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One Hundred Eighteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

April 25, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

On April 6, 2023, the State Department finally took the long overdue step of providing its After-Action Review on the Afghanistan withdrawal to the Committee. The After-Action Review, dated March 2022, is an 87-page document containing numerous unexplained redactions.¹ Despite having been completed for over a year, this document has yet to be shared with the American people. The Department only provided this document to Congress in response to the Committee's imminent threat of a subpoena.

Information within the After-Action Review directly contradicts the White House's recent written and oral public statements. This includes specifically contradicting² National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby's April 6, 2023 statements on the emergency evacuation from Afghanistan that, "for all this talk of chaos, I just didn't see it" and "...I just won't buy the whole argument of chaos."³

¹ U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, AFTER-ACTION REVIEW ON AFGHANISTAN, JANUARY 2020 – AUGUST 2021 (MAR. 2022).

² *Id.* at 60-61.

³ White House Press Secretary, [Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/04/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-9/), (Apr. 6, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/04/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-9/>. Notably, Admiral Kirby himself referred to "the physical crush and chaos" during the evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in an August 24, 2021 Department of Defense press briefing: Department of Defense Press Secretary, [Press Briefing by Press Secretary John F. Kirby and Major General Hank Taylor](https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2744360/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-and-major-general-hank-taylor-deputy-dire/) (Aug. 24, 2021), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2744360/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-and-major-general-hank-taylor-deputy-dire/>.

The Biden Administration’s 12-page unclassified document⁴ claiming to summarize the findings of the Administration’s after-action reviews⁵ and Admiral Kirby’s April 6 press briefing both blamed the failures of the withdrawal almost entirely on the Trump Administration,⁶ despite the fact that the decision to proceed with an unconditional withdrawal on April 14, 2021, was made by President Biden and control of the withdrawal’s timeline, planning, and execution rested with the Biden Administration. President Biden acknowledged this himself, stating “[i]n April, I made the decision to end this war.”⁷ He further acknowledged he would have sought to withdraw even in the absence of the Doha agreement, saying “I would’ve tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes.”⁸

As the Committee continues to examine the After-Action Review, it is clear that while not exhaustive, the document provides considerable new insight into the Department’s botched response to the Afghanistan withdrawal. Some of the information within it stands directly at odds with the White House’s narratives. Several notable takeaways from the After-Action Review, as described in its unclassified findings and recommendations, are listed below:

- The After-Action Review found that “[f]ollowing President Biden’s decision in April 2021 to proceed with the withdrawal of U.S. forces under a new deadline of September 11, the U.S. military moved swiftly with the retrograde to protect U.S. forces, but the speed of that retrograde compounded the difficulties the Department faced in mitigating the loss of the Department’s key enablers. Critically, the decision to hand over Bagram Air Base to the Afghan government meant that Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) would be the only avenue for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO).”⁹
- The After-Action Review directly acknowledges the Biden Administration’s role in the withdrawal’s failures. The first of a series of unclassified findings states: “[t]he decisions of both President Trump and President Biden to end the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan had serious consequences for the viability of the Afghan government and its security...the AAR team found that during both administrations there was insufficient senior-level consideration of worst case scenarios and how quickly these might follow.”¹⁰

⁴ Press Release, White House, The U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan (Apr. 6, 2023),

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁵ Admiral Kirby characterized the document as a “pretty fair summary of our perspectives of the work” of the Administration’s after-action reviews. A Department of Defense review was also produced to Congress.

⁶ Kirby, *supra* note 3.

⁷ President Joe Biden, Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan (Aug. 8, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

⁸ Interview by George Stephanopoulos with President Joe Biden, ABC NEWS (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/full-transcript-abc-news-george-stephanopoulos-interview-president/story?id=79535643>.

⁹ STATE, *supra* note 1, at 11.

¹⁰ *Id* at 11.

- The After-Action Review found that, “[s]ome officials questioned how and whether the Department could sufficiently mitigate the loss of military support, and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security warned of the level of risk that the Department would be accepting.”¹¹
- The After-Action Review found that “...the Department’s participation in the [noncombatant evacuation operation] planning process was hindered by the fact that it was unclear who in the Department had the lead.”¹²
- The After-Action Review found that the Department failed to name a “7th floor principal” to oversee its crisis response, and that “[n]aming a 7th floor principal to oversee all elements of the crisis response would have improved coordination across different lines of effort.”¹³
- The After-Action Review found that: “[a]lthough the Department had established the [Afghanistan Coordination Task Force], it failed to establish a broader task force as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in late July and early August 2021” and that “[t]he complicated Department task force structure...proved confusing to many participants, and knowledge management and communication among and across various lines of effort was problematic.”¹⁴
- The After-Action Review found: “[c]onstantly changing policy guidance and public messaging from Washington regarding which populations were eligible for relocation and how the embassy should manage outreach and flow added to the confusion and often failed to take into account key facts on the ground.”¹⁵
- The After-Action Review recommended that the Department “strengthen [its] overall crisis preparedness and response capabilities.”¹⁶ The Trump Administration recognized this problem – and attempted to solve it by creating a new Contingency and Crisis Response Bureau under Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. However, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon inexplicably dissolved the bureau shortly after taking office in 2021.

¹¹ *Id* at 11.

¹² *Id* at 12.

¹³ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁴ *Id* at 13.

¹⁵ *Id* at 14.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 16; *see also id.* at 16 (stating that the Under Secretary for Management should “assign a senior advisor . . . charged with coordinating M bureau crisis planning and response support” and that “the Department should further codify the roles and responsibilities of all key players in a major international crisis”); *id.* at 17 (stating the Department “needs to appoint a single, principal-level crisis leader who can oversee multiple lines of effort across the policy and operational spheres”); *id.* at 18 (stating that “the Department should establish flyaway teams that are able to deploy at short notice to posts in crisis”).

- The After-Action Review found that “[t]he Department has no systematic process to debrief task force and other crisis response staff promptly after a crisis, especially to assess and support the physical, mental, and emotional impact of their experiences.”¹⁷

The After-Action Review goes into further detail on these points as well as others, shedding additional light on the events of the Afghanistan withdrawal and the State Department’s role, as relayed from its own perspective.

There is a strong public interest in the Department sharing the results of its After-Action Review to the fullest extent possible. Indeed, as reported by *Politico*, at an internal State Department event held on April 6, 2023, a Department official reportedly urged you to release the report both within the Department as well as to the public, stating that the failure to do so leads to a sense of “disillusionment” within the Department, making it feel “like there’s more concern about blowback than interest in being transparent.”¹⁸

In announcing the release of the Administration’s after-action reviews to Congress, Admiral Kirby stated there was “[n]o effort here to try to obfuscate or try to bury something. It’s an effort to try to be as open, as transparent as we can be.”¹⁹ However, the distinct lack of accessibility surrounding the State Department’s After-Action Review falls far short of this promised standard. Notably, in discussing the after-action reviews and White House summary, Admiral Kirby said, “the purpose of it is not accountability,” calling into further question the Administration’s commitment to transparency and accountability.²⁰

The Department has cited the After-Action Review’s classified nature as a basis for not releasing the document, yet the vast majority of its contents are portion marked as either “Sensitive but Unclassified” (SBU) or “Unclassified.” Of the portions of the document marked “Secret”, it is often unclear as to why they were classified as such, and whether they even genuinely merit classification or are merely politically sensitive or embarrassing. As you are aware, under Executive Order 13526, it is prohibited to classify or fail to declassify information in order to “conceal violations of law, inefficiency, or administrative error” or to “prevent embarrassment to a person, organization, or agency.”²¹ Upon review of the document, there does not appear to be any reason an appropriate version could not be made available for public release. **I therefore call upon the Department to publicly release the After-Action Review’s already unclassified executive summary, findings, and recommendations sections *immediately*, and an unclassified version of the complete document within 60 days.**

¹⁷ *Id* at 15.

¹⁸ Alexander Ward, *State Dept. Should’ve Done More to Prepare for Worst-case Scenario of Afghanistan Withdrawal, Blinken Says*, *Politico* (Apr. 6, 2023), <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/06/state-failed-to-prepare-for-afghanistan-withdrawal-blinken-says-00090916>.

¹⁹ Kirby, *supra* note 3.

²⁰ Kirby, *supra* note 3

²¹ Exec. Order No. 13526, 75 FR 707.

The After-Action Review also references a set of documents called “the Afghanistan AAR files,” described as “an electronic and paper collection of all the materials the review team consulted and cited to prepare its report.”²² The documents cited throughout the After-Action Review are material documentary evidence of events of the withdrawal and are essential to the Committee’s investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal, including to inform potential legislation and budget decisions to prevent such events from occurring in the future. **Please produce the Afghanistan AAR files to the Committee in complete and unredacted form no later than May 5, 2023.**

The Committee’s March 3, 2023 and March 20, 2023 document requests which led to the production of the After-Action Review requested “[a] current draft of the After-Action Report prepared under Ambassador Daniel Smith (including any associated documents such as exhibits or appendices)” in “complete and unredacted form.”²³ However, the version provided to the Committee on April 6, 2023, includes numerous redactions with no explanation, including even redactions of the names of documents cited in footnotes. The Committee is unaware of any legal justification for the redaction of this information. **Please also produce a wholly unredacted version of the After-Action Review to the Committee no later than May 5, 2023.**

As we personally discussed, the Department committed to provide the After-Action Review to the Committee in order to prevent a subpoena. In contravention of standard procedures for document production, the document was delivered to the Office of House Security, instead of to the Committee’s own classified space. Further, the document was accompanied by a list of unnecessary and inappropriate access restrictions requested by the Department. While the document is classified at the “Secret” level, these restrictions would exceed those placed upon far more sensitive “Top Secret”-level documents. The Department never presented these claimed restrictions to the Committee and they were not agreed to by the Committee at any point, thus rendering them nonbinding.

The American people deserve a full and honest accounting of the facts of the Afghanistan withdrawal. The Biden Administration’s pattern of obfuscation and obstruction towards oversight of the withdrawal is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The Committee expects a timely and complete response to its requests and looks forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,



Michael T. McCaul
Chairman

²² STATE, *supra* note 1, at 21.

²³ Letter from Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, U.S. House of Rep. Comm. On Foreign Aff. to Antony J. Blinken, Sec’y of State, U.S. Dep’t of State, in Washington, D.C. (Mar. 3, 2023).

House Foreign Affairs Committee

CC:

Rep. Gregory W. Meeks, Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs Committee