human need. "Bureaucracy is killing more people than the Taliban," Mary Beth Goodman, the State Department official, told me.

To Spence it seems as if the U.S. government has moved on. "Afghanistan keeps descending into hell, and what are people like us supposed to do?" she asked. "Are we supposed to leave these people who helped Americans, including people we served with personally, behind? I'm a very idealistic person in some ways, and I understand we can't save everyone, and there are crises everywhere. But there was a 20-year war, and that changed a lot of people here. A lot of people served and went there. Our policy, our money, went there. Do we just abandon the people? I don't think that's who we are as a country. I don't think that's who we should be as a country!"

This article appears in the March 2022 print edition with the headline "The Betrayal." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.