

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–3313

July 26, 2022

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Secretary Austin,

It has been 11 months since the Biden Administration mismanaged the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Essential questions have been unanswered, and Department of Defense (DOD) leadership has offered little insight to the public into how failures in intelligence and execution occurred. You and your team must communicate to the American people how those painful experiences can inform and improve future decision-making and strategic planning.

Press reports indicate DOD is considering whether to publicly release portions of after-action reports focusing on the last 18 months of the war in Afghanistan.¹ Furthermore, reports indicate that your department has returned at least one after-action report, citing new data that the report did not consider.² While I understand that some of this information must remain classified due to its sensitive nature, I struggle to see how you could decide the public has no interest or right to portions of these reports, which could help explain how the evacuation went so wrong.

The Pentagon should strive to avoid even the appearance that its leaders withhold unclassified information because those findings could shine an unfavorable light on its leadership. At a press conference on September 1, 2021, you claimed, “We want to make sure that we learn every lesson that can be learned from this experience.”³ Your department's ability to “learn every lesson” would be severely undermined by failing to disclose key findings from these after-action reports.

¹ Gordon Lubold, *Report on Pentagon Role in Afghanistan Is Under Review*, Wall Street J. (July 18, 2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/report-on-pentagon-role-in-afghanistan-nears-completion-11658149201>.

² *Id.*

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing on the End of the U.S. War in Afghanistan* (September 1, 2021), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2762169/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille/>.

In a related move, I successfully added an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act that requires DOD to restore all accountings of military assistance provided to the Afghan security forces that were publicly available on DOD websites as of July 1, 2021.⁴ That amendment was necessary because several Government Accountability Office reports had been removed in August 2021 without a significant or satisfactory explanation.⁵ I am formally requesting an update on how your department is complying with this statutory requirement.

Over the past 20 years, the American people have invested approximately \$2 trillion of their tax dollars in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. More importantly, nearly 3,000 U.S. service men and women made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation in Afghanistan, fighting the war against a Taliban-controlled government and the terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. These military families deserve transparency and accountability from your department.

To learn the hard lessons from the war in Afghanistan and its disastrous conclusion, I ask that you fulfill your responsibility to publicly release as much information as practical without jeopardizing national security. I request that DOD provide my office a timeline for the public release of the reported after-action reports no later than August 16, 2022.

Sincerely,



Ted Budd
Member of Congress

⁴ *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 1215, 135 Stat. 1541, 1963 (2021).

⁵ Adam Andrzejewski, *Biden Administration Erased Afghan Weapons Reports from Federal Websites*, FORBES (Aug. 31, 2021),

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamandrzejewski/2021/08/31/biden-administration-erased-afghan-weapons-reports-from-federal-websites/>.