

1 year later, Biden administration braces for spotlight on chaotic Afghanistan exit

White House aides hope to mitigate further political damage from a moment that will remind Americans of an effort many of them consider one of Biden's biggest failures.

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WASHINGTON — The Biden administration recently began discussing how to handle the anniversary of the [U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) next month to avoid missteps that could add to President Joe Biden's political woes, according to six administration officials.

The National Security Council also has been reaching out over the past few weeks to the Defense and State department and intelligence officials to check on the status of their internal reviews of the withdrawal, officials said, as Biden's advisers brace for a renewed spotlight on a [widely criticized effort](#) that shook his standing with Americans.

The comprehensive review of the withdrawal, which the White House vowed to undertake nearly a year ago, is still not complete, officials said. While the intelligence community's review is close to finished, much of that report is expected to be classified. The Pentagon's and the State Department's reviews are ongoing, officials said. They also said the White House has not yet decided what might be made public or turned over to Congress.

“We know next month will give us an appropriate opportunity to honor the service and sacrifice of those we lost, as well as recognize the many people we saved,” a spokesperson for the National Security Council said. “We are also focused on how we are on a stronger strategic footing now that the war is over. We are continuing to help people leave Afghanistan and resettle in the U.S. through Operation Allies Welcome, and we will continue to ensure that we remain vigilant and are appropriately positioned to counter any terrorism threats.”



The National Security Council’s status checks with agencies about its promised review and internal discussions on how to approach the withdrawal anniversary come as Biden’s job approval among Americans has reached new lows. His aides hope to mitigate further political damage from a moment that will remind Americans of an effort many of them consider one of Biden’s biggest failures, at a time when they are already questioning his effectiveness on a host of issues.

And while planning for an anniversary or any other milestone is routine for any White House, it is usually focused on celebratory moments, such as the president's signing major legislation into law or widely praised national security successes.

The Afghanistan withdrawal, by contrast, was one of the darkest chapters of Biden's presidency. It marked a turning point, seven months after Biden took office, that raised questions among Republicans and Democrats about the competence of his administration. Indeed, the White House expects, and has begun planning for, congressional investigations into the withdrawal if Republicans win the House or the Senate in November's midterm elections, according to people familiar with the matter.

The internal discussions about how — or how not — to approach the anniversary have so far been coordinated by John Kirby, who recently moved from press secretary at the Pentagon to a senior communications post at the National Security Council. Kirby recently held two conference calls — one on July 1 and another on Friday — with officials from the State Department, the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community and other agencies to discuss the issue.

Administration officials said the discussions are designed to try to coordinate any efforts various agencies might be planning to mark the occasion and to ensure that different parts of the administration convey a common message and tone. Among the White House's top concerns is that someone in the administration might do something that could be seen as insensitive to the families of the 13 service members killed in a bombing at the Kabul airport on Aug. 26, officials said.

Administration officials said they have scoured the calendars of agencies, including the State Department and the Pentagon, for previously planned

events next month that could be considered “tone deaf,” as a senior administration official put it, if they coincided with the anniversary of the withdrawal effort.

Two officials described the National Security Council’s goal as making sure no one in the administration does anything “stupid.”

The president’s aides plan to emphasize what they argue was a successful operation to evacuate tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan after the administration was caught flat-footed by the swift fall of Kabul, trying to push back against criticism that the administration could have done a better job, officials said.

But that could prove difficult given other moments throughout last August that defined the withdrawal for many Americans, as well as Biden’s own public remarks promising a “responsible, deliberate and safe” withdrawal and wrongly predicting the Afghan government and military would maintain control for much longer than they did.

Less than six weeks before Kabul fell to the Taliban, Biden told Americans that “the likelihood there’s going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.”

The chaos that followed the takeover on Aug. 15, with Americans and Afghans swarming the Kabul airport desperately trying to evacuate, are among the most searing images from the withdrawal. Other events that helped solidify the view among a majority of Americans that the withdrawal was far from a success include the bombing that killed 13 U.S. troops, the botched U.S. military airstrike on Aug. 29 that killed an Afghan aid worker and his family, and the departure of the last U.S. troops on Aug. 30 while Americans and Afghans who had helped the U.S. during the 20-year war were left behind.

Specific ideas under discussion to mark the anniversary next month include steps as basic as having top officials issue written statements, such as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, officials said. Officials have also discussed releasing statistics about what the administration views as a successful withdrawal effort if reporters ask for information about the anniversary, officials said.

As part of the effort not to make any public moves that could be perceived as being insensitive to the families of the U.S. service members who were killed, officials said they are leaning away from any plans for a commemoration event to mark the attack on the airport or the final withdrawal of all Americans.

Instead, they are looking at issuing written statements to recognize the service members who were killed, as well as the U.S. troops and diplomats who served in Afghanistan during the war.

The administration is also considering a similar approach to the U.S. airstrike in late August that killed an Afghan aid worker and his family, officials said.

During the withdrawal in August, Biden's approval rating dropped, and only 25% of Americans approved of his handling of the crisis, according to a NBC News poll at the time. And while other factors have dragged down Americans' confidence in Biden's leadership, specifically soaring inflation and high gas prices, the withdrawal was an inflection point. The proportion of Americans who disapproved of Biden's leadership increased by 9 percentage points from April 2021 to August, according to the August NBC News poll.

The White House expects an array of new questions about the withdrawal around the anniversary, some of them about Americans who are still in Afghanistan, Afghans who have been unable to leave and the whereabouts of the tens of thousands who did, and the status of the country again under Taliban rule.

Officials said they also anticipate inquiries about why the administration's internal review remains unfinished. On Aug. 17 — two days after the fall of Kabul — national security adviser Jake Sullivan promised the White House “will conduct an extensive hot wash” and “look at every aspect of this from top to bottom.” But that effort did not begin in the relevant agencies until late fall and winter, officials said.

It's not until the three so-called after action reviews are finished that the NSC and the White House will fully assess what took place. The White House has not publicly set a timeline to complete the review. An internal investigation into the attack at the Kabul airport that killed the 13 U.S. service members took about five months; it was released in February.

“Once these internal reviews are done, we will have an opportunity to look at the full picture in a way that will help inform future operations,” the NSC spokesperson said. “Departments and agencies will share lessons learned consistent with operational and classification security.”