

Opinion | Chris Murphy gets it right on how to examine Afghanistan

 [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/23/chris-murphy-afghanistan-hearings-biden](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/23/chris-murphy-afghanistan-hearings-biden)

August 23, 2021

Oddly, many Democrats criticizing Biden over the withdrawal seem stuck on the first, and are dancing gingerly around the second. It's hard to avoid concluding that they are cowed by Republican criticism of Biden and a relentlessly narrow media framing that lends support to the GOP position. 

Sen. Chris Murphy has avoided this fallacy. The Connecticut Democrat is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which has announced hearings into Biden's "flawed" withdrawal, which may include a look at his predecessor's negotiations with the Taliban leading up to this point.

But in an interview, Murphy said he will call on the committee to broaden out their investigation.

"We should be doing a full, comprehensive review of how we got to this moment," Murphy told me. "You cannot tell the story of what happened around the airport in Kabul without reviewing the decisions made over the last 20 years."

Democrats have mostly focused on the process and decisions adopted by the Biden administration leading up to wrenching scenes of stranded refugees, including countless people who aided the U.S. They are prepping other investigations with this focus.

In some cases, Democrats have gone a bit further and implicated the Trump administration's resolution with the Taliban, which Biden mostly carried out. But many Democrats have capitulated to a framing that treats the only real failures here as related to Biden's "botched execution" of the withdrawal.

This framing has been widely echoed by neutral journalists, but embedded in it is a very pronounced point of view. It treats it as an established, objective fact that there existed an alternate execution of the withdrawal that would have been quasi-immaculate in nature.

That framing also implicitly takes a position — in the negative — on whether a very messy withdrawal was an inevitable outgrowth of the situation that was created by 20 years of misguided policy. But this is a contested notion.

It also privileges the position of Republicans, who want the focus narrow for obvious political reasons, since a broader focus would implicate their party. And it privileges the position of those who advocated for this war all along.

“It’s a convenient moment for Afghanistan war cheerleaders,” Murphy told me. “They can focus all the nation’s attention on the immediate evacuation, absolving themselves of blame for keeping the United States in this war.”

Murphy argued that it is in the national interest to adopt a broader framing.

“Right now many Democrats are buying into Republican arguments that the Biden administration is solely to blame for the chaos,” Murphy said. “That is not true. We’re seeing the regrettable but inevitable consequence of a 20-year war that was badly mismanaged and lasted far too long.”

“There is this fantasy that has been constructed by the media and members of both parties that we could leave Afghanistan, amid a collapse of the Afghan army and government, in a neat, clean way,” Murphy continued.

Importantly, these observations can coexist with demands for oversight and accountability on Biden’s performance. We are starting to get a reasonably good idea of what happened: U.S. military planners misjudged how quickly the Afghan army would collapse.

Congressional investigations are appropriate, because we need to know the full story and what governing weaknesses it reveals. Perhaps such investigations *will* reveal that an alternate approach would have been much cleaner.

But no one should be asserting this as an objective fact at this point. And regardless, it in no way requires the focus to be *only* on those things.

Some insist the demand for a broader focus is “partisan” or “pointing fingers” or about protecting the president politically. But it’s plainly *in the public interest* to determine the full scope of folly that went into the entire sorry episode.

Indeed, the claim that a broader focus is “partisan” is itself a deeply biased claim: It validates and protects the position of Republicans and the war’s initiators and longtime boosters. A broader focus would implicate Democratic supporters of the war, too.

“Democrats can forcefully push back on Republican bulls —t without completely absolving the Biden administration,” Murphy told me. “As Democrats we should demand that this accounting be of *all* the bad decisions that led us to today.”

Why do few Democrats go here? Matt Duss, a foreign policy adviser to Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), who backs Biden’s decision, points to a party-wide problem: Democratic presidents often face blowback from their own party when they buck hawkish D.C. conventional wisdom.

“Whether it’s Barack Obama negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran or Biden drawing down in Afghanistan,” Duss told me, “it’s crazy that Democratic presidents face more aggressive criticism from their own party for trying to end wars or prevent them through diplomacy than they do when continuing decades-old wars or launching new ones.”

Do better, Democrats. Not because it’s good for the party. Because it’s good for the country.