

US Reputation Is in Tatters, It's Time to Bring Those Responsible for Afghanistan Disaster to Account

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Twenty years of US war in Afghanistan draws to a close at the stroke of midnight on August 31. There will be plenty of time to dissect the root causes of failure. What is needed now is accountability for the disastrous endgame.

[A video](#) of active duty Marine Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller demanding accountability for the humanitarian disaster that had come to define the US-led evacuation from Kabul, Afghanistan, quickly went viral.

Scheller, who commanded the advanced infantry training battalion at the Marine Corps School of Infantry, at the time the video was made, had spent 17 years as a Marine, with multiple combat deployments. He knowingly placed this distinguished career at risk by publicly demanding that someone be held accountable for the bungled evacuation, which had left at least 14 American servicemen dead, along with hundreds of Afghans, some with dual citizenship in allied nations. Scheller's commanders immediately [relieved](#) him of his command. This was a consequence Scheller anticipated, which makes his decision to sacrifice his career in the name of accountability even more remarkable.

“I’m not saying we need to be in Afghanistan forever,” the combat veteran said, “but I am saying, did any of you throw your rank on the table and say, ‘Hey, it’s a bad idea to evacuate Bagram Airfield, a strategic airbase, before we evacuate everyone?’”

Lacking that, Scheller asked, did anyone take responsibility for failing to raise objections, and for the related failure to adequately hold up America's end of the bargain when it came to evacuating Afghans who had assisted the United States over the course of its 20-year war in Afghanistan and who, together with their families, were at mortal risk of retaliation from a victorious Taliban enemy. Without accountability, Scheller said, “we just keep repeating the same mistakes.” The Marine officer concluded by stating “I want to say this very strongly. I have been fighting for 17 years. I am willing to throw it all away to say to my senior leaders: I demand accountability.”

While Scheller's actions and sentiment captured the imagination of many who watched the voluntary act of digital self-immolation, the fact of the matter is that, left to its own devices, the chain of command Scheller so rightly calls out for its moral failings will not, on its own volition, seek to hold anyone to account for the failure of policy and national character that has come to define the US-led evacuation mission in Afghanistan.

Americans, together with much of the world, have marveled at the herculean task confronting the young men and women of the US armed forces who secured the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) and carried out the impossible task of deciding who among the tens of thousands of desperate human beings would be given a chance at a new life, or condemned to try and survive in a land governed by the brutality of Taliban-run Islamic law. Their labor and sacrifice have dominated the narrative being pushed out by the mainstream media to the point that few, if any, are asking the critical questions posed by Stuart Scheller: Who is responsible for the decision to close Bagram Airfield?

Until it was abandoned by the US military on the night of July 2, 2021, Bagram Airfield, located some 40 miles north of Kabul, had served as the heart of the US military effort in Afghanistan. Originally used by the Soviets during their military intervention in Afghanistan from 1979-1989, Bagram Airfield had fallen into disarray until captured by the US-led coalition in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The US poured tens of billions of dollars into the airfield [to create a 'home away from home'](#) for deployed US forces. Persons based at Bagram, or transiting through, had access to a Burger King, Popeyes, pizzerias, a Thai restaurant, Dairy Queen and coffee shops. The base had two military exchanges (stores) along with a host of local vendors. Air-conditioned gyms, recreation facilities with video games and large-screen televisions, and full WiFi connectivity made it hard to tell the airfield apart from small-town America. Bagram Airfield played host to US military aircraft, including fighter planes and attack helicopters, as well as a separate compound for special operations personnel and CIA paramilitary officers.

Any contingency involving the movement of Americans in and out of Afghanistan in any significant number would, as a matter of course, assume the availability of Bagram Airfield.

When, [during a press conference](#) on August 26, President Joe Biden was asked who was responsible for the decision to abandon Bagram Airfield, the commander in chief placed the blame squarely on his military commanders. *"Every day when I talk to our commanders,"* Biden said, *"I ask them what they need — what more do they need, if anything, to get the job done. As they will tell you, I granted every request."*

"On the tactical questions of how to conduct an evacuation or a war, I gather up all the major military personnel that are in Afghanistan — the commanders, as well as the Pentagon. And I ask for their best military judgment: what would be the most efficient way to accomplish the mission. They concluded — the military — that Bagram was not much value added, that it was much wiser to focus on Kabul [international airport]. And so, I followed that recommendation."

The problem with the president's statement is that it is not true. In [an earlier press conference](#), held on August 18, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, made it clear that the White House had given the military zero latitude when it came to retaining control of Bagram Airfield. *"Our task, given to us at that time, our task was to protect the embassy,"* Milley said. *"If we were to keep both Bagram and the embassy going,*

that would be a significant number of military forces.”

General Milley made it clear that the military was under strict instructions for “*getting the troops down to a 600, 700 number,*” and that to hold Bagram would require many more troops than the limit imposed by the White House. “*The decision was made to go ahead and collapse Bagram,*” he said, noting that the military “*estimated that the risk of going out of KIA, or the risk of going out of Bagram, were about the same, so going out of KIA was the better tactical solution.*”

Immediately after Bagram Airfield was abandoned by the US military, [Biden held a press conference](#) where he expressed optimism about the US’ ability to manage the evacuation of its troops and civilians from Afghanistan. “*The drawdown is proceeding in a secure and orderly way, prioritizing the safety of our troops as they depart,*” the president noted. “*The likelihood there’s going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely*” he said, adding that there would be no circumstance where you’d see people being lifted off the roof of the American embassy in Afghanistan. “*It is not at all comparable*” to the 1975 US evacuation from Saigon.

The White House bid to manage the optics of withdrawal by keeping the number of US forces deployed on the ground at a minimum while rejecting any comparison of the devolving situation in Afghanistan with that of South Vietnam came crashing down around them as, barely two weeks into August, the Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban entered Kabul victorious.

The very scenario President Biden said could never happen did. With concern over bad optics now mooted by reality, the White House reversed course on its decision to cap the number of US troops in Afghanistan at 600-700. “*Based on the recommendations of our diplomatic, military, and intelligence teams,*” [Biden said in a press conference](#) after Kabul fell, “*I have authorized the deployment of approximately 5,000 US troops to make sure we can have an orderly and safe drawdown of US personnel and other allied personnel, and an orderly and safe evacuation of Afghans who helped our troops during our mission and those at special risk from the Taliban advance.*”

As Biden came under increasing criticism for his handling of the Afghanistan crisis, his National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [went on national television](#) in an effort to shape the narrative in a manner which shielded the president from any blame.

“All along, the president has been clear that the United States was not going to enter a third decade of American military deployment in the middle of another country’s civil war...he has been clear that that could mean difficult times in Afghanistan. We have been clear-eyed about this from the start. But what we were not prepared to do, what the president was not prepared to do, was to say that for that reason, we need to keep American men and women fighting and dying in this civil war,” Sullivan told ABC’s Good Morning America.

The problem with Jake Sullivan’s spin game is that it bore no resemblance to reality: rather than prepare America for a “*difficult time,*” Biden presented the American people with the image of a “*secure and orderly*” evacuation of US personnel from Afghanistan. Far from being “*clear eyed,*” the Biden White House interfered with the contingency planning of the military by limiting the number of forces available to 600-700, putting a lie to the notion that the president “*granted every request*” for additional troops. The fact of the matter is that,

when confronted with the need for additional military resources to enable the military to simultaneously hold on to the US embassy compound in Kabul and Bagram Airfield, the White House turned the generals down flat, creating the conditions for the chaotic humanitarian disaster which unfolded at HKIA in mid-August when the president suddenly saw fit to deploy 5-6,000 additional US troops. That he could have held onto Bagram with a fraction of that number seems to have escaped both the president and his national security advisor.

In his August 16 press conference, Joe Biden declared that *“the buck stops with me”* when it comes to assigning responsibility for the chaotic situation unfolding in Afghanistan at the time. That sentiment, void of a resignation on the part of the president, is meaningless. Stuart Scheller sacrificed a stellar military career in order to drive home the absolute need for accountability when it comes to the botched Afghanistan withdrawal. While Mark Milley and his fellow generals shoulder a significant portion of the blame for not having the courage of Stuart Scheller and failing to put their respective careers on the line in order to oppose bad policy, at the end of the day the primacy of civilian leadership that governs civil-military relations in America requires a civilian head on the chopping block.

One need look no further than the president’s National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan when sizing up candidates. He is the most influential advisor on national security matters and would have been the front man when it came to keeping the military in line regarding maintaining the optics of withdrawal being pushed by President Biden — reduced troop number, and no ‘Saigon moment’.

This politicization of national security contingency planning has cost American servicemembers, and hundreds of Afghans, their lives. The reputation of the United States is in tatters. The ramifications going forward of this utter collapse in American leadership have yet to materialize. Before Biden assembles his national security and foreign policy team to try and right the sinking ship that is US policy in Afghanistan, there must be accountability. At a very minimum Jake Sullivan must be fired. Ideally Mark Milley would be compelled to resign or be fired. Other generals whose fingerprints are on the Afghan disaster should also suffer career-ending consequences.

There must be accountability. Otherwise, as Stuart Scheller noted, *“we just keep repeating the same mistakes.”*

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Featured image: Members of the U.S. Air Force Honor Guard transfer Capt. David A. Wisniewski’s casket to a caisson while HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters fly overhead during his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va., Aug. 23, 2010. Wisniewski died July 2, 2010, from injuries suffered during a

helicopter crash in Afghanistan. (Credit: SSgt Gina Chiaverotti-Paige/Public Domain)

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