

Fact check: Trump administration officials try to rewrite their own Afghanistan history

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August 22, 2021

Washington (CNN) There's been no shortage of fact-based criticism aimed at the Biden administration's handling of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

But some of the criticism from former Trump administration officials has departed from the truth.

In public statements this past week, former Vice President Mike Pence, former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and former Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller have all slammed Biden in one way or another for the chaos that has unfolded in Afghanistan this month. While some of that criticism has been accurate, much of it has inaccurately tried to rewrite the Trump administration's own history on Afghanistan -- denouncing Biden while also misleadingly omitting the actions taken by Trump and his administration.

Here's a fact check of their claims.

Mike Pence claims the US-Taliban peace deal led to unusual 'stability' in Afghanistan

On Tuesday, former Vice President Mike Pence published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal that cast sole blame on the Biden administration for the current situation in Afghanistan.

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Pence went so far as to claim that the Trump administration's February 2020 peace deal with the Taliban "immediately brought to Afghanistan a stability unseen in decades."

"In the past 18 months, the U.S. has not suffered a single combat casualty there. By the time we left office, the Afghan government and the Taliban each controlled their respective territories, neither was mounting major offensives, and America had only 2,500 U.S. troops in the country—the smallest military presence since the war began in 2001," Pence wrote.

Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also claimed this week, on Twitter and in an interview on Fox Business, that the Trump administration "kept the country stable."

Facts First: *There is no legitimate argument that Afghanistan experienced anything resembling "stability" after the US deal with the Taliban. While Pence is correct that no*

more US troops were killed in combat after the deal, the war continued to rage, and large numbers of Afghan troops and civilians continued to be killed or injured.

The inspector general for the Department of Defense reported that "the Taliban escalated violence further" in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the agreement. The United Nations reported that while "there was a drop in the number of civilian casualties documented in the first nine months" of 2020, "in stark contrast, the last three months of the year marked an uncharacteristic rise in civilian casualties -- a critical indicator of the nature of the conflict. The year ended with increased focus on levels of violence and diminishing hopes for lasting peace."

"The anguish caused by the armed conflict continued to be widespread and felt in cities and rural areas by people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and social-economic backgrounds," the UN said in its annual report on the war -- in which it noted that civilian casualties were up 45% in the fourth quarter of 2020 compared to the fourth quarter of 2019.

The total number of Afghan civilian casualties recorded by the UN for 2020, 8,820, was the lowest since 2013 -- but it was still higher than in any of the five years between 2009 and 2013. (The UN began this systematic monitoring in 2009; actual war casualties are often higher than documented casualties.) So even by this basic metric, there is no case that there was a stability unseen "in decades."

"There was a stability on US military bases, not in the country," said Sher Jan Ahmadzai, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Ahmadzai also argued that Trump's US-Taliban deal "paved the way for further potential instability by undermining the legitimacy of the very government President Trump and previous administrations had been supporting."

"A momentary pause in violence does not constitute meaningful political stability," said Benjamin Hopkins, an Afghanistan expert and professor of history and international affairs at George Washington University, adding that the deal "failed to address any of the fundamental issues which the conflict is about internally within Afghanistan."

Experts also took issue with other parts of Pence's op-ed, including its headline: "Mike Pence: Biden Broke Our Deal With the Taliban."

In the piece, Pence argued that, under Trump, "Taliban leaders understood that the consequences of violating the deal would be swift and severe." But experts on Afghanistan say the Taliban had never actually lived up to its commitments in the deal.

"The Taliban was not abiding by the part of the Doha deal that asked them to cut ties with al Qaeda -- intelligence reports have shown that the Taliban continues to maintain those ties," said Madiha Afzal, a foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank.

Nikki Haley criticizes negotiations with the Taliban

After the White House announced Wednesday that the Taliban would permit "safe passage" to Afghan civilians traveling to the capital's airport, Nikki Haley, Trump's former US ambassador to the United Nations, criticized the Biden administration for relying on the word of the Taliban.

"To have our Generals say that they are depending on diplomacy with the Taliban is an unbelievable scenario," Haley tweeted. "Negotiating with the Taliban is like dealing with the devil."

Facts First: *Haley didn't mention that the Trump administration itself negotiated with the Taliban -- and that she had herself spoken favorably of those peace negotiations while serving in the administration.*

"We are seeing that we're closer to talks with the Taliban and the peace process than we've seen before," Haley said on January 17, 2018, at the UN in New York. Haley added that Afghanistan officials were "confident that the Taliban will be coming to the table" and that the "US policy on Afghanistan is working."

In the summer of 2018, the Trump administration said it was ready to enter negotiations with the Taliban and, after much tumult, signed the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban for the US to remove troops in Afghanistan by the start of May 2021. Haley resigned from her post in the administration in October 2018.

Despite the Taliban's continued attacks and failure to follow through on areas of the agreement, the US continued to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. On January 15, days before Biden would be inaugurated, Trump's acting defense secretary Christopher Miller announced that US forces had reached the lowest levels in the country since the beginning of the war.

"U.S. force levels in Afghanistan have reached 2,500. Directed by President Trump," Miller's statement said, "and as I announced on November 17, this drawdown brings U.S. forces in the country to their lowest levels since 2001.

We're not disputing Haley's negative assessment of the Taliban. However, her tweet completely ignored the Trump administration's own negotiations and her previous praise of the strategy.

Christopher Miller claims Trump promise of full withdrawal was just a ruse

Christopher Miller, who served as acting defense secretary for less than three months at the end of Trump's presidency, claimed in an interview with Defense One that Trump's 2020 deal with the Taliban to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021 was just a "play," and Trump actually intended to keep some US troops in Afghanistan for counterterrorism purposes.

Facts First: *While we don't know what Trump may have discussed with Miller in secret, statements from other administration officials and even Trump himself cast doubt on Miller's claim. Trump has repeatedly said publicly, even after leaving office, that his plan was to bring home "all" of the troops. A former Trump administration senior official told CNN's Jake Tapper that Miller's claim is false.*

As President, Trump called for a full withdrawal by Christmas 2020, even sooner than the May 1 deadline. And as recently as August 12, Trump released a statement suggesting he would have followed through with the full withdrawal plan had he won the 2020 election, though he claimed it would have been "much more successful" than Biden's.

In an April 18 statement that has since been deleted from his website, Trump said, "Getting out of Afghanistan is a wonderful and positive thing to do. I planned to withdraw on May 1st, and we should keep as close to that schedule as possible." And on June 26, Trump emphasized that his administration was responsible for starting the process to bring all troops back, saying "I started the process. All the troops are coming back home. They couldn't stop the process. Twenty-one years is enough, don't we think?"