

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD J. AUSTIN III
PREPARED REMARKS BEFORE THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SEPTEMBER 28, 2021

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent drawdown and evacuation operations in Afghanistan.

I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie, who I know will be able to provide you with additional context.

I am incredibly proud of the men and women of the U.S. armed forces, who conducted themselves with tremendous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the drawdown, and the evacuation.

Over the course of our nation's longest war, 2,461 of our fellow Americans made the ultimate sacrifice, along with more than 20,000 who still bear the wounds of war, some of which cannot be seen on the outside.

We can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year, when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war. We can debate the decisions over 20 years that led us to this point.

But one thing not open to debate is the courage and compassion of our service members, who – along with their families – served and sacrificed to ensure that our homeland would never again be attacked the way it was on September 11, 2001.

I had the chance to speak with many of them during my trip to the Gulf region a few weeks ago, including the Marines who lost 11 of their teammates at the Abbey Gate in Kabul on the 26th of August. I have never been more humbled and inspired. They are rightfully proud of what they accomplished, and the lives they saved, in such a short span of time.

The reason that our troops were able to get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities for a non-combatant evacuation as far back as this spring.

By late April, two weeks after the President's decision, military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered Central Command to make preparations for a potential non-combatant evacuation operation. Two weeks later, I began pre-positioning forces in the region, to include three infantry battalions. On the 10th of August, we ran another table-top exercise around a non-combatant evacuation scenario. We wanted to be ready. And we were.

By the time that the State Department called for the NEO, significant numbers of additional forces had already arrived in Afghanistan, including leading elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, who were already on the ground in Kabul. Before that weekend was out, another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82nd Airborne.

To be clear, those first two days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside the airport. But within 48 hours, our troops restored order, and process began to take hold.

Our soldiers, airmen, and Marines – in partnership with our allies, our partners, and our State Department colleagues – secured the gates, took control of airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people they would be manifesting onto airplanes. They and our commanders exceeded all expectations.

We planned to evacuate between 70,000-80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000.

We planned to move between 5,000-9,000 people per day. On average, they moved slightly more than 7,000 per day.

On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation, an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes. And not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems.

It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in just 17 days. Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside of Afghanistan.

We are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave. We did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in the Special Immigrant Visa program. We take that very seriously. That is why we are working across the interagency to continue facilitating their departure. Even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

Tragically, lives were also lost: several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day; 13 brave U.S. service members and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26th; and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29th.

Non-combatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations, even in the best of circumstances. And the circumstances in August were anything but ideal. Extreme heat. A land-locked country. No government. A highly dynamic situation on the ground. And an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat.

In the span of just two days – from August 13th to 15th – we went from working alongside a democratically elected, long-time partner government to coordinating warily with a long-time enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment. It proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.

We learned a lot of other lessons, too – about how to turn an Air Force base in Qatar into an international airport overnight, and about how to rapidly screen, process, and manifest large numbers of people. Nothing like this has ever been done before, and no other military in the world could have pulled it off. I think that is crucial.

I know that members of this committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield, how real is our over-the-horizon capability, why we didn't start evacuations sooner, and why we did not stay longer to get more people out. Let me take each in turn.

Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as five thousand U.S. troops in harm's way, just to operate and defend it. And it would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned: to protect and defend our embassy some 30 miles away. That distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram – even for counter-terrorism purposes – meant staying at war in Afghanistan, something that the President made clear he would not do.

As for over-the-horizon operations: when we use that term, we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective, and fairly common, operations. Just days ago, we conducted one such strike in Syria, eliminating a senior Al Qaeda figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult but absolutely possible. And the intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources, not just U.S. boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations: we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause the very collapse of the Afghan government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk. As I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and pre-positioning of forces.

As for the mission's end: my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission. The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September, and as you know, we faced grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. Staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees who we could get out.

As we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself, and pause to think about the lessons that we have learned over the past 20 years. Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan institutions – an army, an air force, a police force, and government ministries?

We helped build a state, but we could not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan army we and our partners trained simply melted away – in many cases without firing a shot – took us all by surprise. It would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths: that we did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor leadership in their senior ranks, that we did not grasp the damaging effect of frequent and unexplained rotations by President Ghani of his commanders, that we did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that Taliban commanders struck with local

leaders in the wake of the Doha agreement, that the Doha agreement itself had a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers, and that we failed to fully grasp that there was only so much for which – and for whom – many of the Afghan forces would fight.

We provided the Afghan military with equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them. Over the years, they often fought bravely. Tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police officers died. But in the end, we couldn't provide them with the will to win. At least not all of them.

As a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that. But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it. They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, and they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

Now, our service members and civilians face a new mission: helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives in new places. They are performing that one magnificently, as well. I spent time with some of them up at Joint Base Maguire-Dix-Lakehurst, just yesterday. I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, courage, and professionalism.

And I appreciate the support that this committee continues to provide them and their families.

Thank you.