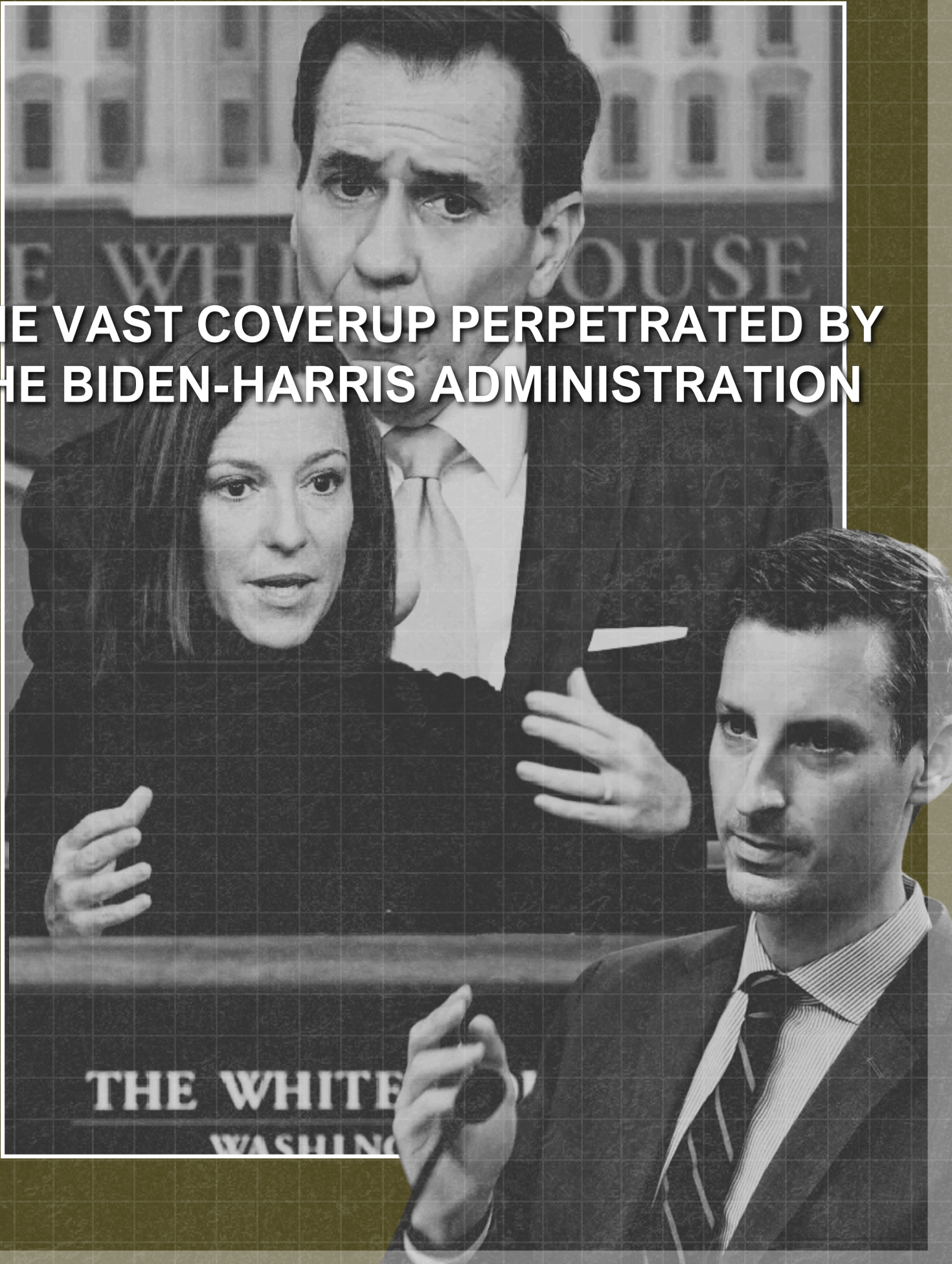


**THE VAST COVERUP PERPETRATED BY
THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION**



A SUMMATION OF THE BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION'S MISREPRESENTATIONS OF CRITICAL INFORMATION

“When you conclude 20 years of military action in a civil war in another country with the impacts of 20 years of decisions that have piled up, you have to make a lot of hard calls, none with clean outcomes. What you can do is plan for all contingencies. We did that.” [1397]

— NSA Jake Sullivan, August 17, 2021

As illuminated throughout this report, more than three years after the last U.S. military plane departed Afghanistan, the American people have still never heard a complete account from the Biden-Harris administration on its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The administration’s public communications, as previously evidenced, came from three podiums and primarily from three individuals: Ned Price, spokesperson for the State Department; Rear Admiral John Kirby, spokesperson for the Department of Defense; and White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, spokesperson for the president. [1398] Coordinating all three of those entities fell to the NSC, where communications strategy at the time was led by Emily Horne. [1399]

This investigation uncovered that — prior to April 2021 in the lead up to the go-to-zero order — the Biden-Harris administration withheld material information from the American people. Missing from press releases was information related to the Taliban’s failure to adhere to the Doha Agreement, the ongoing presence of terrorism in Afghanistan, the capabilities of the Afghan government and military with and without U.S. support, and dissent from NATO allies on the U.S. plan to withdraw.

With regard to the Doha Agreement, on February 3, 2021, Mr. Price announced the administration would conduct a review of the Taliban’s adherence to the Doha Agreement to evaluate a withdrawal from Afghanistan. This review was to include an “assessment of whether the Taliban are fulfilling their commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan Government and other stakeholders.” [1400]

In his testimony before the committee, contrary to his public statement, Mr. Price asserted the Taliban's adherence to the Doha Agreement was in fact "immaterial" to the Biden-Harris administration's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. [1401] To summarize: (1) the Taliban were in breach of key elements of the Doha Agreement, (2) the Biden-Harris administration claimed to be assessing the Taliban's compliance therewith, (3) in reality, the conditions were entirely irrelevant to them.

Further, the Biden-Harris administration consistently and misleadingly touted NATO allies' support for its decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. On April 6, 2021, Mr. Price claimed, "We heard this in Brussels the other week, that there is a good deal of agreement with our NATO allies on the path forward when it comes to Afghanistan. The international community is similarly united in the belief that there isn't a military solution to what we have long faced in Afghanistan." [1402] On April 9, 2021, Ms. Psaki insisted President Biden was "taking the advice, the counsel, the consultations of members of his military leadership, members of his diplomatic leadership, and also our partners and friends around the world into — into consideration as he's making his decision." [1403] On June 14, 2021, a senior White House official again claimed NATO allies "said that they ultimately agreed with the decision to come — to draw down this year." [1404] However, as previously introduced in the report, at those same meetings in Brussels, Secretary Blinken was hearing in "quadrophonic sounds" that NATO allies were recommending against an unconditional withdrawal. [1405]

In their testimony before the committee, General Milley and General McKenzie both attested that NATO allies recommended against President Biden's go-to-zero order. [1406] General Miller also testified NATO allies were not pleased with the United States' decision to draw troops to zero, necessitating their withdrawal, saying, "They certainly were unhappy, and they voiced that unhappiness in different publications." [1407] Even Counselor Chollet would only go so far as to testify before the committee that NATO allies did not take a position during the administration's interagency review of the Doha Agreement and decision to withdraw. [1408]

The misrepresentations from the Biden-Harris administration's communication team continued after the president's go-to-zero decision. For example, Ms. Psaki claimed on April 14, 2021, that "al-Qaeda ... is not being harbored in a safe haven in Afghanistan how it was 20 years ago." [1409] Similarly, on May 10, 2021, Mr. Price claimed, "We went into Afghanistan 20 years ago — just about 20 years ago — with a singular mission, and that was to go after the group that was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and to see to it that Afghanistan could not again be leveraged as a staging ground for attacks on the United States. We were able to achieve those goals." [1410]

These claims were again challenged by the testimony of senior military leadership during a congressional hearing. [1411] Secretary Austin affirmed “there are remnants of al-Qaeda still in Afghanistan.”[1412] General Milley said “al-Qaeda is still in Afghanistan” and was “there in mid-August.” [1413] In Ms. Psaki’s testimony before the committee, when asked why she made such claims, she attributed responsibility to the central policy-making apparatus of the administration — the NSC — saying, “Any statement I would have made would have been based on, again, the interagency process and the NSC press guidance that was providing information to me.” [1414]

The Biden-Harris administration also significantly overstated and under-planned its ability to support the Afghan military after the withdrawal. Indeed, it publicly repeated the line that the U.S. would continue to support the Afghan government and military during and after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. On April 13, 2021, in a press call, Ms. Psaki represented, “The United States is going to remain deeply engaged with the government of Afghanistan, committed to the Afghan people who have made ... extraordinary sacrifices during this conflict.” [1415] On July 8, 2021, President Biden claimed, “While we [will] not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue. We’ll continue to support the government of Afghanistan. We will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.” [1416] But in April 2021, the administration’s military leaders expressed concern that would eventually become reality. [1417] General McKenzie asserted he was “concern[ed] about leaving with a date certain” because he did not have confidence in the “ability of the Afghan military to hold the ground that they’re on” without U.S. and NATO support in the form of “intelligence, ... fire support, [and] the enabling things that actually give them an edge over the Taliban.” [1418]

The loss of that support had an immediate negative impact on physical capabilities and morale for the Afghan military. [14919] The repeated commitments from the Biden-Harris administration to support the Afghan government and military obscured the fact that the administration did not devise a viable plan to follow through on those commitments, nor had it developed confidence in the Afghan military’s capabilities without U.S. support.

Misrepresentations with regard to Afghan military capabilities and Taliban victories were manifold. The Biden-Harris administration repeatedly told the American public that Afghan forces numbered 300,000, giving them an advantage against the Taliban. [1420] In reality, according to testimony by General Milley, the Afghan forces constituted 175,000 conventional army troops, fighting against a “guerrilla-insurgency” of up to 100,000 fighters. [1421]

This force ratio, he said, “balanced more in favor of the Taliban.” [1422] The Biden-Harris administration also downplayed the onslaught of the Taliban’s summer attacks. On May 3, 2021, Rear Admiral Kirby described Taliban attacks as “small, harassing attacks over the course of the weekend” but said the Pentagon saw nothing “thus far that has affected the drawdown.” [1423] And yet, by July 17, 2021, the Taliban controlled 221 of Afghanistan’s 407 districts, compared to the Afghan government’s 73, with the remaining districts contested. [1424] On July 20, 2021, when asked about increases in Taliban violence and violent attacks touching Kabul, Mr. Price responded by discussing the Biden-Harris administration’s hopes of an agreement in Doha and a diplomatic solution. [1425] Even as the Taliban closed in on Kabul, the Biden-Harris administration kept reiterating a Taliban victory was not inevitable. **On August 11, 2021, Ms. Psaki said, “We are closely watching the deteriorating security conditions in parts of the country, but no particular outcome, in our view, is inevitable.”** [1426] **On August 13, 2021, Rear Admiral Kirby argued “it still is a moment for Afghan National Security and Defense Forces” and “no outcome has to be inevitable.”** [1427] Rear Admiral Kirby also contended “Kabul is not, right now, in an imminent-threat environment.” [1428] Kabul fell to the Taliban two days later.

Perhaps most significantly, after President Biden’s go-to-zero order, the White House and the State Department continued to present the situation in Afghanistan as well-planned when the reality was anything but. On June 3, 2021, when asked about planning for a potential evacuation of SIV applicants to third-party countries, Mr. Price did not directly respond, instead asserting the Biden-Harris administration planned to keep Embassy Kabul open to process applications. [1429] On June 23, 2021, when asked about what steps were being taken to protect SIV applicants, Ms. Psaki claimed, “[W]e’re doing the kind of extensive planning for potential evacuation should that become necessary.” [1430] She also claimed, the “State Department and our team takes very seriously and assesses whether there is a need to take any additional action,” in the event the Taliban advanced quicker than anticipated. [1431] **On July 6, 2021, when a reporter asked Mr. Price about a plan for an evacuation in light of the rapid Taliban advances on the battlefield, he responded, “We’re always planning for any contingency ... we’re planning for any number of contingencies.”** [1432]

But those representations were wrong. When Ambassador John Bass arrived at Embassy Kabul on August 19th, days after the fall of Kabul, the embassy was not operating under any plan that took into account worst-case contingencies. [1433] Indeed, multiple witnesses acknowledged the State Department never had a plan for conducting an evacuation in a Taliban-controlled Kabul. [1434] State Department witnesses further acknowledged the department had not determined SIV eligibility by the time the Taliban took over Kabul. [1435]

Notably, the State Department's on-the-ground evacuation leaders — Ambassador Bass, Consul General DeHart, and Consul General Howell — were stationed at posts around the world and received only 24 to 48 hours notice that the State Department would be sending them into a warzone. [1436] That request from State Department leadership came only after Kabul had already fallen to the Taliban. [1437]

Upon the release of the Biden-Harris administration's review of the withdrawal in 2023, Rear Admiral Kirby, in his new role as NSC coordinator for strategic communications, said, "For all this talk of chaos [at HKIA], I just didn't see it, not from my perch." [1438] His statement flies in the face of reason and the well-documented, globally reported tragedy at the airport. Yet, Rear Admiral Kirby's statements are consistent with the contemporaneous communications of the Biden-Harris administration during and after the NEO. On August 19, 2021, Mr. Price said, "My understanding is that things are moving quite efficiently at this hour at the airport." [1439] On August 20, 2021, Mr. Price again asserted the evacuation operations were "efficient and effective." [1440]

But those public-facing statements were contradicted by internal reports. An internal State Department memorandum from August 19th stated the situation at the airport "remains volatile with large crowds gathered at the North Gate and inside the terminal. People are desperate and are making multiple attempts to gain access despite being turned away on more than one occasion." [1441] A second State Department memorandum conveyed "congestion outside gates worsened, resulting in confrontation and stress" and "a large number of" locally employed U.S. embassy staff "were unable to enter HKIA and returned home, reporting deeply traumatic experiences." [1442] State Department witnesses interviewed by the committee were aware of Taliban violence against Americans and of instances in which the Taliban did not let Americans through to HKIA. [1443] **The information coming from behind the Biden-Harris administration's podiums did not convey the gravity of the emergency, hid the threats facing Americans, and grossly understated the tragedy wrought on those attempting to flee.**

At the same time, the Biden-Harris administration insisted no one saw the fall of Kabul coming. Those assertions are, again, directly contradicted by testimony from top military leadership, in addition to President Ghani warning Secretary Blinken of the imminent dissolution of the ANDSF. [1444]

Ms. Psaki, for example, claimed no one anticipated the fall of the Afghan government and forces with statements like, "I don't think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world." [1445]

“I don’t think anyone assessed that they would collapse as quickly as they did. Anyone. Anyone in this room. Anyone in the region. Anyone anywhere in the world.”

— Former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki

In her testimony before the committee, when presented with military guidance to the contrary and asked what information supported her claim, Ms. Psaki quibbled that “quickly” has a broad range of potential definitions, ignoring the unmistakable impression that statement created for Americans watching. [1446] When pressed on whether she thought she “fairly communicated to the American people based on the warnings issued within the U.S. Government how quickly Afghanistan would fall,” Ms. Psaki merely said she “answered the question based on the information [she] had available at the time.” [1447] Ms. Psaki previously attested to receiving the information she took to the briefing room from the NSC press team.

Such statements came from elsewhere in the administration, as well, with Mr. Price claiming on August 17, 2021, “[I]t is absolutely true that we were surprised at the speed at which the Taliban were able to approach Kabul.” [1448] On August 20, 2021, President Biden contended that “no one — I shouldn’t say ‘no one’ — the consensus was that it was highly unlikely that in 11 days they’d collapse and fall, and the leader of Afghanistan would flee the country.” [1449] Valid explanations are few and far between for the chasm between military testimony on advice to the president on an imminent Taliban takeover and the administration’s claimed surprise when that came to pass.

President Biden also misrepresented the extent to which Americans were left behind. When speaking about the safety of Americans during the NEO with George Stephanopoulos on ABC News, President Biden promised to get all Americans home. [1450] Despite this promise, the committee was informed by Consul General Howell that no matter how many Americans remained in Kabul, the president was set on leaving by August 31. [1451] The White House continued to reiterate these assurances over the course of the evacuation, with Ms. Psaki claiming, “I think it’s irresponsible to say Americans are stranded. They are not. We are committed to bringing Americans, who want to come home, home. ... [W]e have been very clear that we are not leaving Americans who want to return home.” [1452] NSA Sullivan claimed on August 23rd, “[A]s I’ve said before, as the president has said before, we believe that we have time between now and the 31st to get out any American who wants to get out.” [1453] In October 2021, weeks after the conclusion of the NEO, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl testified to the Senate that there were 439 Americans still in Afghanistan at that time. [1454]

Three years later during her transcribed interview, Ms. Psaki agreed that not every American who wanted to get out of Afghanistan got out before August 31, 2021. [1455]

Rather than grapple with the administration's responsibility, NSA Sullivan publicly laid blame on a lack of valor among Afghan soldiers. He said that "when push came to shove, they decided not to step up and fight for their country," [1456] "its own armed forces would not fight to hold it together," [1457] and "they ultimately decided that they would not fight for Kabul and would not fight for the country." [1458] Such statements were a monumental disrespect to the Afghans who fought valiantly for their country alongside the United States for 20 years, experiencing over 69,095 military deaths and 46,319 civilian deaths. [1459] And they were an insult to the 80 to 90 Afghan servicemembers dying daily while fighting against Taliban advances in the final months before the NEO. [1460] Even as the Taliban reached the gates of Kabul, the highest-ranking remaining Afghan commander, General Alizai, asked for U.S. support in a last stand to defend Kabul. [1461] **NSA Sullivan's commentary was as disrespectful to the Afghan soldiers as it was consistent with the Biden-Harris administration's long-running efforts to hide the fact that it privately anticipated this outcome.**

There is one primary party responsible withholding or misrepresenting critical information to the American public: the NSC led by NSA Sullivan. Throughout the course of the majority's investigation, multiple witnesses have pointed to the NSC as leading not only the interagency coordination, but also the decision-making and day-to-day operations of the withdrawal. [1462] In her testimony before the committee, Ms. Psaki conceded she received her talking points on the situation in Afghanistan directly from the NSC press team, who coordinated messaging across agencies. [1463] Further, she testified that she engaged directly with NSA Sullivan when questions arose. For this reason, the committee requested NSA Sullivan appear publicly before this committee, so the public can learn why it was kept in the dark or misled on so many key issues. [1464] The White House and NSA Sullivan instead refused his appearance. The committee rejects their refusal and will not relent in its pursuit of NSA Sullivan's testimony.

The NSC escaped scrutiny as it executed the Biden-Harris administration's withdrawal plan. The State Department, over which this committee possesses jurisdiction, certainly bears significant accountability for parroting NSC talking points, as does the Defense Department. But with regard to the public narrative, the Biden-Harris administration leveraged NSC autonomy to spearhead terrible policy and deceive the public, all while evading oversight. The fact that the Biden-Harris administration's press strategy during the Afghanistan withdrawal was deliberately run out of the NSC — the sole source of Ms. Psaki's briefings — speaks volumes. NSA Sullivan must, for the first time, answer to the public.

Lack of Accountability

To this day, the Biden-Harris administration has not only avoided responsibility for its many failures throughout the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, but it has also claimed the operation a success. The day after Kabul fell to the Taliban, President Biden said, “I am deeply saddened by the facts we now face, but I do not regret my decision.” [1465] In the middle of the chaotic NEO, Ms. Psaki stated, “I would say that this is now on track ... to be the largest airlift in U.S. history ... So, no, I would not say that is anything but a success.” [1466] Even after the Abbey Gate attack, where 13 brave servicemembers were killed, along with 170 civilians — and with the knowledge that almost a thousand Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan allies were left behind — President Biden himself touted the “extraordinary success of this mission” on August 31. [1467]

As time has passed, the administration’s narrative has not changed. In December of 2021, NSA Sullivan claimed the United States had “safely and effectively” ended its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and defended the withdrawal without mentioning the 13 U.S. servicemembers killed at Abbey Gate. [1468] In congressional testimony in 2023, Secretary Austin similarly said he had no regrets. [1469] Counselor Chollet told the committee, “I don’t want to say any hypotheticals, but I think that the fact of the matter is, and I think the president has made this very clear — he believes he made the right decision.” [1470] Under Secretary Kahl called the operation “unparalleled” and said “we, as Americans, should be immensely proud.” [1471]

In January of 2022, President Biden claimed, “I make no apologies for what I did.” [1472] Later that year, Rear Admiral Kirby insisted in November 2022, “We have admitted and acknowledged that not everything about the withdrawal was done perfectly, that there were certainly mistakes made, we’ve investigated those mistakes, we’ve owned up for those mistakes.” [1473] Yet, in May of 2024, President Biden still insisted this “was not a loss in Afghanistan.” [1474] As recently as the June 2024 presidential debate, President Biden brought up the topic of Afghanistan, unprovoked, to brag about his withdrawal and criticize President Trump for not doing so sooner. [1475] And on the three-year anniversary of the Abbey Gate attack, Vice President Harris touted the withdrawal as a success, calling the decision “courageous and right.” [1476]

With an unwillingness to see failure comes an inability to learn or hold those responsible to account. When asked if anyone had been held accountable for the failures of the withdrawal from Afghanistan in a congressional hearing, Secretary Austin admitted, “to my knowledge, no.” [1477] A prime example of the Biden-Harris administration’s accountability failure is found in Counselor Derek Chollet. The self-proclaimed fixer for Secretary Blinken, who was entrusted with significant responsibility over Afghanistan policy, feigned forgetfulness so many times during his transcribed interview that the question became, what did he remember? [1478] Despite his lead role in the Afghanistan failure and alarming lack of candor before the committee, Counselor Chollet was nominated by President Biden to serve as under secretary of defense for policy, a Senate-confirmed position. Chairman McCaul sent a letter to Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Senate Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) opposing Counselor Chollet’s confirmation. [1479] Counselor Chollet was never voted out of committee. Discontent with even that degree of accountability, the Biden-Harris administration found a high-powered but non-Senate confirmed position for Counselor Chollet to occupy: chief of staff to Secretary Austin, which he started in June 2024. [1480] To fill the counselor position now vacated, Secretary Blinken tapped Tom Sullivan, brother to NSA Jake Sullivan. **In short, those responsible for the administration’s failure in Afghanistan, and those who have attempted to evade this committee’s oversight, have been rewarded by President Biden and Vice President Harris.**

With that said, the committee majority offers nothing but the highest praise and the deepest gratitude for the brave U.S. servicemembers and foreign service officers who risked their lives to carry out the NEO in August of 2021, despite being set up for failure by political leadership. It is no surprise, then, that those who were actually on the ground do not consider the NEO a success. One State Department employee told AAR interviewers there was “no way you could describe this as a success.” [1481] Foreign Service Officer Sam Aronson shared those sentiments, explaining, “I cannot call this evacuation a success because I had to replace my diplomatic tools with those meant for soldiers in war. Instead of a pen, I carried flashbang grenades as a last resort to divert potential attackers; and instead of a notepad, I wore night-vision goggles to secretly rescue a women’s rights activist under the cover of darkness. I recall, that night, feeling equal parts concerned that I’d either be discovered by the Taliban, taken hostage by ISIS, or reprimanded by a State Department bureaucracy that favors coloring within the lines.” [1482] Mr. Aronson said “after sitting next to Gold Star father Darin Hoover and hearing him describe how much his son, Taylor Hoover, loved being a Marine,” he could not possibly call the evacuation a success. [1483]

In his testimony before the committee, when asked by Congressman Michael Waltz (R-Fla.) whether President Biden's characterization of the withdrawal as a success added to the moral injury of veterans, Retired Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mann, a Green Beret and founder of Task Force Pineapple, stated, "I believe even more hurtful is the non-mentioning of it in two State of the Union addresses." [1484]

SIGAR Stonewalling by the State Department

Understanding how the withdrawal failed is critical to making sure officials and agencies are held accountable and mistakes are not repeated. SIGAR, under congressional mandate to provide "independent and objective" oversight of Afghanistan reconstruction projects and activities, has continued trying to carry out its work. [1485] But it has run headlong into State Department opposition.

In October 2021, after facing State Department obstruction, SIGAR Sopko decried the Biden-Harris administration's "bureaucratic inclination to try to restrict public information." [1486] SIGAR Sopko revealed that, right after the fall of Kabul, the State Department asked him to "temporarily suspend access" to all "audit, inspection, and financial audit reports" on the SIGAR website because the State Department was afraid information included in those reports could put Afghan allies at risk. [1487] SIGAR Sopko said that "despite repeated requests, State was never able to describe any specific threats to individuals that were supposedly contained in our reports, nor did State ever explain how removing our reports now could possibly protect anyone since many were years old and already extensively disseminated worldwide." [1488] SIGAR Sopko was then asked by the State Department to redact a spreadsheet containing roughly 2,400 new items, of which only four were found to have merit. [1489] SIGAR Sopko said the "Pentagon also restricted from public release a range of information going back to 2015 on the performance of the Afghan security forces," at the request of the Afghan government, which he believed consisted of the information needed to determine whether the Afghan military was "a real fighting force or a house of cards waiting to fall." [1490]

James Cunningham, the analyst-in-charge for SIGAR, who spent 17 years analyzing Afghanistan, accused the Biden-Harris administration of stonewalling investigators after the fall of Kabul. In a September 2022 podcast interview, Mr. Cunningham explained, "What we've noticed over the past year or so as we've been doing our work is that the [Biden-Harris] administration, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and other organizations have just been resistant to this type of independent examination, of learning what happened in Afghanistan ... we asked CENTCOM two years ago if we could look through historical files, and I think they said the files would be ready for us to look [at] in 2030." [1491]

In June of 2022, SIGAR sent a letter to Congress reporting the Biden-Harris administration was blocking its investigations, including inquiries into whether U.S. taxpayer dollars were flowing to the Taliban or the Haqqani Network. [1492] SIGAR asserted, “Two SIGAR audits are also being hindered by a lack of cooperation from State and USAID. The first evaluates your agencies’ compliance with the laws and regulations prohibiting transfers of funds to members of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The second concerns ongoing emergency food assistance to Afghanistan.” [1493] Later that year, in October of 2022, SIGAR reported, “for the first time in its history,” it was “unable this quarter to provide Congress and the American people with a full accounting of this U.S. government spending due to the noncooperation of several U.S. government agencies.” [1494] SIGAR added USAID and the Treasury Department “refused to cooperate with SIGAR in any capacity, while the State Department was selective in the information it provided pursuant to SIGAR’s audit and quarterly data requests, sharing high-level funding data but not details of agency-supported programs in Afghanistan.” [1495] SIGAR further asserted a State Department official informed the inspector general that State Department staff received internal instruction to not engage with or speak to SIGAR without prior permission from the State Department’s legal counsel. [1496]

Obstruction of SIGAR continues to this day, with the State Department refusing to share information with SIGAR on its recent report regarding U.S. humanitarian aid implementers paying taxes to the Taliban. [1497]

State Department Obstruction of Congressional Oversight

Pursuant to 22 U.S.C. § 2680, “The Department of State shall keep ... the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and responsibilities within the jurisdiction of these committees. Any Federal department, agency, or independent establishment shall furnish any information requested by ... such committee relating to any such activity or responsibility.” Rule X of the House of Representatives furnishes the committee with oversight authority over, in relevant part, “[r]elations of the United States with foreign nations generally,” the “[d]iplomatic service,” and the [p]rotection of American citizens abroad and expatriation.” [1498]

Throughout the course of this three-year investigation — including the 20 months since Republicans gained a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives — the State Department has actively worked to thwart congressional oversight despite its statutory obligations and the committee’s congressional authorities.

The State Department has resisted, delayed, obfuscated, and outright refused to comply with legitimate oversight inquiries.

Consequently, its modus operandi bred distrust in the department and forced the committee to threaten subpoenas on countless occasions, serving two, and threatening to hold Secretary Blinken in contempt of Congress twice for failure to comply therewith.

The State Department's obstruction is in many cases attributable to White House and NSC interference, with document productions withheld on the basis of purported executive confidentiality concerns. The depth of this investigation comes in spite of the department's lack of cooperation. The Biden-Harris administration's efforts to avoid accountability have undermined the relationship between this committee and the State Department, leading to increasing use of compulsory process. Per Senator Arthur Vandenberg, politics stops at the water's edge, but that is only possible through a shared commitment to transparency and accountability. [1499]

A primary example of State Department obstruction can be found in the department's 90-day internal After Action Review (AAR), which concluded in March of 2022. [1500] The AAR found significant failures in the department's response and identified "an electronic and paper collection of all the materials the review team consulted and cited to prepare its report," titled the "Afghanistan AAR files." [1501] The AAR had been based, in part, on "more than 150 interviews with current and former State Department officials at all levels of the organization," along with other critical documents examining the accuracy of the AAR and withdrawal more broadly. [1502] As described below, the State Department stonewalled requests for the materials underlying the AAR for over a year until this committee instituted contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken.

To provide an overview of the timeline of obstruction, on January 12, 2023, shortly after Republicans claimed the House majority, the committee requested the production of "all documents resulting from State Department internal reviews related to the Afghanistan withdrawal," to better understand the department's role in the withdrawal. [1503] On January 30th, committee staff provided the department a list of priorities to facilitate production, including the "After-Action Report and all documents and communications referring and relating to it" [1504] The department failed to comply with its February 7th deadline, prompting a warning of compulsory process. Repeated requests and warnings followed on March 3rd, March 22nd, April 25th, June 8th, and June 20th. [1505] Although the State Department did produce the report, it withheld much of the critical supporting material, causing the committee to serve Secretary Blinken with a subpoena on July 18, 2023, to produce the AAR files by July 25, 2023. [1506]

The State Department failed, again, to comply. Accordingly, on August 9, 2023, the committee requested transcribed interviews with the department's Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Legislative Affairs Naz Durakoğlu, and Acting Legal Adviser Richard Visek, both of whom hold responsibility for document production. [1507] Two days later, in lieu of those transcribed interviews, Secretary Blinken communicated to Chairman McCaul his "personal commitment" towards cooperating with the subpoena. [1508] The department, however, proceeded to produce documents that were largely redacted, publicly available, or even blank. Particularly outlandish examples from that document production included a food menu and a 1975 study from Vietnam. [1509]

The committee then learned what the department was withholding. On August 31, 2023, the committee interviewed Ambassador Dan Smith, whom Secretary Blinken tasked to lead the AAR. [1510] Ambassador Smith revealed to committee staff the AAR was based on carefully recorded interviews he and his team conducted of department officials. [1511] He testified that he and his team "took notes on the interviews," which took the form of "memorand[a] of conversation." [1512] Prior to Ambassador Smith's transcribed interview, State Department staff led the committee to believe notes and records compiled in the production of the AAR were not organized in a manner conducive for efficient production. Ambassador Smith, however, confirmed his memoranda would be "in the custody of the State Department," as part of the AAR files, which his team had preserved in accordance with the Records Disposition Schedules approved by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. [1513]

It would be months before the department turned over Ambassador Smith's memoranda of conversation, following the institution of contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken. On October 20, 2023, no longer able to justify its inaction with intimations of disorganization or burden, the department suggested, for the first time, that it might not produce the AAR interview notes at all. [1514] It referenced conversations with the White House and cited purported executive branch confidentiality interests and interagency equities as the basis for its noncompliance with the committee's July subpoena. In response, committee staff reiterated the AAR interview notes provided primary source material essential to the investigation. [1515] On February 26, 2024 — after over a year of good faith requests — Chairman McCaul announced he would begin contempt proceedings against Secretary Blinken. [1516] Notably, no secretary of state had ever before been held in contempt of Congress.

On the eve of contempt, the department agreed to release its objections and produce the materials underlying the AAR report. Those interview notes revealed systemic issues with the State Department's handling of the withdrawal and disclosed that, unlike Biden-Harris political appointees, the department's civil servants generally held a critical view of the withdrawal.

Just as the department improperly withheld the AAR interview notes from the committee for over a year, it also withheld “the Dissent Channel cable sent on or about July 13, 2021, reportedly signed by 23 State Department officials and the official response to it.” [1517] Again, the department only relented after Chairman McCaul subpoenaed Secretary Blinken and threatened contempt. That subpoena was served on March 28th, and on May 5, 2023, Chairman McCaul sent a letter to Secretary Blinken warning of contempt. [1518] The State Department allowed Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Meeks to view the Dissent Channel cable on May 23, 2023, and later allowed all members of the committee to do the same.” [1519]

The same pattern holds true for witness interviews. Although the department ultimately made 16 current and former officials available for transcribed interviews, it did so after multiple requests, months of delay, and the threat of compulsory process.

On May 14, 2023, the committee submitted to Secretary Blinken requests for five transcribed interviews of key department witnesses: Consul General James DeHart, Mr. Jonathan Mennuti, Consul General Jayne Howell, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Afghanistan Mark Evans, and Ambassador Dan Smith. [1520] It took the department nearly three months to schedule those witnesses. [1521]

The next slate of requests was similarly delayed. On August 30, 2023, the committee submitted requests for transcribed interviews of nine key department witnesses: Ambassador Ross Wilson, D-MR Brian McKeon, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Acting Under Secretary Carol Perez, Counselor Derek Chollet, Ms. Suzy George, Mr. Salman Ahmed, Acting Assistant Secretary Dean Thompson, and Ambassador John Bass. [1522] On September 8, 2023, the committee requested another key department witness: State Department Spokesperson Ned Price. The department’s deadline for both requests lapsed without a calendared interview, and it was not until September 29th — after the committee threatened compulsory process — that the department arranged for the first of the ten witnesses to appear. [1523] On October 2 and 3, 2023, the committee — again threatening use of a subpoena — insisted availability for the remaining nine witnesses be provided within the week. [1524] It was only then that the department scheduled interviews for these remaining witnesses. Indeed, the only State Department witness who appeared on request and not threat was former foreign service officer Sam Aronson.

Through patience, repetition, and threat of compulsion, the committee obtained 16 transcribed interviews of State Department leaders and uncovered critical documents underlying the department’s internal investigation. But at nearly every step of the way, the committee’s efforts to engage cooperatively encountered resistance and obstruction.
