

# Full transcript of ABC News' George Stephanopoulos' interview with President Joe Biden

*Stephanopoulos spoke to Biden in an exclusive interview Wednesday.*

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**EXCLUSIVE:** Biden remarks on Afghanistan exit

*President Joe Biden told ABC News' George...*

ABC News

Read the full transcript of President Joe Biden's exclusive interview with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos on Wednesday.

**GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS:** Mr. President, thank you for doing this.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Thank you for doin' it.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Let's get right to it. Back in July, you said a Taliban takeover was highly unlikely. Was the intelligence wrong, or did you downplay it?

BIDEN: I think -- there was no consensus. If you go back and look at the intelligence reports, they said that it's more likely to be sometime by the end of the year. The idea that the tal -- and then it goes further on, even as late as August. I think you're gonna see -- the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others speaking about this later today.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you didn't put a timeline on it when you said it was highly unlikely. You just said flat out, "It's highly unlikely the Taliban would take over."

BIDEN: Yeah. Well, the question was whether or not it w-- the idea that the Taliban would take over was premised on the notion that the -- that somehow, the 300,000 troops we had trained and equipped was gonna just collapse, they were gonna give up. I don't think anybody anticipated that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you know that Senator McConnell, others say this was not only predictable, it was predicted, including by him, based on intelligence briefings he was getting.

BIDEN: What -- what did he say was predicted?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Senator McConnell said it was predictable that the Taliban was gonna take over.

BIDEN: Well, by the end of the year, I said that's that was -- that was a real possibility. But no one said it was gonna take over then when it was bein' asked.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So when you look at what's happened over the last week, was it a failure of intelligence, planning, execution or judgment?

BIDEN: Look, I don't think it was a fa-- look, it was a simple choice, George. When the-- when the Taliban -- let me back -- put it another way. When you had

the government of Afghanistan, the leader of that government get in a plane and taking off and going to another country, when you saw the significant collapse of the ta-- of the-- Afghan troops we had trained -- up to 300,000 of them just leaving their equipment and taking off, that was -- you know, I'm not-- this -- that -- that's what happened.

That's simply what happened. So the question was in the beginning the-- the threshold question was, do we commit to leave within the timeframe we've set? We extended it to September 1st. Or do we put significantly more troops in? I hear people say, "Well, you had 2,500 folks in there and nothin' was happening. You know, there wasn't any war."

But guess what? The fact was that the reason it wasn't happening is the last president negotiated a year earlier that he'd be out by May 1st and that-- in return, there'd be no attack on American forces. That's what was done. That's why nothing was happening. But the idea if I had said -- I had a simple choice. If I had said, "We're gonna stay," then we'd better prepare to put a whole hell of a lot more troops in --

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STEPHANOPOULOS: But your top military advisors warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops.

BIDEN: No, they didn't. It was split. Tha-- that wasn't true. That wasn't true.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They didn't tell you that they wanted troops to stay?

BIDEN: No. Not at -- not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a timeframe all troops. They didn't argue against that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So no one told -- your military advisors did not tell you, "No, we should just keep 2,500 troops. It's been a stable situation for the last several years. We can do that. We can continue to do that"?

BIDEN: No. No one said that to me that I can recall. Look, George, the reason why it's been stable for a year is because the last president said, "We're leaving. And here's the deal I wanna make with you, Taliban. We're agreeing to leave if you agree not to attack us between now and the time we leave on May the 1st."

I got into office, George. Less than two months after I elected to office, I was sworn in, all of a sudden, I have a May 1 deadline. I have a May 1 deadline. I got one of two choices. Do I say we're staying? And do you think we would not have to put a hell of a lot more troops? B-- you know, we had hundreds-- we had tens of thousands of troops there before. Tens of thousands.

Do you think we woulda -- that we would've just said, "No problem. Don't worry about it, we're not gonna attack anybody. We're okay"? In the meantime, the Taliban was takin' territory all throughout the country in the north and down in the south, in the Pasthun area.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So would you have withdrawn troops like this even if President Trump had not made that deal with the Taliban?

BIDEN: I would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes, because look, George. There is no good time to leave Afghanistan. Fifteen years ago would've been a problem, 15 years from now. The basic choice is am I gonna send your sons and your daughters to war in Afghanistan in perpetuity?

STEPHANOPOULOS: That's--

BIDEN: No one can name for me a time when this would end. And what-- what-- what-- what constitutes defeat of the Taliban? What constitutes defeat? Would we have left then? Let's say they surrender like before. OK. Do we leave then? Do you think anybody-- the same people who think we should stay would've said, "No, good time to go"? We spent over \$1 trillion, George, 20 years. There was no good time to leave.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if there's no good time, if you know you're gonna have to leave eventually, why not have th-- everything in place to make sure Americans could get out, to make sure our Afghan allies get out, so we don't have these chaotic scenes in Kabul?

BIDEN: Number one, as you know, the intelligence community did not say back in June or July that, in fact, this was gonna collapse like it did. Number one.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They thought the Taliban would take over, but not this quickly?

BIDEN: But not this quickly. Not even close. We had already issued several thousand passports to the-- the SIVs, the people-- the-- the-- the translators when I came into office before we had negotiated getting out at the end of s-- August.

Secondly, we're in a position where what we did was took precautions. That's why I authorized that there be 6,000 American troops to flow in to accommodate this exit, number one. And number two, provided all that aircraft in the Gulf to get people out. We pre-positioned all that, anticipated that. Now, granted, it took two days to take control of the airport. We have control of the airport now.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Still a lotta pandemonium outside the airport.

BIDEN: Oh, there is. But, look, b-- but no one's being killed right now, God forgive me if I'm wrong about that, but no one's being killed right now. People are-- we got 1,000-somewhat, 1,200 out, yesterday, a couple thousand today. And it's increasing. We're gonna get those people out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But we've all seen the pictures. We've seen those hundreds of people packed into a C-17. You've seen Afghans falling--

BIDEN: That was four days ago, five days ago.

STEPHANOPOULOS: What did you think when you first saw those pictures?

BIDEN: What I thought was we ha-- we have to gain control of this. We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did.

STEPHANOPOULOS: I-- I think a lot of-- a lot of Americans, and a lot of veterans who served in Afghanistan agree with you on the big, strategic picture. They believe we had to get out. But I wonder how you respond to an Army Special Forces officer, Javier McKay (PH). He did seven tours. He was shot twice. He agrees with you. He says, "We have to cut our losses in Afghanistan." But he adds, "I just wish we could've left with honor."

BIDEN: Look, that's like askin' my deceased son Beau, who spent six months in Kosovo and a year in Iraq as a Navy captain and then major-- I mean, as an Army major. And, you know, I'm sure he had regrets comin' out of Afganista-- I mean, out of Iraq.

He had regrets to what's-- how-- how it's going. But the idea-- what's the alternative? The alternative is why are we staying in Afghanistan? Why are we there? Don't you think that the one-- you know who's most disappointed in us getting out? Russia and China. They'd love us to continue to have to--

STEPHANOPOULOS: So you don't think this could've been handled, this exit could've been handled better in any way? No mistakes?

BIDEN: No. I-- I don't think it could've been handled in a way that there-- we-- we're gonna go back in hindsight and look, but the idea that somehow there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens. I don't know how that happened.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So for you, that was always priced into the decision?

BIDEN: Yes. Now, exactly what happened-- is not priced in. But I knew that they're gonna have an enormous, enorm-- look, one of the things we didn't know is what the Taliban would do in terms of trying to keep people from getting out, what they would do. What are they doing now? They're cooperating, letting American citizens get out, American personnel get out, embassies get out, et cetera. But they're having-- we're having some more difficulty in having those who helped us when we were in there--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And we don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Pardon me?

STEPHANOPOULOS: We don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Well-- we do know generically and in some specificity what's happening outside of Kabul. We don't know it in great detail. But we do know. And guess what? The Taliban knows if they take on American citizens or American military, we will strike them back like hell won't have it.

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STEPHANOPOULOS: All troops are supposed to be out by August 31st. Even if Americans and our Afghan allies are still trying to get out, they're gonna leave?

BIDEN: We're gonna do everything in our power to get all Americans out and our allies out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does that mean troops will stay beyond August 31st if necessary?

BIDEN: It depends on where we are and whether we can get-- ramp these numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000 a day coming out. If that's the case, we'll be-- they'll all be out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: 'Cause we've got, like, 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in the country right now, right? And are you committed to making sure that the troops stay until every American who wants to be out--

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: -- is out?

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about our Afghan allies? We have about 80,000 people--

BIDEN: Well, that's not the s--

STEPHANOPOULOS: Is that too high?

BIDEN: That's too high.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How many--

BIDEN: The estimate we're giving is somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 folks total, counting their families.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does the commitment hold for them as well?

BIDEN: The commitment holds to get everyone out that, in fact, we can get out and everyone that should come out. And that's the objective. That's what we're doing now, that's the path we're on. And I think we'll get there.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So Americans should understand that troops might have to be there beyond August 31st?

BIDEN: No. Americans should understand that we're gonna try to get it done before August 31st.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if we don't, the troops will stay--

BIDEN: If -- if we don't, we'll determine at the time who's left.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And?

BIDEN: And if you're American force -- if there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: You talked about our adversaries, China and Russia. You already see China telling Taiwan, "See? You can't count on the Americans." (LAUGH)



BIDEN: Sh-- why wouldn't China say that? Look, George, the idea that w-- there's a fundamental difference between-- between Taiwan, South Korea, NATO. We are in a situation where they are in-- entities we've made agreements with based on not a civil war they're having on that island or in South Korea, but on an agreement where they have a unity government that, in fact, is trying to keep bad guys from doin' bad things to them.

We have made-- kept every commitment. We made a sacred commitment to Article Five that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with-- Taiwan. It's not even comparable to talk about that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Yeah, but those--

BIDEN: It's not comparable to t--

STEPHANOPOULOS: --who say, "Look, America cannot be trusted now, America does not keep its promises--"

BIDEN: Who-- who's gonna say that? Look, before I made this decision, I met with all our allies, our NATO allies in Europe. They agreed. We should be getting out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Did they have a choice?

BIDEN: Sure, they had a choice. Look, the one thing I promise you in private, NATO allies are not quiet. You remember from your old days. They're not gonna be quiet. And so-- and by the way, you know, what we're gonna be doing is we're gonna be putting together a group of the G-7, the folks that we work with the most-- to-- I was on the phone with-- with Angela Merkel today. I was on the phone with the British prime minister. I'm gonna be talking to Macron in France to make sure we have a coherent view of how we're gonna deal from this point on.

STEPHANOPOULOS: What happens now in Afghanistan? Do you believe the Taliban have changed?

BIDEN: No. I think-- let me put it this way. I think they're going through sort of an existential crisis about do they want to be recognized by the international community as being a legitimate government. I'm not sure they do. But look, they have--

STEPHANOPOULOS: They care about their beliefs more?

BIDEN: Well, they do. But they also care about whether they have food to eat, whether they have an income that they can provide for their f-- that they can make any money and run an economy. They care about whether or not they can hold together the society that they in fact say they care so much about.

I'm not counting on any of that. I'm not cou-- but that is part of what I think is going on right now in terms of I-- I'm not sure I would've predicted, George, nor would you or anyone else, that when we decided to leave, that they'd provide safe passage for Americans to get out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Beyond Americans, what do we owe the Afghans who are left behind, particularly Afghan women who are facing the prospect of subjugation again?

BIDEN: As many as we can get out, we should. For example, I had a meeting today for a couple hours in the Situation Room just below here. There are Afghan women outside the gate. I told 'em, "Get 'em on the planes. Get them out. Get them out. Get their families out if you can."

But here's the deal, George. The idea that we're able to deal with the rights of women around the world by military force is not rational. Not rational. Look what's happened to the Uighurs in western China. Look what's happening in other parts of the world.

Look what's happenin' in, you know, in-- in the Congo. I mean, there are a lotta places where women are being subjugated. The way to deal with that is not with a military invasion. The way to deal with that is putting economic, diplomatic, and national pre-- international pressure on them to change their behavior.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about the threat to the United States? Most intelligence analysis has predicted that Al Qaeda would come back 18 to 24 months after a withdrawal of American troops. Is that analysis now being revised? Could it be sooner?

BIDEN: It could be. But George, look, here's the deal. Al Qaeda, ISIS, they metastasize. There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria. There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa. There's significant greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan. And we have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out. We're-- we don't have military in Syria to make sure that we're gonna be protected--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And you're confident we're gonna have that in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: Yeah. I'm confident we're gonna have the overriding capability, yes. Look, George, it's like asking me, you know, am I confident that people are gonna act even remotely rationally. Here's the deal. The deal is the threat from Al Qaeda and their associate organizations is greater in other parts of the world to the United States than it is from Afghanistan.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And th-- that tells you that you're-- it's safe to leave?

BIDEN: No. That tells me that-- my dad used to have an expression, George. If everything's equally important to you, nothing's important to you. We should be focusing on where the threat is the greatest. And the threat-- the idea-- we can continue to spend \$1 trillion and have tens of thousands of American forces in Afghanistan when we have what's going on around the world, in the Middle East and North Africa and west-- I mean, excuse me-- yeah, North Africa and Western Africa. The idea we can do that and ignore those-- those looming problems, growing problems, is not-- not rational.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Final question on this. You know, in a couple weeks, we're all gonna commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The Taliban are gonna be ruling Afghanistan, just l-- like they were when our country was attacked. How do you explain that to the American people?

BIDEN: Not true. It's not true. They're not gonna look just like they were we were attacked. There was a guy named Osama bin Laden that was still alive and well. They were organized in a big way, that they had significant help from arou-- from other parts of the world.

We went there for two reasons, George. Two reasons. One, to get Bin Laden, and two, to wipe out as best we could, and we did, the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did it. Then what happened? Began to morph into the notion that, instead of having a counterterrorism capability to have small forces there in-- or in the region to be able to take on Al Qaeda if it tried to reconstitute, we decided to engage in nation building. In nation building. That never made any sense to me.

STEPHANOPOULOS: It sounds like you think we shoulda gotten out a long time ago--

BIDEN: We should've.

STEPHANOPOULOS: --and-- and accept the idea that it was gonna be messy no matter what.

BIDEN: Well, by the-- what would be messy?

STEPHANOPOULOS: The exit--

BIDEN: If we had gotten out a long time ago-- getting out would be messy no matter when it occurred. I ask you, you want me to stay, you want us to stay and send your kids back to Afghanistan? How about it? Are you g-- if you had a son or daughter, would you send them in Afghanistan now? Or later?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Would be hard, but a lot of families have done it.

BIDEN: They've done it because, in fact, there was a circumstance that was different when we started. We were there for two reasons, George. And we accomplished both ten years ago. We got Osama bin Laden. As I said and got criticized for saying at the time, we're gonna follow him to the gates of hell. Hell, we did--

STEPHANOPOULOS: How will history judge the United States' experience in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: One that we overextended what we needed to do to deal with our national interest. That's like my sayin' they-- they're-- they-- they b-- b-- the border of Tajikistan-- and-- other-- what-- does it matter? Are we gonna go to war because of what's goin' on in Tajikistan? What do you think?

Tell me what-- where in that isolated country that has never, never, never in all of history been united, all the way back to Alexander the Great, straight through the British Empire and the Russians, what is the idea? Are we gonna s-- continue to lose thousands of Americans to injury and death to try to unite that country? What do you think? I think not.

I think the American people are with me. And when you unite that country, what do you have? They're surrounded by Russia in the north or the Stans in the north. You have-- to the west, they have Iran. To the south, they have Pakistan, who's supporting them. And to the-- and-- actually, the east, they have Pakistan and China. Tell me. Tell me. Is that worth our national interest to continue to spend another \$1 trillion and lose thousands more American lives? For what?

STEPHANOPOULOS: I know we're outta time. I have two quick questions on COVID. I know you're gonna make-- be makin' an announcement on booster shots today. Have you and the first lady gotten your booster shots yet?

BIDEN: We're gonna get the booster shots. And-- it's somethin' that I think-- you know, because we g-- w-- we got our shots all the way back in I think December. So it's-- it's-- it's past time. And so the idea (NOISE) that the recommendation-- that's my wife calling. (LAUGH) No. (LAUGH) But all kiddin' aside, yes, we will get the booster shots.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And-- and finally-- are you comfortable with Americans getting a third shot when so many millions around the world haven't had their first?

BIDEN: Absolutely because we're providing more to the rest of the world than all the rest of the world combined. We got enough for everybody American,

plus before this year is-- before we get to the middle of next year, we're gonna provide a half a billion shots to the rest of the world. We're keepin' our part of the bargain. We're doin' more than anybody.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. President, thanks for your time.

BIDEN: Thank you.