

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR JACK REED
CHAIRMAN, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**ROOM SD-G50
Tuesday, September 28, 2021**

**To receive testimony the conclusion of military operations in Afghanistan and
plans for future counterterrorism operations**

(As prepared for delivery)

REED: Good morning. The Committee meets today to discuss the end of American military operations in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years of war, enormous sacrifice by American and coalition military, diplomatic, and intelligence personnel, and vast U.S. investment, the Afghan state has failed and the Taliban has retaken control. We need to understand why and how.

As part of this hearing, we will seek to understand the factors that contributed to the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country and the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. While there is a temptation to close the book on Afghanistan and simply move on to long-term strategic competition with China and Russia, we must capture the lessons of the last two decades to ensure that our future counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere continue to hold violent extremists at bay.

I know that much of this hearing will focus on our final months in Afghanistan. I think it is equally important, however, that this Committee takes a step back and examines the broader two-decade mission that shaped the outcome we face today. Our withdrawal this summer and the events surrounding it did not happen in a vacuum. The path that led to this moment was paved with years of mistakes, from our catastrophic pivot to Iraq, to our failure to handle Pakistan's support for the Taliban, to the flawed Doha Agreement signed by President Trump. The members of this Committee and the witnesses before us have overseen chapters of a war that spanned four presidential administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and we owe the American people an honest accounting. I hope that this hearing will be frank and searching, so that future generations of Americans will not repeat our mistakes.

Our witnesses today are Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense; General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and General Frank McKenzie,

Commander of U.S. Central Command. I welcome each of you and thank you for your many years of service. I also want to commend and thank our military men and women for their heroic efforts to evacuate more than 124,000 American citizens, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and other at-risk Afghans over 17 days in chaotic and perilous conditions—a remarkable accomplishment. We especially honor the brave American servicemen and women who were killed and wounded while selflessly protecting those seeking safety.

So, how did we get here? There are countless decisions and factors that could be pointed to, but I would highlight a few that clearly paved the way.

Early in the war, we did achieve our original counterterrorism objective of significantly degrading al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Over time, however, that mission morphed into convoluted counterinsurgency and nation building. While the U.S. presence in Afghanistan drew down significantly over the last few years, the lack of a defined strategy continued to erode the mission.

One of the clearest inflection points was the ill-fated decision to go to war in Iraq. Just as we began to achieve momentum in Afghanistan, the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq drew critical resources, troops, and focus away from the Afghan theater. Our best opportunity in Afghanistan was squandered, and we were never able to get back on track.

Throughout the war, we were also unsuccessful in dealing with Pakistan's support of the Taliban. Even as American diplomats sat down with Pakistani leaders and our forces cooperated on counterterrorism missions, the Taliban enjoyed sanctuary inside Pakistan with time and space to regroup.

More recently, the Taliban's resurgence can be tied to the flawed Doha Agreement, which then-President Trump signed in 2020. This deal—negotiated between the Trump Administration and the Taliban without our coalition allies or even the Afghan government present—promised the end of the entire international presence in Afghanistan, including contractors critical to keeping the Afghan Air Force in the fight, with virtually no stipulations. The Taliban, with momentum on the battlefield and no incentives to honor the Doha Agreement, used the final year of the Trump Administration to boldly escalate violence and begin its fateful march toward Kabul.

Despite colossal efforts over multiple administrations, both Democratic and Republican, we were unable to help build an Afghan government capable of leading its people, nor an Afghan security force capable of defeating the Taliban.

Afghan soldiers fought bravely in the face of massive casualties but, faced with the loss of American military support and hamstrung by corruption within, they were unable to stand on their own against Taliban forces.

Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie: you have each led troops in combat in Afghanistan, commanded at the theater level, and advised our nation's top leaders on our Afghanistan strategy. You have played significant roles throughout this war, and I hope that you are forthcoming in your answers today.

To begin, I would ask that you provide an accounting of the intelligence and other key assessments that factored into your judgements about the viability of the Afghan government and Afghan forces, and how those trends changed over time. I would like to know any lessons you have identified for how we can more effectively work by, with, and through partner nation forces in the future.

Additionally, I would like to understand what factors you attribute to the Taliban's success and whether we missed indicators and warnings of their imminent takeover.

Finally, while we have transitioned our military from Afghanistan after largely achieving our counterterrorism objectives, we must continue to ensure that Afghanistan can never again be used as a base for terrorist groups to conduct operations against the United States and our allies. We must remain vigilant about these threats and ensure that we establish an effective counterterrorism architecture moving forward. To that end, I would ask that you update the Committee on your plans for over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations.

The United States faces new and evolving threats around the world. To overcome them, we must first understand what went wrong during our mission in Afghanistan and learn from those missteps. We owe it to the American people.

I want to thank you again for being here this morning and I look forward to your testimony.

Before I turn to Ranking Member Inhofe: For the benefit of my colleagues, because we have two rounds of open testimony and a closed session following, I will strictly enforce the five-minute limit allowed for each member. I intend to recess at 1pm for lunch and promptly resume at 1:30pm. I would again remind my colleagues that there will be a classified session immediately following this open session in SVC-217, the Office of Senate Security.

Ranking Member Inhofe.