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By Associated Press

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Top Former US Generals Say Failures of Biden

Administration in Planning Drove Chaotic Fall of Kabul

The former top military chief Gen. Mark Milley and former head of U.S. Central Command testified before Congress Tuesday on policy failures by the Biden administration to adequately plan for or direct an evacuation in time to avoid the chaotic final days of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan

Top Former US Generals Say Failures of Biden Administration in Planning Drove Chaotic Fall of Kabul



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

Retired Gen. Mark Milley, left, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, left, and retired Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, former commander of the U.S. Central Command, speak to the House Foreign Affairs Committee about the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, March 19, 2024. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

WASHINGTON (AP) — The top two U.S. generals who oversaw the evacuation of Afghanistan as it fell to the Taliban in August 2021 blamed the Biden administration for the chaotic departure, telling lawmakers Tuesday that it inadequately planned for the evacuation and did not order it in time.

The rare testimony by former Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark Milley and U.S. Central Command retired Gen. Frank McKenzie publicly exposed for the first time the strain and differences the military leaders had with the Biden administration in the final days of the war. Two of those key differences included that the military had advised that the U.S. keep at least 2,500 service members in Afghanistan to maintain stability and a concern that the State Department was not moving fast enough to get an evacuation started.

The remarks also contrasted with an internal White House review of the administration's decisions which found that President Joe Biden's decisions had been "severely constrained" by previous withdrawal agreements negotiated by former President Donald Trump and blamed the military, saying top commanders said they had enough resources to handle the evacuation.

Thirteen U.S. service members [were killed](#) by a suicide bomber at the Kabul airport's Abbey Gate in the final days of the war, as the Taliban took over Afghanistan.

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Thousands of panicked Afghans and U.S. citizens desperately tried to get on U.S. military flights that were airlifting people out. In the end the military was able to rescue more than 130,000 civilians before the final U.S. military aircraft departed.

That chaos was the end result of the State Department failing to call for an evacuation of U.S. personnel until it was too late, Milley and McKenzie told the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"On 14 August the non-combatant evacuation operation decision was made by the Department of State and the U.S. military alerted, marshalled, mobilized and rapidly deployed faster than any military in the world could ever do," Milley said.

But the State Department's decision came too late, Milley said.

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"The fundamental mistake, the fundamental flaw was the timing of the State Department," Milley said. "That was too slow and too late."

In a lengthy statement late Tuesday, the National Security Council took issue with the generals' remarks, saying that Biden's hard decision was the right thing to do and part of his commitment to get the U.S. out of America's longest war.

The president "was not going to send another generation of troops to fight and die in a conflict that had no end in sight," the NSC said. "We have also demonstrated that we do not need a permanent troop presence on the ground in harm's way to remain vigilant against terrorism threats."

The statement said the president and first lady still mourn for those lost at Abbey Gate and are "enormously proud of the men and women of our military, our diplomats and the intel community who conducted that withdrawal," the NSC said.

In the hearing, which was prompted by a lengthy investigation by the House Foreign Affairs Committee into the decisions surrounding the evacuation of Kabul, McKenzie spoke at length about his discomfort in how little seemed to be ready for an evacuation, even raising those concerns with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Evacuation orders must come from the State Department, but in the weeks and months before Kabul fell to the Taliban, the Pentagon was still pressing the State Department for evacuation plans, McKenzie said.

"We had forces in the region as early as 9 July, but we could do nothing" without State ordering the evacuation, McKenzie said, calling State's timing "the fatal flaw that created what happened in August."

"I believe the events of mid and late August 2021 were the direct result of delaying the initiation of the (evacuation) for several months, in fact until we were in extremis and the Taliban had overrun the country," McKenzie said.

Milley was the nation's top-ranking military officer at the time, and had urged President Joe Biden to keep a residual force of 2,500 forces there to give Afghanistan's special forces enough back-up to keep the Taliban at bay and allow the U.S. military to hold on to Bagram Air Base, which could have provided the military additional options to respond to Taliban attacks.

Biden did not approve the larger residual force, opting to keep a smaller force of 650 that would be limited to securing the U.S. embassy. That smaller force was not adequate to keeping Bagram, which was quickly taken over by the Taliban.

The Taliban have controlled Afghanistan since the U.S. departure, resulting in many dramatic changes for the population, including the [near-total loss of rights](#) for women and [girls](#).

The White House found last year that the chaotic withdrawal occurred because President Joe Biden was “constrained” by previous agreements made by President Donald Trump to withdraw forces.

That 2023 internal review further appeared to shift any blame in the Aug. 26, 2021, suicide bombing at Hamid Karzai International Airport, saying it [was the U.S. military](#) that made one possibly key decision.

“To manage the potential threat of a terrorist attack, the President repeatedly asked whether the military required additional support to carry out their mission at HKIA,” the 2023 report said, adding, “Senior military officials confirmed that they had sufficient resources and authorities to mitigate threats.”

AP White House Correspondent Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

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