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**MAY:** On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for joining us. I'm Cliff May, FDD's Founder and President.

We are pleased to be joined by former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Leon Panetta and former National Security Advisor LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster to discuss a critical policy decision: the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists, who regarded themselves as engaged in a jihad, hit our homeland, killing almost 3,000 innocent people. By taking the fight to our enemies and standing with our partners abroad who need our help, we have prevented another attack on that scale over the years since. But roughly twenty foreign terrorist organizations currently operate in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Nevertheless President Biden is implementing a timeline-based withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, one that explicitly ignores conditions on the ground.

How have we gotten to this point, what is the current situation on the ground, and what should we expect going forward? Secretary Panetta and General McMaster, both advisors to FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, will discuss these and other issues with my colleague Bradley Bowman.

Secretary Leon Panetta served as Secretary of Defense and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency in the Obama administration. His public service began in the United States Army and spans sixteen years in Congress. He is now Chairman of the Panetta Institute for Public Policy.

General H.R. McMaster deployed to Afghanistan for a twenty-month tour of duty as a senior Army officer and later served as national security advisor in the Trump administration. He served in uniform for thirty-four years and retired as a lieutenant general in 2018.

My colleague Bradley Bowman serves as senior director of CMPP. He worked in the U.S. Senate for nine years, taught at West Point as an assistant professor, and served as an active-duty U.S. Army officer, including as a staff officer in Afghanistan.

FDD's Center on Military and Political Power seeks to promote understanding of the defense strategies, policies, and capabilities necessary to deter and defeat threats to the freedom, security, and prosperity of Americans and America's allies. CMPP features *FDD's Long War Journal*, edited by Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, which has consistently provided the best open-source analysis available regarding the real situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

As I hope you already know, FDD is a non-partisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. We accept no funds from foreign governments –never have, we never will. For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website: [FDD.org](http://FDD.org). You can follow us on Twitter @FDD. Thanks again for joining us for this important and timely conversation. Brad, over to you.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you for that introduction. It's my pleasure to be here talking with Secretary Leon Panetta and Lieutenant General (ret.) H.R. McMaster. Gentlemen, thank you so much for making time to talk with me about this important issue.

The topic today is obviously relevant. As we speak, the U.S. forces in Afghanistan are undertaking a withdrawal. We have the 20th anniversary of the horrible terror attacks on our country this September. Last month, President Biden announced that he wanted all U.S. forces out of the country by that September 11th anniversary.

So today, with the permission of our two distinguished guests here, I'm hoping that we can talk about the past, the present, and the future. By past, I mean what's transpired over the last 20 years—what went well, what didn't, what can we learn. The present: what we're seeing right now on the ground in Afghanistan, and then the future. That's always a precarious exercise talking about the future, but we'll do the best we can to talk about that responsibly.

So, gentlemen, welcome. Thank you again. As I just said, the September 11th terror attacks on our country kind of frame our discussion. That's why we went to Afghanistan because, after all, the Taliban's hospitality allowed al-Qaeda to plot and launch the attacks on our country, and that's the date by which the Biden administration is conducting the current withdrawal.

Before we get into the policy details, which I'm eager to do, I just thought it would be interesting, if you're willing, to hear from both of you about where you were on September 11, 2001, what your personal experience was on that day. Perhaps, Secretary Panetta, you would start, if you're willing?

**PANETTA:** Well, thank you, Brad. First, let me express my thanks to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and your willingness to put together this program, and also my respect for H.R. McMaster and having the opportunity to be able to do this with him. It's an honor for me.

9/11, something that obviously is seared into our minds, no matter who we are. I was in Washington, DC. At the time, I was chairman of what was called the Pew Oceans Commission. We were looking at issues related to how we protect our oceans. I was providing a briefing on what the commission had done to a group of members of Congress. We were in the Cannon Building. As I was going through the briefing, one of the members of the commission, Marilyn Ware, who used to be head of I think it was American Water, had an office in New York City.

She leaned over to me with her cell phone and said she had just received a message from her office in New York City that one of the Trade towers had been hit. I think we all kind of assumed that it must have been an accident by a plane at the time. Within a few minutes later, she got another message that the other tower had been hit and that it looked like it was part of a terror attack on the United States. At that point, I stopped the meeting and said to all the members of Congress, "It's probably not a bad idea to get the hell out of here. Because if they've hit those trade towers and it looks like there's a broad attack on this country, the Capitol may very well be the next target."

So, they all left. I jumped into a car, and I was scrambling. I told the driver, "Get the hell out of here." As we were driving away, one of the planes hit the Pentagon. I could see the smoke coming from the Pentagon. It was horrific to think about just what exactly is going on and what other attacks are going to happen. Like many, I got stuck in Washington because all of the traffic basically was stopped. Later that day, I think I was able to rent a car and jumped in a Rent-A-Car and drove across country like crazy to get back to my home here in Monterey.

It was one of those times when you're riding across America and you really see America for what it is, because everywhere I was driving there were signs going up, "USA, USA." There really seemed to be a sense of real patriotism

that came out of it. You could just sense that the country was pulling together and that, in fact, we were probably going to be a country at war.

**MCMASTER:** Brad, first of all, thanks for your leadership of the Center on Military and Political Power and all the great work FDD's doing. Thanks, especially, for the opportunity to be here with Secretary Panetta.

I was in command of the 1st Squadron, 4th United States Cavalry in Schweinfurt, Germany, and we were taking a break in between two major training exercises at Hohenfels, Germany, where we do major maneuver exercises. I was actually on the phone back to the Pentagon to the Army's G-1 office, which was really where that plane struck, when the charge of quarters from our squadron – because we had been at minimum manning because we were at this little break between training exercises – ran in because he had seen the planes strike the Twin Towers.

I stayed on the phone on a personnel matter with the Department of the Army G-1. And then it was clear, while I was on the phone, that the plane struck that part of the Pentagon. The person on the phone said, "I don't know what happened. I have to go," and hung up the phone. Of course, the experience of the next several days, for me, was really to focus on readying our squadron in case we were called on to deploy in response to these mass murder attacks, the most devastating terrorist attacks in history.

Of course, my experience was that there was a great outpouring of support for us in Germany. The commander and sergeant major of our partnership unit immediately came over to the squadron headquarters...And then of course, all of our German neighbors were displaying American flags, expressing their support in so many different ways. So that's where I was, and that was my recollection of that time. Of course, as a soldier, it's almost a double blow because it's your job to defend the country and these terrorists, of course, bypassed our tremendous military capabilities with box cutters and airplanes to commit mass murder on a colossal scale.

Of course, on our minds as well was vengeance, and for all of us serving, the hope that we would be among the first to deploy to track down our enemies and impart justice.

**BOWMAN:** Thanks to you both for sharing those anecdotes. After those attacks, as you both know far better than me, our country sent intelligence operatives and military forces to Afghanistan to try to bring justice to the terrorists who did this to us. It's been quite a 20 years. General McMaster, I know in your book you write at length about this, and I was just reviewing it again. But, if you both are willing, it's really an unfair question to ask you to summarize 20 years of experience in just a few minutes. But based on the fact that you served there in uniform, General McMaster, you served as national security advisor, Secretary Panetta, secretary of defense and director of the CIA, you both had Afghanistan come across your proverbial desks in different ways. How do you assess the last 20 years? What did we do well as a country? What were our big mistakes, and what lessons should we take from it? I'm happy to have either of you go first.

**MCMASTER:** I think age should determine our precedence.

**BOWMAN:** There you go. Mr. Secretary. Twenty years in two minutes, Mr. Secretary.

**PANETTA:** Yeah, let's see if I can summarize 20 years in a few minutes here. I think it was clear at the beginning that we went to war against those who had conducted the attack against the United States. We knew that it was bin Laden and al-Qaeda. We knew where they were located in Afghanistan. There's no question that this country made the

decision that it was going to go after those who had attacked our country and make sure that they would never be able to conduct another 9/11 attack on our country, and we pretty much did that.

We sent forces into Afghanistan. I think it was in October. They moved quickly through Afghanistan. They drove al-Qaeda and the Taliban pretty much out of Afghanistan and into the tribal areas in Pakistan. So, the initial effort here was pretty successful in the approach that was taken. And then there came a period where we continued to go after al-Qaeda and bin Laden and the terrorists involved. That took kind of a bumpy road because they were located in Pakistan, and Pakistan was resistant to our ability to conduct military operations in their country. We couldn't use F-16 fighter planes. We couldn't use boots on the ground. We tried a couple times, I think, to put boots on the ground to go after targets, and they complained about that. Soon after, the Bush administration decided on the ability to use drones as a way to go after the targets there in Pakistan. When I became CIA director, I'll never forget Mike Hayden saying to me when I went to see him at the CIA, he said, "You understand you're going to be a combatant commander?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He explained what the CIA was doing.

Those operations were extremely effective at trying to go after the targets—terrorism targets located largely in the tribal areas in Pakistan. At first, they tried to do it with the cooperation of the Pakistanis, but they soon found out that that was very difficult to do. Pakistanis were not very cooperative. Targets would be disappearing. So, they pretty much made a decision before I got there to basically do these operations on our own, and then inform the Pakistanis after the operations are done. That was the situation when I got there.

We were focusing on a lot of targets. We were focusing on going after those targets. I have to tell you, it was a very effective operation to go after those targets. We were very successful in doing that. And then ultimately, as you know, it led to the bin Laden operation. We were doing a lot of intelligence trying to figure out where the hell bin Laden was. The president made clear that that was a priority. We focused on that priority. We were able to get good intelligence on the couriers, found out where the couriers were, in a major compound that was located in Abbottabad, worked with Bill McRaven, who was special forces commander at the time, to develop an operation to go after that compound.

It was a risky operation. We never had 100 percent information that bin Laden was there. But the president made a gutsy decision. We went ahead with the operation, and it proved to be successful. They killed bin Laden. At the same time that I think we were pretty successful at going after those involved with 9/11, I think the military was trying to figure out an approach to try to deal with Afghanistan. I think there then became a focus more on how can we nation-build a little bit here with Afghanistan so that they could have the capacity to both govern and secure themselves?

Very frankly, that became a bigger challenge. I think we made some progress in improving their military and their police capabilities. We made some progress in helping to try to secure the country, particularly against the Taliban. But there were real problems that undermined a lot of what we were trying to do. There was continuation of a lot of corruption in Afghanistan, particularly at higher levels. There were a lot of grievances about how the government was operating within Afghanistan itself. There was the whole problem with Pakistan being able to provide cover for terrorism in Pakistan. These terrorists would then cross the line and make attacks in Afghanistan and made it near impossible to try to deal with that threat. And then there was the Taliban had an appeal within the country because they promoted resistance to occupation, which is kind of the history of Afghanistan. Using that, they were successful in kind of rehabilitating their effort, and so they became a real threat.

I think the bottom line was that in the latter part of our engagement in Afghanistan, it became a little more of a hit-and-miss operation, where we were hoping we could get the Afghans to do better, to be able to defend and secure themselves. We didn't quite have a comprehensive plan of how to accomplish this. The Taliban kept capturing areas within Afghanistan, particularly in the South and the East, and we never really secured that part of the country. And then at that point, in the frustration, we began to gradually withdraw forces. We did some surges in the early part of the Obama administration—20,000 and then 30,000. But then there became a period where we started pulling troops out, and there was nothing really to backfill as we were pulling out, even though we had NATO there, and I think we had a good operation with NATO in dealing with the country.

I think the bottom line is that we did not ever develop a comprehensive and tight mission for what we were going to do in Afghanistan. Ultimately, that led to a situation that we've seen recently where the United States is now withdrawing its forces, and I think the Taliban is going to be a real threat to the future of Afghanistan.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you, sir. General McMaster?

**MCMASTER:** I agree with the secretary that we never had a sustained and sustainable, reasoned approach to Afghanistan. I think our experience there is little understood. I think the experience in Afghanistan makes a great case for maybe something like a Center for Military and Political Power because I don't think we've ever really integrated all elements of national power and efforts of like-minded partners to accomplish well-defined and commonly understood objectives and goals in Afghanistan.

So, the result is that it's not really a 20-year war for the United States. It's been a one-year war fought 20 times over. The inconsistency of effort is astounding over that period of time. In fact, what we were trying to achieve politically oftentimes was utterly disconnected from what we were doing militarily. So, for example, at times, this is during the Obama administration, we initiated the Taliban Political Commission. We've allowed some of the most heinous people on Earth to live in five-star hotels, to travel freely, so we could cut a deal with them.

At the same time, we had announced a timeline for our withdrawal. How does that work? We had also said the Taliban's no longer a designated enemy as they were killing U.S. soldiers, killing Afghans, and committing mass murder of civilians. I mean, it was an utter disconnect from reality, and I think an extremely incompetent way to wage the war. This is across multiple administrations.

During the Trump administration, I think was the only time, in August of 2017 with the South Asian Strategy, the only time that we had a sustainable and reasoned approach to the problem set in South Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the problem with jihadist terrorists that operate really along the frontier there at one of the true, real epicenters of jihadist terrorism in the world where we have over 20 U.S.-designated terrorist organizations operating in an ecosystem in which these groups share resources and gain strength from one another, share expertise, have access to a very lucrative drug trade and other illicit trafficking.

So, I think the main theme, as Secretary Panetta said, is an inconsistency of effort and, I would just add, an utter disconnect between what we're trying to achieve politically and what we're doing militarily. What should we have aimed to achieve from the beginning in Afghanistan? What we should have aimed to achieve is sustainable outcome consistent with what brought us there to begin with: to ensure that Afghanistan could never again be used as a safe haven and support base for terrorist organizations that posed a threat to the United States and all humanity.

I think that that was achievable if we had taken a long-term approach, but we never took a long-term approach. We kept announcing we're going to get out. So even though we've been there for 20 years, we never had really the benefit, in terms of influence and the psychological effect, of a long-term commitment because every time we said we're going to get out, Afghans looked over their shoulder, "Hey, who's got my back? Nobody? Well, time to maybe cut some deals with some of the criminalized patronage networks associated with the old Mujahideen-era elites."

We created, with the short-term approach, incentives, incentives for these groups to try to consolidate power in advance of a post-U.S. Afghanistan because what Afghans fear is a return of the large-scale violence of the civil war from '92 to '96. Each of these groups wanted to be in a position of relative advantage, relative to one another, to their potential competition. So, they tried to affect state capture, capture of state institutions and functions. These groups, Brad, when you and I were there together, and I had the mission of standing up the counter-corruption Task Force Transparency or Shafafiyat, these groups were driven by a political motive, and they were driven to hollow-out the institutions we were trying to build because it was the weakness of those institutions that gave them freedom of action and impunity and ability to build up those power bases. So, we never really integrated what we were trying to do politically with what we were doing militarily. And then we engaged in an astonishing degree of self-delusion.

We defined the enemy as we would like them to be, the Taliban. We defined them as completely separate from al-Qaeda, when we know that they're intertwined. You know how we know that? Because of the great work that FDD does with the *Long War Journal*. That's how we know that. It's an open source, and it's apparent to everybody.

The second part of the self-delusion is, hey, the Taliban, they're going to be more benign this time. Well, hey, we know. We know from what they're doing now. How about attacking a maternity hospital and gunning down expectant mothers and infants? I mean, these are the types of people we're dealing with. How about attacking the American University of Afghanistan and gunning down young people who are trying to build a better future for their countrymen and women? How about a massive assassination campaign that's ongoing right now, Brad, killing judges, journalists, anybody who would be opposed to the brutal form of Sharia that the Taliban is already re-imposing in areas of the country that they control? So, what does power-sharing with the Taliban look like? What does it look like? It's ugly. It's a humanitarian catastrophe.

The final element of self-delusion is, seriously, this idea that wars end when we leave, as if the Taliban will look around, "Hey, the Americans are gone. Let's just stop fighting." Well, Secretary Panetta has the scars from his experience before, which is the withdrawal from Iraq in 2014, December 2014, when then-Vice President Biden called up President Obama on the phone and said, "Thank you for allowing me to end this goddamn war." Well, of course, they misunderstood the nature of the conflict there and al-Qaeda in Iraq didn't stop and, in fact, morphed into the most destructive terrorist organization in history, ISIS, an organization—I'm sorry. December 2011 is when the withdrawal was. An organization that by 2014 was in control of territory the size of Britain. As Secretary Panetta said, when these terrorist organizations gain control of territory and people and resources, they become much more dangerous, as ISIS did. Look at all the attacks that they organized and directed in Europe. They shot down a Russian airliner. They inspired attacks in the United States. So, sadly, we're not dealing with a theoretical case. I know you want to ask us about what's going to happen next.

But I think the Afghanistan war, astonishingly to me, it's not a 20-year war. Also, it's really a misunderstood war, I think. It's been an underreported war. I mean, I think that the American people, sadly, because I think the succession of presidents, the last three administrations in particular, didn't really take it upon themselves as commanders-

in-chief to explain to the American people what was at stake there and what was the strategy that could deliver a favorable outcome.

And that strategy, I think, had to entail a sustainable political outcome. Not Denmark, but just Afghanistan, an Afghanistan that could be hardened and strengthened against the regenerative capacity of the Taliban, an Afghanistan in which the various ethnic groups and other groups within Afghanistan had faith in a common vision for the future that could have been maybe the focus of our diplomatic work, rather than accommodating some of these murderous people in Doha, Qatar, in the TPC and negotiating a capitulation agreement with the Taliban.

We could have had our diplomatic efforts, I think, more productive there. Convincing Pakistan to stop its support for these organizations and to take a tougher approach on Pakistan and that connection. I don't think Pakistan wants to be a pariah state with a one-state sponsor of China, but that could be the path they're on. That looks like North Korea to me or Zimbabwe. But I don't think the Pakistanis want to be that, but that's the choice we should have posed them with.

And then it would take sustained international commitment, which we already had. I mean, we had 2,500 troops here most recently in Afghanistan. NATO troops do three times that number. Of course, Afghans were bearing the brunt of the fight. I think the sad part is that I would say we won the war in Afghanistan, and then defeated ourselves. Of course, this touches a nerve with me. I know we're going to talk about the future, but I think this has been not only an unwise series of strategies in Afghanistan, but it's been an immoral approach to the war, especially since the agreement negotiated by the Trump administration for complete withdrawal and then validated by the Biden administration. I think it's astonishing that the secretary of state would write a letter to Ashraf Ghani and say, "Hey, you need to do more for peace." Well, did he write a letter to Hibatullah Akhundzada? I mean, it's almost as if this is kind of abuse victims who then identify with their abusers. We've become apologists for the Taliban and are essentially partnering with them against the Afghan government. I know that sounds like an extreme statement, but I think it's actually what's happening. It's a reversal of morality. I think it's going to be a source of great embarrassment for us for a long time to come.

**BOWMAN:** Secretary Panetta, was it, in your view, a mistake for the U.S., for the Trump administration, to negotiate with the Taliban at all, or to not insist that the Afghan government be involved in those negotiations? Looking back, was that a mistake? Even if we just want to withdraw, should we just have withdrawn and not done those negotiations?

**PANETTA:** Well, I always began with a premise that I could never trust the Taliban. That's probably a good premise to start with because of the fact that they are terrorists and the fact that they always envisioned an effort to try to regain control of Afghanistan. Now, in dealing with the Taliban, probably the best point to have dealt with the Taliban was, frankly, after we drove them into Pakistan because, at that point, we had moved al-Qaeda—we had moved the Taliban—and we were clearly in control of the situation.

At that point, I know the Taliban had tried to see if they could try to negotiate a way to try to become part of the government. At the time, Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, my predecessor, basically said, "No, we're not going to do that." But, at that point, when you have leverage and when you're in a good position, that probably was the best time to try to see if you could develop some kind of role where they could be part of a government operating in Afghanistan. That never happened.

As we continued to kind of begin to focus on — We moved our focus from Afghanistan obviously to Iraq. That diverted our attention from Afghanistan and into that vacuum. I think the Taliban began to make gains and tried to reestablish themselves in Afghanistan. Look, I think it is clear that if you're going to have stability in Afghanistan, A) you need a strong government there. Frankly, we haven't had strong governments in Afghanistan, either with Karzai or with Ghani. They basically cut deals with tribal leaders. They basically were corrupt. They did a lot of things that just really never pulled it together and didn't develop a lot of trust with the Afghan people.

But if you have a strong government that's there, I think the Taliban could have had a role in that government in terms of being represented in the Parliament, et cetera, because I'm not sure you could just go forward as if the Taliban was never there. So, the answer to your question is I think at some point it was necessary to try to figure out an approach as to how we dealt with the Taliban. The problem is that in negotiating with the Taliban and not having the Afghan government at the table, I think that was a bad mistake.

If you're going to negotiate, the best way to negotiate with the Taliban is—United States, frankly, our allies in NATO, we should have had them at the table. We should have had the Afghan government at the table, and you have the Taliban at the table. But you needed to have a negotiating position where you had enough people at that table to recognize that we're not just going to cave to these guys. We're not just going to give in to the Taliban. We're not just going to try to cut a deal as quickly as we can in order to get the hell out of there. This required long-term negotiation. At the same time, you had to put pressure on the Taliban militarily. If they're going to negotiate, and we're going to be able to get them to agree, then we needed leverage. The leverage was to make clear to them that we're not going away. We're not leaving. We're going to continue to be there to go after the Taliban. We're going to continue to kill the Taliban. Admittedly, we'll have casualties as well, but we're going to continue that pressure.

So, if you're going to negotiate, a broader negotiation should have taken place. Pressure on the Taliban should have been put on as well. Very frankly, ultimately, you really needed a much stronger government in Afghanistan in order to be able to pull the rest of Afghanistan together in order to make that kind of ultimate agreement. None of that came together. So, as I said, the record in Afghanistan is one of hit-and-miss. You try to get what you can, try to do what you can. At the same time, you're trying to get the hell out of there. Very frankly, those were all the wrong incentives for trying to develop a more permanent solution.

**BOWMAN:** Secretary Panetta, when we spoke, the three of us spoke in December, we had a broader discussion about the monograph, but we did talk about Afghanistan. I asked you about that in December, of course, before the Biden administration came into the White House and before the decision last month. I'm paraphrasing your words, but you emphasized that we can't just say, "Hey, we're tired. We're going to do a precipitous withdrawal. We're going to throw our hands up and make timeline-based conditions ignoring withdrawal."

Isn't that exactly what the Biden administration is doing right now in Afghanistan, the very thing you said we shouldn't have done in December?

**PANETTA:** The decision did not begin with President Biden. President Trump had the same reaction—I mean President Obama, frankly, was anxious to end the war in Afghanistan. At the time I was secretary of defense, we ended the combat role in Afghanistan. So, it was pretty clear, we were in a downward effort there to try to get our troops home. President Trump, same issue, he wanted to get the hell out of there and do whatever's necessary to be able to get the troops home.

And then ultimately, President Biden who, frankly, had raised a lot of questions when he was vice president about our role in Afghanistan, whether we really had that kind of strategy to actually deal with the situation there. I think, in many ways, he went into the office knowing that what was happening in Afghanistan was a no-win situation.

We had drawn down to 3,500 forces, not enough to really make that much of a difference. Probably the Taliban would have continued to go after our forces there, continue to gain ground. The government was not very effective at trying to pull any kind of strategy together. So, it was a no-win situation that he was facing, so we decided to pull the plug. Look, I understand why he did it. The difference I was hoping for was that he would make clear that we are not, even though our forces may be leaving, that we are not pulling away from Afghanistan in our responsibility to try to help Afghanistan in terms of its government, to provide aid to the Afghans, and also to be able militarily to conduct counterterrorism operations to go after targets in Afghanistan as well.

Now, the president said all of those things. My concern is that there, frankly, hasn't been very good planning, probably no planning, that I saw by the Defense Department to establish those over-the-horizon operations that need to take place. I think that Tony Blinken and others want to try to provide assistance there and try to keep the government in Afghanistan stable enough to be able to provide some governing ability, some ability to secure itself. But I think that once you kind of send the signal that you're getting the hell out, what does that do? It sent a major signal to the Taliban.

By the way, I think while the decision was made, I think it was probably made at the wrong point. They probably should have allowed the negotiations to continue to see whether or not they could develop a peace treaty. That would have been a lot clearer in terms of what the role of all the parties would have been. That did not happen.

So, what you now have is a very clear signal to the Taliban that with the United States pulling its forces out—that “out of sight, out of mind.” What you've seen happen in Afghanistan today is that the Taliban are going after major bases throughout the country. There's a *New York Times* article last week that basically made clear that the Taliban is going in. They're using the warlords to tell the government forces, “If you don't get out, you're going to die.” They're dropping their weapons and getting the hell out of there, and Taliban's taken over, what, about 26 bases, if not more, at this point. So there clearly is an indication that the Taliban are going to move a lot faster in taking that country back than what we suspected. That's going to create a real dilemma for the United States.

**BOWMAN:** General McMaster. Sorry. Sorry, sir.

**PANETTA:** It's going to create a real dilemma, which is do we confront them now? Do we try to go back in and do some targeted operations with regards to special forces, do some air operations against the Taliban? Do we try to, in some ways, play for time to see whether or not we can make clear to the Taliban that we're not just going to pack up and totally leave that part of the world? Are we going to do that, or are we simply going to allow the Taliban to totally take over the country with a prayer that ultimately you hope that the Taliban isn't going to be as bad as we think they are? Which I would think is a mistake.

At that point, then, it is back to an Iraqi situation all over again because if the Taliban take over, if they have al-Qaeda there, if they have ISIS there, they have in essence created a base of operations for terrorism, again, in Afghanistan. We cannot allow that to happen because all that needs to happen is one attack in this country as a result of that, and there is no question, we are going to be back at war in Afghanistan.

So, the real question right now is what the hell does the United States do in a situation that is a real dilemma for our country? What is our role to try to, in some way, prevent the Taliban from creating that base of operations, which is why we went into Afghanistan in the first place? We did not want Afghanistan to be a base for terrorism operations. I think we have a responsibility, frankly, to all of those who put their lives on the line. We have a responsibility to them to make sure that that never happens.

**BOWMAN:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. In our remaining 10 minutes or so, General McMaster, I'm eager to hear your current assessment of the situation on the ground. There are just a few quick comments, and you can take or leave whatever you want. I mean what Secretary Panetta just said is Bill Roggio and Tom Joscelyn at *Long War Journal* are documenting what's happening right now on the ground in Afghanistan, and it's not good, as the secretary described.

You said earlier, General McMaster, about 20+ foreign terrorist organizations that are in Afghanistan/Pakistan region. President Biden emphasized that, hey, it almost had a "Mission Accomplished" air to it. We prevented a 9/11 attack the last 20 years, and I think every service member that's served there should be proud of that. Kind of implied in President Biden's message seemed to be the idea that these terror threats have dissipated which, of course, they haven't.

**MCMASTER:** Well, yes, it's fundamentally dishonest, yeah, fundamentally dishonest.

**BOWMAN:** Yeah. And then please—

**MCMASTER:** The whole speech, if you listen to President Biden's speech, everything he said is the opposite of the reality. There's nothing in that speech that in any way replicates the actual situation in Afghanistan. So, it's this astounding degree of self-delusion over across multiple administrations, but taken to a new level, I have to say, by President Biden in that speech. And then almost to – I think what demonstrates an astounding degree of ignorance, really, about why our servicemen and women serve our country and why we are willing to make sacrifices for one another and for the mission – when he went in front of the press at Area 60 at Arlington Cemetery and then set the date of 9/11 for our withdrawal from Afghanistan.

So I think this shows you, I think, again, this fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the war, in this case, at the highest levels of our government, and his belief that American veterans who fought, who took risks, who saw their friends and those who they loved make sacrifices, that they would appreciate our capitulation to this heinous enemy who really is an enemy of all civilized people and to execute this retreat in a way that's ceded ground and strength and control of populations back to the same terrorists who gave safe haven to al-Qaeda, which they will again.

This is what is clearly documented in the *Long War Journal*. So, what's going to happen is there'll be a point at which we can no longer continue to delude ourselves, and it's happening already. What you're going to see is a humanitarian catastrophe of colossal scale, and it won't be like Rwanda where we decided not to intervene. It'll be worse because we could have prevented it with a very small number of troops, with a sustainable level of commitment financially, and with Afghans bearing the brunt of the fight, but we didn't do that. We prioritized withdrawal over sustaining that effort and set conditions for this humanitarian catastrophe, which we also know from decisions not to do anything about the Syrian civil war – not that we could solve that problem or that that required a massive commitment of troops – but our determination not to get involved in any way, to establish something like a Green Line in Iraq after 1991 or to establish a no-fly zone there, led to a refugee crisis that destabilized not only countries in the region, but Europe as well.

This humanitarian catastrophe that is on the horizon here, really already happening, is going to create great human suffering inside of Afghanistan. It's going to lead to massive influx of refugees much like occurred during the civil war of '92 to '96 and the brutal Taliban rule from '96 to 2001 into Pakistan. It's going to destabilize Pakistan further as those refugees will be a source of recruitment for jihadist terrorist organizations, going to put a strain on an already strained Pakistani army and government, a country, by the way, which has nuclear weapons.

But those refugees will move into Europe as well. Even at the height of the Syrian civil war, the number-two source of refugees in Europe was Afghanistan. So, we're all going to watch this. I'm sure people will cry crocodile tears. The same people who came up with the Responsibility to Protect - R2P doctrine - after Rwanda were present when decisions were made to complete our withdrawal from Afghanistan. What will they say, as we watch this?

**BOWMAN:** Gentlemen, our—

**PANETTA:** Brad?

**BOWMAN:** Please, sir. Yes, go ahead.

**PANETTA:** Yeah. If I could, I think it's important to keep this all in perspective because I don't place all of the fault on Joe Biden.

**MCMASTER:** I don't either, by the way, I just want to say.

**PANETTA:** But the reality is he inherited a legacy of failure in Afghanistan. It goes back to the Bush administration and the failure to follow up on what happened in Afghanistan in a meaningful way. The Obama administration, which surged but then, I think, best thing that the Obama administration did was, in fact, the bin Laden operation to get rid of somebody who had attacked our country. I thought that was an important step. But in terms of the military operation and governing and securing Afghanistan, no clear strategy.

I think the Trump administration, same thing: trying to get out of there, trying to cut a deal with the Taliban and not looking at a strategy for how we're going to try to maintain some kind of stability in Afghanistan. So, all of that just kind of fell on Joe Biden's shoulders, and he said, "Screw it. We've been fighting this for a long time. We don't have a clear strategy. We don't have a clear way to try to make this a situation that can stabilize." So he took the step he did. So I understand why he did it.

What I think is important though is what the hell's going to happen in the future here? That's what we've all got to be focused on. What are we going to do in the future? Are we going to repeat the mistake that was made in Iraq and find ourselves going back in and having to go to war again? That would be a terrible mistake. So, if we agree with that then, by God, what needs to happen now is that he is going to have to take some steps here.

If the Defense Department is going to do counterterrorism operations, even if it's over-the-horizon then, by God, if I know Special Forces, they can do it. They know how to do this stuff, and they could do it effectively. But make it happen. Make it happen. Make it happen that we're providing military assistance and continue to provide training to the Afghan forces. Make it happen that we're trying to develop a strategy that protects the major population areas of the cities in Afghanistan. Make that happen. Provide aid. Protect what's happened with the women and girls in Afghanistan.

Protect the progress that's been made. Don't let that go to hell. Try to at least support moving in the right direction. That requires the United States to have some level of involvement. So let's not kid anybody. This isn't just, "We're taking off and to hell with it." We're going to have to have some involvement there, if for nothing else, if for nothing else but to make sure that the men and women in uniform that gave their lives there did not die in vain.

**MCMASTER:** I'll just say that that's what servicemen and women want. I mean, that's what our warriors want. I think there's this tendency these days, and I think it's not a criticism, it's just an observation, that many Americans, I think, believe that our servicemen and women, our warriors, want to be pitied. I don't know any soldier who wants to be pitied. Soldiers actually do have agency when they deploy to combat and we take the fight to the enemy.

If you look at the way this war's been reported, we never really celebrate our military achievements in battle. We never give the American people any kind of a description of the prowess of our warriors and what they accomplish as they really engage in the righteous use of violence against the enemies of all civilized people. So, I think that there's a fundamental misunderstanding of what military service and what service in combat entails. I think maybe that's reflected in how the president could have made that decision, to give that talk and answer questions in Area 60, which is the area in Arlington National Cemetery where large numbers of our servicemen and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war since 9/11 are laid to rest.

So, I mean this is a larger issue, not the issue we're talking about today. But I think there's a misunderstanding of, really, the nature of war and who our warriors are, what our ethos is, why we sign up to do what we do, why we fight. I think this might be something we could take on maybe in a subsequent discussion.

**BOWMAN:** Gentlemen, thank you sincerely for those insights. I know a lot of this is difficult to discuss. There's been a clear moral component, I think, to what we're talking about. When I hear that, one thing I think of is the Afghan translators that we worked with. I would argue, if I could be so bold as to suggest, the moral obligation we have to do justice by them and their families. I welcome either of you commenting, disagreeing, or commenting with me on that and the importance of taking care of those Afghans who risked their lives to help us.

**MCMASTER:** That's of paramount importance. I'll ask the secretary to comment on this, but I know there's work going on on this right now. So I hope the Biden administration follows through on it. I know there are people working on it. I applaud the fact that they're working on it. I think fast-track visas, Special Benefit Parole is one method. There are many methods to do it. But I think that, as someone who has sponsored an Iraqi family of six on Special Benefit Parole-status, a family that's thriving and many of whom, almost all of that family now are just great American citizens. So I think this is something we have to do. Secretary Panetta, your thoughts on that?

**PANETTA:** We have a responsibility here. We have a responsibility to those who fought alongside of us, who basically helped us in our efforts. We can't just walk away from that. I was offended, frankly, when President Trump basically took the position that we were going to leave Syria, leave that part of Syria and leave our Kurdish fighters who had fought alongside of us and basically abandon them. Look, one thing the United States should really protect is a reputation that we are going to stand with those who stand with us and we're going to protect them.

If we abandon those interpreters, if we abandon those that struggle alongside us, then I think that sends a terrible message to our allies around the world in terms of whether or not they can trust the United States. By the way, just again, kind of stand back and look at the bigger situation, what happened with the Arab Spring was that we never really

developed a strategy to provide stability in those countries that were undermined. We didn't do it in Yemen. We didn't do it in Libya. We didn't do it in Syria. We didn't do it in other countries. We did not have an approach.

I think if we're going to deal with the Middle East, if we're going to deal with this whole issue of how do you build nations that stabilize themselves, we're going to have to build a set of alliance with the UAE, with Saudi Arabia, with Bahrain, with Qatar, with Israel, with others, to try to figure out how do we approach these failed states and try to provide some degree of stability? That's because we're facing it not just in Afghanistan. We're facing it across the Middle East. Even to this day, I'm not sure we have a strategy to deal with failed states.

**MCMASTER:** Could I just add to that that I think there's this misunderstanding, really, of what it takes to have a sustained and reasoned approach that aims to get the region, ultimately, on the path to greater security and stability. I think the massive commitment of troops to Afghanistan and Iraq during the surges there have Americans in their mind think that everything has to be on that scale. So nation-building is a dirty word these days.

There's an idea that the consolidation of military gains in war, it's like an optional phase, you don't have to do that. You can just essentially take the George Costanza approach to war and just leave on a high note. This is what Libya essentially was, which was an effort to avoid, I think in some people's minds – Mr. Secretary, you know this much better than I do – to avoid what the Obama administration perceived, or some people did, perceived as the mistakes of the George W. Bush administration in Iraq. What's paradoxical about it, in doing nothing to shape the political aftermath of Qaddafi's demise and the victory by the rebels, I think the Obama administration actually exceeded the mistakes of the George W. Bush administration, who also underappreciated the degree to which consolidation of those gains in Iraq is a necessary part of war.

So, I think the lesson people are learning is kind of the wrong one. It's that we shouldn't even attempt to do this kind of consolidation of gains anymore. We should essentially have military strategies that are almost exclusively comprised of raids, which are military operations of limited purpose, short duration, of planned withdrawal. But I'll tell you, Mr. Secretary, I've never seen an over-the-horizon counterterrorism plan work, you know what I mean? I think that's what it was in '98 against al-Qaeda. Didn't work. So I think we're kind of deluding ourselves again about the very nature of war.

**BOWMAN:** So many of the questions one might hope would be answered before the withdrawal announcement in April appear to be, according to reporting by the *New York Times*, still unanswered. What bases are we going to use? Do we have base agreements in place? Transferring contracts to the Afghans? Maintenance support? I mean, here we are, I mean a month-and-a-half after the announcement. A lot of this still seems to be unknown—

**PANETTA:** That's a real concern because I think if the president was going to make that decision, it would have made sense to have all of that planning done prior to the decision so that you saw a clear plan of action. How was the military going to conduct this? I understand exactly what H.R. is saying. It's a tough mission to perform, but I have tremendous regard for Special Forces. I know what they can do, and I know how they can operate. But, in the very least, we should have had a plan.

Where are we going to establish the bases? Are they going to operate off an aircraft carrier? Where are they going to locate? How are we going to do the intelligence to identify targets? Are we going to have people on the ground? Are we going to have intelligence on the ground? I mean, all the questions that have not been addressed should have been

addressed because, frankly, right now the appearance of it is that since we didn't have a plan, we basically have said, "To hell with Afghanistan." I mean, that's the message. My sense is we cannot afford to just stand back and watch Afghanistan fall to the Taliban. We just can't, period.

I mean one thing Joe Biden did was to make clear the United States was going to be a leader in the world and that we were back. If we're going to be a leader in the world, then we have got to build the alliances necessary to make sure that our security and the security of the world is protected.

**MCMASTER:** If I could just tie into that quickly because I want to clarify something in our discussion as well. The victory of the Taliban is not a foregone conclusion. There are still Afghans who are fighting courageously every single day to secure the gains that they've made. Afghanistan is a transformed society. I think there was something like, I think less than 500,000 people in Kabul in 2001. Now there are millions of people. It's grown by orders of magnitude. There were like two phones in Kabul because the Taliban got rid of all communication. Everybody in Afghanistan has a phone.

No women were going to school. Women are in school in Afghanistan. There have been healthcare improvements. Afghanistan has the freest press and the greatest freedom of speech of any country in the region. So anyway, I think the Taliban is already going to have a super hard time if they want to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. With the kind of support that Secretary Panetta is outlining, we can bolster those who want to prevent the hell of Taliban rule from returning. Many Afghans, although Afghans are very young demographically, a lot of Afghans remember the hell that it was to live under the Taliban from '96 to 2001 and don't want to see it come back.

**PANETTA:** Let me join H.R. in that comment: I think that's exactly right. If we can leave with some degree of hope, the reality is we did make gains in Afghanistan. We have made progress. We have improved their society in terms of how they operate. Very frankly, and I think H.R. will agree with this, I saw the Afghan military do some very effective operations. These guys put their lives on the line and fought bravely. Every time I went to Afghanistan and met with our commanders there, they said, "By God, these guys are fighting and fighting tough."

So we have something to work with. We just have to make sure we're providing a support system here to give the Afghans half a chance to be able to protect their country.

**BOWMAN:** Mr. Secretary, I'm so glad—

**MCMASTER:** I just have one message to our Afghan friends: Don't be divided at this moment. I think what's most important for Afghans to do is to come together and to put aside their internal competitions and fight together against the Taliban in this period.

**BOWMAN:** Gentlemen, thank you so much for that. You've both have been incredibly generous with your time and for discussing the past, the present, and hopefully an optimistic future in Afghanistan. Thank you for your service on the board of advisors for the Center on Military and Political Power. Thank you sincerely for your decades of service to our country and for sharing your experience and insights with us. I'm deeply grateful. Thank you.

For our audience, this concludes our discussion. Thanks for watching. For more on FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, please visit us at [fdd.org](http://fdd.org). Thank you very much.