

[Transcript] The Realignment / 397 | Jerry Dunleavy & James Hasson: Two Years After the Fall of Kabul - Was the Chaotic Withdrawal Inevitable?

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

The Re-alignment has spent a lot of time covering the war in Afghanistan and the broader implications of the 20 years the U.S. spent in the country. We haven't covered as much how the war ended.

Now, with the recent two-year anniversary of the Taliban's return to power, I'm joined by Jerry Den Levy, an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and James Hassan, an army veteran of the Afghan War.

They've offered Kabul the untold story of Biden's fiasco and the American warriors who fought to the end. With a title like that, Jerry and James obviously have a sharp point of view on the topic, but I was curious about exploring the degree to which one can separate the withdrawal, which ended horrifically with suicide bombing, and Afghan allies and U.S. citizens alike left behind, not to mention the images of people falling from planes as they took off, from the broader debate over whether it was the right decision to end the war. People, like Sagar, acknowledge the failures of the withdrawal, but believe messy exits are an inherent aspect of any serious effort to end a failed nation-building attempt. Others think the U.S. presence itself was sustainable long-term, and this was all a false choice.

Jerry and James set aside the war-ending question, and instead focused on the specific tactical decisions the Biden administration made, which they argue led to disaster. From their point of view, you could have made the decision to withdraw from Kabul and Afghanistan without the horrific August that occurred two years ago. With all that said, at a broader level, and this is just an interesting political point, there's been significant evidence that a lot of the Biden administration struggles when it came to polling actually started with the withdrawal itself, even though a majority of the country supported ending the actual war. The withdrawal itself may have permanently politically damaged the administration, something that is going to make this matter moving into 2024, let alone broader conversations about U.S. foreign policy from Ukraine to Asia. With that said, we've got another edition of the Realignment Supercast coming out, so if you'd like to support the show, input your own questions, or get full access to the episode, be sure to go to realignment.supercast.com, or click the link at the top of the show notes. Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast. Hope you all enjoy this conversation.

Jerry Dunleavy and James Hassan, welcome to the Realignment.

Thanks for having us.

Yeah, it's great to be here.

So I want to ask this first question as delicately as possible, because obviously we're talking about a story involving the deaths of 13 U.S. service members and, of course, hundreds of Afghan civilians beyond the human level of that story. Why two years later is this a story, the withdrawal from Afghanistan Kabul, one that Americans should engage with? I'm kind of thinking in the context of, if it's 1977, I doubt that many people were looking to go over the pullout from Saigon, so kind of answer it in that context.

Yeah, look, the war in Afghanistan was America's longest war, a 20-year war.

More than 2,400 American service members were killed during that war. Tens of thousands of Afghans who were allied with us were killed during that war, and hundreds of members of NATO who went over there with us after 9-11 were killed in that war as well. So this is a 20-year war.

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We spent a lot of money there. We lost a lot of blood and treasure there. And obviously for the war to end this way, I think should give everyone a lot of pause. Our goal in writing this book was to expose the truth about what happened. Obviously 20 years of mistakes during the course of the war under four different presidents, but President Biden was the one who made a series of catastrophic and strategic decisions that led to the debacle in Afghanistan. And obviously 13 Americans, service members killed, a dozens of them wounded, some of them very seriously with white falter and injuries as well. Female service member paralyzed. Sergeant Tyler Vargas Andrews losing two of his limbs. And so this did have, as you mentioned, a human element. But I also think that it had consequences that go beyond that. Obviously 20 years now after the attacks of 9-11, you have pretty much the same people in the Taliban or their sons in charge now. And you've got al-Qaeda. The alliance with al-Qaeda remains unbroken. And in fact, members of the Taliban who are also members of al-Qaeda are in the Taliban government now. And of course, as we lay out in our book, we also think that this debacle had consequences that rippled beyond just Afghanistan. Vladimir Putin obviously wanted to invade Ukraine for a long time. It was a long-term goal of his. But I think that the evidence that we gathered in the case that we lay out makes it pretty clear that the debacle in Afghanistan and the United States and NATO's 20-year war ending in such a disaster was likely the final push that Putin needed to invade. And obviously, the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to this day. So what's the consequences from this? And obviously, it's important that this never happens again. And that's the purpose of the book. Yeah. If I can piggyback off that just very briefly. One thing that we point out in the prologue of the book is that whether or not you think it was a good decision to withdraw, it was the fact that things, regardless of where you land on that decision, things didn't have to turn out the way that they did. Yeah, I served in Afghanistan, so I have not, you know, I had a pretty pro, you know, time for them to stand on their own kind of approach to things. Because I, you know, I saw with the war cost people, I saw it lost, you know, good friends. But what the way that it went down was so egregious, so humiliating, and, you know, lost American lives and ruined, or at least seriously damaged a lot of others. And to say nothing of the fact is that we left Americans behind. We abandoned Americans. And the government's job is to protect its citizens. So you could divorce this from a, even from a, you know, a broader geopolitical context, which I think would be a mistake. But even if you did, the government left, knowingly left thousands of Americans behind. And it used to be that a blue passport, you know, was the most valuable document in the world. Because it meant that if you were overseas, and some gang took you hostage, terrorist outfit, that the American government would be knocking on their door instantly. And here we had the Taliban fighters beating up Americans in full view of, you know, full view of the world to say nothing of the American troops who are on the wall and can do very little about it because they're pulled back. And then we left Americans behind, some of whom are still there and still stuck. And that's just from a moral perspective, an outrage. Yeah, I like your use of the term or the word moral, because it gets to the broader context of how President Biden looks at this issue. So let's break the morality and obligations, as part of this in the two parts. So one, in a dangerous situation, right, the evacuation

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of a country at the end of a military trying to find the right euphemism, because I don't want to say occupation, I don't want to, but at the end of like a military engagement, I sound so like that's so like sterile, but it's, you know, the end of our military engagement in Afghanistan. People know we're leaving. What is the obligation that the United States government has to American

citizens in the sense that if there are still 10 people left, does that mean that we need to extend the time that we're holding the airfield in Kabul? Like how do you think of that dynamic?

So whoever wants to take it first can go. Yeah, yeah, I'll start and then I'll let Jerry chime in.

That's a great question. And I'm sure it's also one that people,

you know, generals were wrestling with and all that, because there is, you know, somewhat of a tension in what you just described, but

you know, the premise of the question was also that people knew that we were relieving. The administration failed so clearly to plan that everyone knew that the U.S. troops were drawing down, but we said, hey, we're still going to have an embassy.

We're still going to, you know, there's going to be a functioning and thriving

Afghanistan with an Afghan military that can take care of itself. And, you know, then they, you know, were shown to be just complete, you know, wish casting. Basically, we misled all of these people who are still staying. And then all of a sudden everything collapsed and the embassy's gone within a day. And there are no flights anymore. The airport's taken over. They can't get out to say nothing of the fact that now there's a, you know, a brutal, you know,

call what it is, a Stone Age terrorist group all of a sudden in charge. And you're leaving at the mercy of that. So, you know, I understand there's always kind of a hypothetical like what, you know, what obligation do we have to, to rescue someone who hikes into, you know, Iran. This is, this is, this is literally right, right. Exactly. Exactly. Like, and those are,

I get those questions, I understand them. Here, we did it on scale. We did it in front of everyone.

It was thousands and thousands of people in a way that is completely corrosive to

our credibility to do all kinds of things on the world stage. And, but more importantly, we, we did it, you know, these people were there on the reliance to the American government on the assurances. And then those assurances turned out to be completely false. And then we didn't

happen. We just walked away. How about you, Jerry? And, you know, to add to that, you know,

President Biden, even after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, President Biden promised that the U.S. troops that he had to send back in would stay there until we got all Americans out. And,

of course, that ended up being yet another promise that he broke. And so, you know, we, I, obviously,

I do believe that we had an obligation to make sure that Americans got out. It's an obligation that we failed on. And, you know, part of why Americans had so much trouble getting out was once the Taliban took over. And, you know, this all goes back to the fact that the United States pulled, in a very swift military retrograde, pulled all of our troops out before we had gotten

Americans out. We shut down Bagram Air Base, which would have been a much safer place to run an evacuation out of, and would have been great to have to assist in any NEO as well, both in terms of helping get Americans out and helping keep the Taliban at bay to make sure that they didn't take Kabul. But that's exactly what happened. And so, when we were trying to get American

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citizens out, the U.S. presidents in Afghanistan had shrunk down to an airport. And everything outside the airport in that entire country was controlled by the Taliban. And so, we were reliant on the Taliban to let Americans through. And, you know, a lot of, a decent number of Americans did manage to get through the gauntlet. And it was a gauntlet. I mean, it was tough. And the Taliban was rough. And the Taliban was beating people. American Americans especially, it was a favorite target for them. Yeah. But some Americans were just turned away from the Taliban and were unable to get out. And so, that just goes to show the problems with relying on the Taliban. And since you brought up the question of moral obligation and our moral obligation when it comes to wars, you know, I want to touch on briefly the Afghan allies that we left behind as well. You know, President Biden, he was elected to the Senate in the 1970s. And his first big attempt to make a name for himself as an American politician was during the close of the Vietnam War. You know, he was elected to the Senate pretty much too late to become a big part of the anti-war, you know, leader movement there. So, how he tried to make his mark on the war in Vietnam was he was the leading voice in American politics to fight efforts from Gerald Ford and others to help get the South Vietnamese who had helped America during that war to help them get out. Joe Biden did everything that he could to stop that from happening. And, you know, you brought up moral obligation. There's actually a famous quote from him that I dug up from the Senate Archives where he said that, you know, we have no obligation to one, 1001 South Vietnamese, no obligation to any of them. And so that is a mindset that he had as a, you know, 30-something guy in the war in Vietnam. And it's the mindset that he had during the war in Afghanistan as well. He really did not care very much about the Afghans that had fought beside us. And so once this debacle happened, because of Joe Biden's orders, not only did Americans get killed and Afghans get killed, but Americans were left behind and tens of thousands of Afghan allies were left behind as well. You know, that's really interesting. And I'm glad you took it there. And this is where, you know, I was going to have a question I was going to ask you, like, what are your connections to the war in Afghanistan? James, you obviously answered that to a degree. And my perspective of this is always going to be the fact that, you know, I was in fourth grade when 9-11 happened. So I was just young enough to be able to understand, you know, what was happening. I was at the White House the day that we found out that Osama bin Laden was killed. So like that really like bookended my early childhood. But I'm also cognizant of the fact that for most Americans, we were in Afghanistan to get Osama bin Laden, defeat al-Qaeda, punish after 9-11. So that's why the conversation point around to what degree do we owe Afghan allies, what degree do we owe like women in Afghanistan. There's a Joe Biden quote that you also feature in the book where Joe Biden is very explicitly articulating that it's not the responsibility of him to send his then living son, Beau Biden, you know, in the US Army to Afghanistan to defend women rights. That's a position that I actually suspect a more than decent percentage of Americans across the political spectrum. Well, I thought they would reveal that in a poll would be, let's say, sympathetic

to. So how should we unpack what we sign up for when we engage in foreign interventions? Yeah, no, I mean, it's a great question and to kind of add a little bit more meat on the bones in terms of kind of the context you just described that we did kill bin Laden in 2011 and warfare has changed immensely in the 20 years since we first went into Afghanistan. We didn't have armed predator drones in 2001 and, you know, a whole lot of other things have changed. So there's, you know, absolutely, I think like a good argument to be made. And I honestly was making it myself in 2017, 2018, 2019 that, you know, what we were doing wasn't effective and at some point the country has to stand on its own. And, you know, so I'm not going to sit here and pretend that if we had just spent 10 more years, we could have turned Afghanistan into, you know, the modern iteration of ancient Greece. Or even Japan and Germany after World War II, right? You don't need not to be poetic. It's just, you know, that's the kind of the model of the assumption. Yeah, and having been there, I've seen that firsthand. But and that's kind of the point of the book in that we don't take a strong position on that in particular, because we don't have to. Our point is that if you're going to withdraw from a country, doing it the way that they did now, maximize the chances that Americans would be stranded, that the Taliban would take over, which is objectively a bad thing, regardless of whether you think American troops should be the ones preventing it, or Afghans is objectively a very, very bad thing. And maximize the chances that, you know, there's going to be all kinds of other follow on disruptions from, you know, in the world stage, which includes now China taking a very active role in Afghanistan and you know, mining all the natural resources they have, but also all the human information that they have about how American soldiers like, how American units fight, and Iran's doing the exact same thing that they've been actively trying to recruit the Afghan Special Forces Commandos to learn everything they can about how we plan missions, how we do, you know, how our tactics work, everything. And that, at the end of the day, puts American troops wherever they are in the world at risk, but it's got to undermine the global stability that, you know, is at least if you're looking for American perspective is in everyone's interest. But so yeah, I guess the point is we don't take a position on that because what happened, no matter how you come down on it, was unforgivable, it was weak, and it was shameful and ultimately Americans died. And go ahead, Jerry. Yeah, I mean, what I would add to that is, you know, President Biden refused to be honest on this issue because we could have had an honest debate about what staying or leaving looks like and what keeping a small troop presence there while attempting to enable the Afghans to keep fighting and keep the Taliban at bay, what that all looks like. But we didn't have an honest debate about this. You know, when President Biden announced his troop withdrawal, you know, he claimed that al-Qaeda was gone from Afghanistan, a total lie. You know, al-Qaeda remains- And quick pause, because I want to be very precise. In this context, lie means something. So you're saying like not just colloquially, but that was a lie, like we knew they were there and he claimed that they weren't there. Yeah, and you know, Biden claimed this a few times, and it's just not true. And it was a noble fact that al-Qaeda remained in Afghanistan. I mean, the U.S. and Afghan forces were still killing members of al-Qaeda right before Biden's announcement and right after. I mean, al-Qaeda was still in Afghanistan, but Biden was trying to say that it wasn't. And you know, it's something

that he also said, you know, after the Taliban took over as well. And it was just never true. You know, another thing that he said was, and why this was all set up for such failure, is a constant mantra from him and from other people in his national security team was that the Afghans had a 300,000 person strong military. And so therefore, they were going to be able to fight and defeat the Taliban. This 300,000 military figure is just completely untrue and was known to be completely untrue at the time. Now, there's two reasons why. First is the 300,000 troops was combining the size of the Afghan military and then the size of like the Afghan police and paramilitary together, which we never do with any other country to get to how big is your military. But we were doing that with the Afghans. We were inflating the size of the Afghan military on that element to, I don't know what, to fool ourselves into thinking that the Afghan military was stronger, to fool the American public. I'm not entirely sure. And beyond that sort of misleading math, it was also well known that the Afghan military had what are called ghost soldiers, which are just people that exist on paper, but weren't really there. Plus, the Afghan military was in the midst of basically a massive onslaught by the Taliban that continued throughout the spring and the summer. And we can even as the Afghan military was disintegrating, literally falling apart. We continued to promote this 300,000 figure. So my point with this, and I could go on and on and on about it, is that if we wanted to have an honest discussion about what a withdrawal would look like, we should have done that. But the problem is that we didn't have an honest discussion. And just one more point is that strategically, in terms of when we withdrew, we have been fighting in Afghanistan for 20 years. We know about the Afghan fighting season. We know when fighting is brutal there. And we know when fighting basically stalls out because of the brutal winters in the mountain terrain. We decided, Joe Biden decided, because I guess he wanted something, some sort of victory lap related to the...

Heidi narrative, just like 20 years. Yeah, and you wanted to mark the 20th anniversary by having that be the date that we were out of Afghanistan. But the problem with that is that our entire retrograde from April through about July when it wrapped up, we were pulling U.S. troops out at the exact same time that the Afghan fighting season was ramping up. And so right as we were pulling U.S. troops, contractors, logistics, intelligence, all these supports that the Afghan military had, that is the exact moment when the Taliban onslaught was kicking off. And so we, just by picking the date that we did, and by we, I mean, President Biden, just by doing that, we helped set things up for failure. And there are so many different things like that that we lay out in the book about all of the little decisions that could have been done differently that we just, we didn't, and just set this up to be a disaster. And let me just add one very small point to that. To Jerry's point about this just not being an honest and upfront discussion, we spoke to people in the intelligence community who told us that their internal assessments for when Afghanistan would collapse once we threw any enabling support, the form of drones or contractors or anything of that variety, where it was some of the most optimistic assessments were six months, and the least were almost immediately, which is exactly what we saw, almost immediately. But if that had been what was presented to American people to circle back to your initial question about whether we owe the American citizens, they were stranded there, well, they, they would have been, you know, out, they would have left. And it would have been a different choice presented to the American people than the way

it was sold. And now, you know, that we have, you know, Gold Star family still looking for answers, and soldiers, you know, permanently disabled, including paralyzed, you know, you know, now that's, you know, they're trying to just ignore number 10 that this was all inevitable when it wasn't. And so I think that's part of the motivation for what we're doing.

You know, and James, if you've read your book, what you just articulated combining these two statements together is really fascinating, because the answer I'll guess for why there wasn't an honest articulation of the timeline come April, May, was that would have all of the semblance of a political defeat. Hey, we claimed for the past 20 years that this military is functional, it's, it's not functional. Be this is an emergency, we need to move like that's not if you're trying to do this 20 year 9 11 narrative, that is just not what you would embrace. So here's where this gets awkward, though, and where I think my frustration of President Biden comes about. If you read the statements that you'll reproduce in the book, him in 2009, him in 2010, 2011, 2015, aside from his opposition to the bin Laden raid, because of course you guys have to include the Robert M Gates quote, former Secretary of Defense under Bush and Obama, where he says, Joe Biden's been wrong in every single foreign policy decision in his career.

Let's put the opposition to the bin Laden raid in the wrong category. His political analysis is actually I think pretty prescient in the sense that like, hey, like there actually isn't a political consensus in favor of the moralistic claims about women's rights. Actually, the like democratic side of this debate isn't as secure as you think it is, and you need to bring in the political aspect. Why do we see kind of like the gap of political awareness between then and then that April, May, June period, like maybe like this is just incorrect, but just thinking a lot. I'm like, there's a real gap there in understanding how that he seems to have gone from deeply realist, like in 2010, they're like very sort of like hand wavy in 2021.

Let me take a stab at that. So look, it's tough for me to get into the mind of President Biden. But my my basic assessment is that I really think that that Biden felt very ignored, especially on the issue of Afghanistan when he was President Obama's vice president. And he he just he became just convinced that this is what we were going to do and consequences be damned. I think he had a real chip on his shoulder when it came to military generals as well. He felt very much ignored by them during his time in the Obama White House as well. And so when military leaders were telling him, hey, you know, if you pull US troops out immediately, this is going to this is going to fall apart real fast. He just wasn't particularly concerned about it. I think he had he had he had long ago washed his hands of Afghanistan. And, you know, I don't want to put the human rights and women's rights issues aside. But in addition to those, you know, the bigger strategic question, I think, is, do do we want the Taliban back in charge of Afghanistan? And do we want the Taliban back in charge of Afghanistan on the 20th anniversary of 9 11, which is exactly what ended up happening because of his withdrawal announcement and because of his deadline of 9 11. And, you know, those those things happening were obviously obviously not good. But, you know, there's there's questions now about President Biden's age and like his, you know, ability to do the job energetically. But from from what we found for for our book, while there there is, you know, a lot of truth to that, this decision on Afghanistan was Biden and pretty much Biden alone, like this was President this was driven by President Biden, with some weak opposition from some people, some

somewhat stronger opposition from others. But President Biden was driving the discussion on this and it was his decision start to finish. Yeah. And just a quick thing. Thank you for noting that because I get particularly aggravated when you kind of have the conspiracy adjacent thought that oh, Joe Biden isn't in control is not making decisions. If you study this story, this is very, this is very specifically Joe Biden leading what for good or for ill, leading, directing, etc. But yeah, James, do you want to add anything to that?

Oh, I was just gonna say that's that's exactly they did to agree to your point that this is this is what Joe Biden has always believed. So, you know, you don't need to go down some rabbit hole about, you know, who's in charge who's not that it's very this was this is unfortunately vintage Joe Biden and and you know, what Joe Biden still believes. So two or three last strategic questions before we get into the tactical. So I know for a fact that listeners who are deeply sympathetic to the objective of getting out of Afghanistan, their initial pushback to everything you're saying to the book, etc. is going to be that's all fine and good. That's fair if we're going down the list. But at the end of the day, the US presence in Afghanistan was doomed in the same way that Vietnam was doomed. And we could say, well, if you did this thing in 1972, or this thing in 1969, or this thing in 2011, or this thing in 2005, this at its core, this military engagement was so flawed, past a certain point that we always were going to have a messy withdrawal.

Maybe that would be messy in a different direction than one other direction, maybe this thing could have been done differently. What are your responses to that argument? Because these people tend to

acknowledge every single thing you've said, they'll say yes, but going down the list like that was a mistake, this was a mistake, background closure, etc. But we were always going to have the helicopters

off the rooftop of the embassy and we were always going to have a suicide bomb to close out the occupation. Yeah, what I would say to that is that's simply just not the case. Again, I was sympathetic to the idea of eventually withdrawing all troops. The way to do it, though, would have been to keep Bagram, which has a full service airport, at least was, that could do a whole lot of flights in and out every single day, and it was completely defensible, rather than a single strip runway, with dual purposes, in the middle of a dense population center. There was a meme that intelligence officers and military folks were sharing with each other when they were closing up Bagram. That kind of just gets to the heart of it a little bit. It was a picture of the Sun Zoo, and then it said, always give up your most strategic airspace when you're evacuating a country. But it makes no sense. Yeah, what would Afghanistan as a country with the military have held on? As we just discussed, probably not. Why did they give up Bagram? We've just taken that as I think, why did they give it up? We get into that quite a bit. Bagram has been a project of Jerry's for some time, so I'll let him handle this one. But yeah, thank you. That's a great question. Yeah, so I'll just preface this part with, currently, I am an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and my job is focusing on the Afghanistan withdrawal. But these comments are all in my personal capacity. What I can say is that the committee brought in the command sergeant major for closing down Bagram in July 2021. His name is Jake Smith, and he testified last month about this. And he said that he was there in Afghanistan in 2021, and the State Department survey site team came from the Kabul Embassy to Bagram in

early

2021. And he told them, you know, if you're going to do a NIO, you would be absolutely insane to try to do it in Afghanistan. I'm using nomenclature. Yeah, thank you. Obviously, the matrix just flashed before my eyes. I was like, is that like a matrix reference? Yeah, sorry, go on. I see, I'm already slipping into Congressional jargon, but so a NIO is a non-congressional, a non-combatant evacuation operation, basically an evacuation, right? And this command sergeant major told the State Department,

if you're going to do an evacuation like this, you'd be insane to do it out of Kabul Airport. You have to do it through Bagram. And, you know, we apparently had a many, many, many years old evacuation plan through Bagram that the command sergeant major had. And he said, you know, he looked at the plan and the plan was for something like evacuating like 60 or 80,000 people. And he's like, that would be insane to try to do through Kabul Airport. And the State Department said, yeah, we agree that would not be a good idea. And also, by the way, we think that in evacuation, the number would have to be something more like 140,000. And the command sergeant major was like,

well, you definitely can't do that through Kabul Airport. I mean, now you really need Bagram. And so like, it was clear from the people on the ground that trying to do a massive evacuation through Kabul Airport, it would be problematic under normal circumstances, doing it with the Taliban

in charge of every inch of Afghanistan, outside of that little airport, was completely insane. Now, where does the decision ultimately land? It's a very good question. President Biden had limited the number of US troops that were allowed to be in Afghanistan. And, you know, military leaders like Mackenzie, Millie, Miller, you know, we're all discussing this. And basically, they, their assessment, so they testified is that the limitation on troop numbers that President Biden had put, and the goals that he had of maintaining the US Embassy and Kabul Airport, the troop cap combined with the goals that Biden had set meant the US military would have been stretched too thin to control Bagram. Now, why they didn't push back further, knowing that getting rid of Bagram would be a complete disaster, because that's exactly what happened. I couldn't tell you yet, but there are a lot of questions that remain about why we abandoned Bagram. But obviously, everybody knew, including all of the people on the ground, that it was a terrible idea. So, Jerry, follow up. And James, you could obviously jump in on this too. But this is where this story gets particularly awkward in terms of the Taliban, right? Because obviously, we're not allied with the Taliban. Like, that's not like a great situation on 15 different levels, to put it not that eloquently. But during the withdrawal, we obviously cooperated with the Taliban. And the suicide bombing was done by ISIS, who, you know, are in their own, like, weird little like civil war with the Taliban. So like, it was kind of a weird circumstantial reality. What leeway did we have with the Taliban in order to basically say, look, we're getting out, you guys have won. Was there a world where they let us basically do what we did, but with the expanded part of Bagram? Do you kind of get what I mean? So like, if we're looking at like the scope of political possibility, where the Taliban are effectively, once again, they weren't effective, right? Like, it's my opinion, they made it easy. But they effectively like work, they weren't shooting at us, right? Like, they weren't doing the suicide bombing. How big were the possibilities that we could have worked with come August? Okay, yeah, yeah, come August. I

think it's a good way to frame it. Because if we had kept Bagram, they would not have been able to take Kabul. Okay, so I wasn't alleges. Okay, that's helpful to know. So it's not so, so let me restate then. So it's not simply that in August, they've taken over the whole country, but we ideally have Bagram and Kabul Airport, you're saying that even if we'd retained Bagram, they wouldn't have taken the whole country. Yeah, yeah, if we had retained Bagram until we completed a full evacuation and withdrawal, then basically you there would have been some radius around which our control was definitely limited or limited in that area. But Bagram is too defensible. And, you know, it is relatively close to proximity to Kabul, where and we would have had more air assets there to continue kind of keeping that perimeter at bay. And then, you know, at some point you bring all Americans from Kabul to Bagram, and then you leave and Bagram is built by the Soviets. It's, you know, almost every American who's gone to Afghanistan has gone through that airfield is impenetrable if, you know, it's kind of almost like the size of a small city. So we never had to get to that kind of, oh, do we need to, you know, cooperate with the Taliban mentality in the first place. Jerry, I'm sure, is about to tell you about why even then we didn't have to allow them to have security of the airfield and it was something, well, I won't preview it, but he's going to explain why it doesn't apply there either. But yeah, so at that, you know, that's one of the things that, you know, we mean when we say it just didn't have to be the way that it was. And the only reason that they, you know, ended up closing down Bagram is that the administration

had a political cap on the number of soldiers that they were going to savor in the country, and they needed it to be less than a thousand. And you can't hold Bagram with, you know, with under a thousand troops. You need three or four or five. And so that meant, because we needed to be under a thousand, then we had to get rid of Bagram. And that's why it happened. And, you know, Jerry referenced the old, you know, withdrawal plan. Believe it or not, that was President Obama's administration. And they looked at the feasibility of doing it, of closing down Bagram and doing it without that Bagram and out of a Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. And they concluded it would be an absolute disaster if they tried to do that. And hence they, you know, even in their planning purposes, they never planned that. So just to show you the magnitude of incompetence that we're dealing with. But I'll kick it to Jerry. Yeah. I mean, you know, another thing to keep in mind is that General Mackenzie flew out to Doha around August 14th, August 15th, right around when

the Taliban was surrounding Kabul. And he flew to Doha and he met with a top Taliban leader named

Baradar. And Mackenzie's intel at the moment was pretty outdated because Mackenzie showed up with

a map that had a circular perimeter around the area around Kabul. And he basically told Baradar, you know, Taliban's not allowed to come inside this perimeter. And Baradar basically told him, well, we're already inside that perimeter. We are closing in on Kabul, actually. But Baradar, actually, this Taliban leader offered Mackenzie said, you know, if the United States wants to provide security in Kabul, we will let you. We'll let you do that to do your evacuation and leave. And Mackenzie turned it down. Whether that request ever made its way all the way to President Biden

remains to be seen. But the long and short of it is that Mackenzie turned that offer down.

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And so I pause you there just to understand the story properly. If the issue to James's point was that we didn't have the troop presence to maintain security in Bagram, would the Mackenzie argument be that we did not have the troop presence in the context of the Afghan government collapse to maintain security without Taliban assistance? Would that be the argument? Okay, so let me let me try and put this in better context. So we we have like what Biden kind of how Biden wanted things to play out, which how he wanted things to play out is he set a full troop withdrawal by September 11. He announced that in April. Almost all U.S. troops were out of Afghanistan by July 2021. We shut down all of our bases. We shut down Bagram on July 2. We were pretty much gone outside of very, very small troop contingent in Kabul itself to help protect the embassy and Kabul airport. And in this fantasy world that President Biden had generated, that is kind of how things would go. And if we need to do a Neo, we'll get around to it. And we're going to start to get Afghan allies out slowly. And maybe we'll get some Americans out here and there and things are all just going to kind of go along. Well, everything changes because the Taliban is taking the country over and the Biden administration somehow doesn't see it coming. Despite the Afghan military falling apart, the rural areas collapsing, deals getting caught with the Taliban, the Afghan forces falling back, Taliban taking provinces. And the Taliban starts to take Afghan provincial capitals, because it had been surrounding that these capitals for months and months, starts to take them in very rapid succession in August. And August 14th, basically almost every single capital in Afghanistan, a capital city in Afghanistan had been taken, the Taliban is surrounding Kabul. This troop cap limit that we had set, this arbitrary, we need to keep the troops under, that is now going, is going to go out the window because to do an evacuation, we need to pour thousands and thousands of US troops in, which is what we do. The US troop number that ended up having to go just into Kabul airport ends up being higher than US troop levels had been for a couple of years. So this whole arbitrary troop level thing goes out the window when we need to do an evacuation anyway. And so we ended up sending thousands and thousands of US troops back into Kabul anyway. And if you'll let me, I'd love to also touch on sort of this, this question of the Taliban and ISIS-K being mortal enemies. And like if you have a specific interest in that, I'd love to run you through. With your show, go for it. It's much more complicated, I think. You know, the ISIS-K and the Taliban fought each other a lot in Afghanistan, but it's Afghanistan. And so things are always a little bit more complicated than that. These groups do want different goals. The Taliban wants an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. The ISIS-K wants a caliphate, a global caliphate. You know, this is what they want. So there are big differences, but for many years, the Taliban and ISIS-K obviously had common enemies, those common enemies being the Afghan Republic and American and NATO forces. And so there is a lot of evidence that the Haqqani network elements of the Taliban did a lot of collaboration with ISIS-K in carrying out attacks, especially in Kabul itself over the years. The Haqqani network facilitated ISIS-K attacks and it maybe even conducted some attacks itself that it allowed ISIS-K to take credit for. But the point is that the Taliban was more than happy to help ISIS-K in certain situations with killing Afghans and with killing Americans, because that was a common goal. It shakes faith in the Afghan government's ability to provide security for the rest of the country. And, you know, the more Americans that you kill, obviously, you shake the desire of America to stick around. And so,

yeah. They may hate each other, but they hate us more. That's right. They hate each other, but they hate us more. So, you know, there were times where the Taliban and ISIS-K were fighting each other, where Taliban was fighting us, where ISIS-K was fighting us, and where the Taliban was helping ISIS-K carry out attacks at us all at once in Afghanistan. And that's what we try and kind of bring out in the book, is that you need to understand the U.S. I don't think ever properly understood Afghanistan. And I don't think that President Biden understood these dynamics very well. And so, when President Biden was saying, you know, yes, ISIS-K is threatening Kabul airport, but the Taliban and ISIS-K are mortal enemies. And so, we can rely on the Taliban to provide security. They are mortal enemies, but they're also have a history, especially in Kabul, of working together to carry out attacks against the United States.

Yeah. So, two last big questions. So, other obvious question to ask you is the Trump administration, parts of the Trump administration, and President Trump specifically wanted to leave Afghanistan, which is also another defense of the Biden administration that folks across the aisle would basically offer. It was, yes, it was messy, but, you know, at least he actually did it. Do you feel as if a Trump withdrawal, because, you know, it's the Trump era, so everything was chaos, what is your just sort of assessment of how that would have compared to what happened under Biden?

I mean, that's a tough hypothetical. I mean, I don't know how President Trump would have done this. I mean, our book is very honest about our assessment of the, you know, the Doha agreement that Trump struck with the Taliban. A flawed agreement, but it had conditions, right? There were, I mean, flawed, maybe it might be an understatement, deeply flawed agreement, but it did have conditions that the Taliban was supposed to meet. And, you know, one of those conditions was ensuring that al-Qaeda wasn't going to be a threat to the United States or the West, which obviously the Taliban al-Qaeda alliance was never broken. And al-Qaeda obviously has never ceased its desire to carry out attacks against the West and the United States. So, that condition alone, and there were a number of conditions that the Taliban never met, but that condition alone, you know, clearly was never met. You know, there was movement at the end of the Trump administration where Trump clearly flirted with quickly pulling all of the U.S. troops out, but he ultimately didn't. And, you know, about in this sort of floating range between about 2,500 and 3,500 was what Trump left in Afghanistan. And if you talk to different people in the Trump administration, you might actually get different answers about what Trump's long-term solution was, whether he was going to immediately go to zero, like Biden did, which would have, if he had made all of the same mistakes that Biden did, would have ended in similar disaster, or maybe he would have done something else. It's tough for me to weigh in on that hypothetical, but we kind of lay out in very detailed fashion that not only was the decision and the timing flawed, but every decision that President Biden made along the way was flawed, not properly planning for an evacuation, having no real plan about how to get Americans and Afghans out, shuddering bagram, the absolute swiftness of the retrograde, not even crying. Yeah, not even trying to keep the Afghan military in the field to keep the Taliban at bay for the amount of time that we would need them to to conduct an evacuation. I mean, these basic things weren't done. And I think James has more to say about that. Yeah, yeah, just to add one more example, you know, Jerry talks about failures along the way. They didn't even start reducing personnel from the embassy until a week or two before everything went. And even then, you still

had three diplomats for every soldier on the ground. It was the largest embassy, United States embassy in the world. And then you start burning documents, they didn't do anything. So just the the, you know, and they shut you know, what's interesting is they shut down the embassy and stop processing anything for a period, I believe like four weeks might be six weeks in the summer before the evacuation, because of some COVID cases. And so, you know, they're just a million and one

different ways that things could have been done differently. They were just one. So the total lack of urgency in an extremely urgent situation. I mean, I don't know how else to put it, that the country was collapsing for months, you know, right in front of our eyes. And there was a total lack of urgency to do anything to start the process of getting Afghan allies out, to get Americans out, to do the things that would have needed to be done to at least stall this for a few months to give us the time that we needed to get people out. Total lack of urgency. And, you know, the Biden administration was still holding like national security council meetings on like, what should our evacuation plan look like? Like the day before the Taliban took Kabul. I mean, this is like the level of just willful blindness that they had.

And just to close, right, because you guys are a little over the knee, but we're part of the same broad generational cohort. I think the way you set up the start of the book by focusing on the withdrawal from South Vietnam really illustrates that, you know, 30, 40 years from now, I think that this story and where people in our cohort were basically going to play a role in whatever future conflict there is. So what would you just say is the broad generational takeaway, right? Like our generational, we didn't start the war. We weren't there for those like early, like it's 2002, are we going to go long-term in our decisions? We were definitely there at the end, once again, much like Joe Biden in 1974, 75. So what's the generational takeaway here?

I think it's that Americans, America has an obligation to protect its citizens and to, you know, if we're talking about the whole war, if we're, then I would say the generational takeaway is if we go into a war that we should be prepared to win it, we should have very clearly defined aims. And our leaders need to be straightforward and honest with the American people about the trade-offs of the decisions they're making. You could make the case that for many years, we had different leaders pretend that success in Afghanistan and turning into Japan or Germany was just around the corner. And that wasn't true. But in this book, what we detail at length is that the Biden administration was not being honest about what would happen if it made the decisions that it did. And then, you know, you have the 13 flag-dripped coffins because of it.

And, you know, to add to that, the generational takeaway for me is that, yeah, I was a freshman in high school on 9-11. And so, you know, 20 years of war. And, you know, I try to point this out in the book, you know, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan after 9-11 because the Taliban was harboring and sheltering Osama and Laden. And they refused to turn them over. And so, there you go. And, you know, did the United States turn its attention away from Afghanistan to Iraq? Yes. Did we make a series of, you know, mistakes for 20 years? We absolutely did. But so, I sort of have a somewhat grim takeaway. Obviously, I think that the 2400 American service members who lost their lives over the 20-year war, their heroes, they were fighting a vicious terrorist group, al-Qaeda, that struck us on 9-11. They were fighting the group, the Taliban that harbored that group and continues to harbor an ally with that group. The grim reality is that 20 years later, the pretty much the same Taliban leaders or their sons are in charge. And

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it's not good. And I think that President Biden should have been more honest about what the consequences of withdrawal would have looked like because consequences aren't good. And,

hey, maybe people would have wanted to leave anyway, even if it meant the Taliban back in charge. You know, that's a decision for the American public. But the consequences are pretty bad and pretty deadly. And, you know, when we do a war like this, I think that we have an obligation to the American service members to protect them, to honor them and their families when they lose their lives overseas, to help them when they come home. And I think that we also have an obligation to the locals who help us in these wars. You know, a lot of Afghans stuck their necks out for America over 20 years. A lot of interpreters, they're, you know, helping American forces and, you know, putting their putting their own lives in danger. And a lot of those people, old thousands and tens of thousands of them are still stuck now under Taliban rule.

Very well stated. Guys, this has been a really helpful conversation, kind of making clear why this isn't just like, you know, Monday morning, quarterback situation, like there are some actual very straightforward things that were screwed up and how this is going to matter for the future. The book is Kabul, the untold story of Biden's fiasco and the American wars who fought to the end. Jerry and James, they keep joining me on the realignment. Hey, thank you very much. Thanks, man. It was great. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, Lotus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com

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