

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Message to the Force - One Year Since the Conclusion of the Afghanistan War

AUG. 30, 2022

Today, we mark one year since the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, and I, like so many of you, have been reflecting on the sacrifice that American Service Members, Veterans, their families, and so many others made during America's longest war.

I first want to express my profound gratitude to all who served in Afghanistan, including everyone on our Department of Defense team. Every American who contributed to our efforts shared a deep devotion to keeping our country safe, working toward a brighter future for the Afghan people, and standing up for liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. As a veteran of the war, I witnessed firsthand the bravery, selflessness, and compassion that our men and women brought to the fight. Your efforts make me proud to be your colleague - and even prouder to be an American.

Two decades of noble service demanded significant and selfless sacrifice. Many Service members still bear the wounds of war, to body and to soul, and 2,461 brave heroes never made it home. To our Gold Star families: We hold your loved ones in our hearts - and we pledge to you the unwavering commitment of a grateful Nation.

The United States went to Afghanistan in 2001 to wage a necessary war of self-defense. On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists attacked our country. They were able to plan and execute such a horrific attack because their Taliban hosts had given them safe haven in Afghanistan. Since 2001, no enemy has been able to launch such an

attack on our homeland, and that speaks to the entire U.S. government's efforts to defend our citizens from terrorist threats that could emanate from Afghanistan or anywhere around the globe.

Still, we know this work is not done. We must keep a relentless focus on counterterrorism - and we are. Just a few weeks ago, the United States delivered justice to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden's deputy at the time of the 9/11 attacks. And in recent months, our military has successfully carried out operations against key ISIS leaders. We also know that preventing terrorist violence requires much more than military might. We're committed to supporting a whole-of-government effort to address the root causes of violent extremism. No one should doubt America's resolve to keep our people safe.

For me, there is no greater testament to the strength of a country's democracy than the fact that millions of people freely choose, every day, to defend it. Those who step up to serve - whether in uniform or as part of our civilian workforce - do so because of the values we fight for: the rule of law, human dignity, and freedom.

So last year, in the war's final days, the United States, along with our partners and allies, conducted the largest air evacuation of civilians in American history, lifting more than 124,000 people to safety. I'm proud that our military communities - and Americans from all walks of life - have welcomed our Afghan allies as they begin new lives in our country.

And our values continue to drive the important work that American patriots are doing around the world. The United States is rushing urgently needed assistance to Ukraine in the face of Russia's unprovoked and reckless invasion. We are firmly committed to supporting the people of Ukraine and to defending the rules-based international order against autocrats and aggressors anywhere.

As our country looks back on two decades of combat in Afghanistan, I understand that many people have hard questions about the costs of the war and what their sacrifices meant. These are important discussions, and I hope we will keep having them with thoughtfulness and respect.

Last year, I said that although the Afghanistan war has ended, our gratitude to those who served never will. Today, I renew that pledge. To every man and woman who served in Afghanistan: This country will never forget what you did and what you gave.

Thank you.

May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

Lloyd J. Austin, III