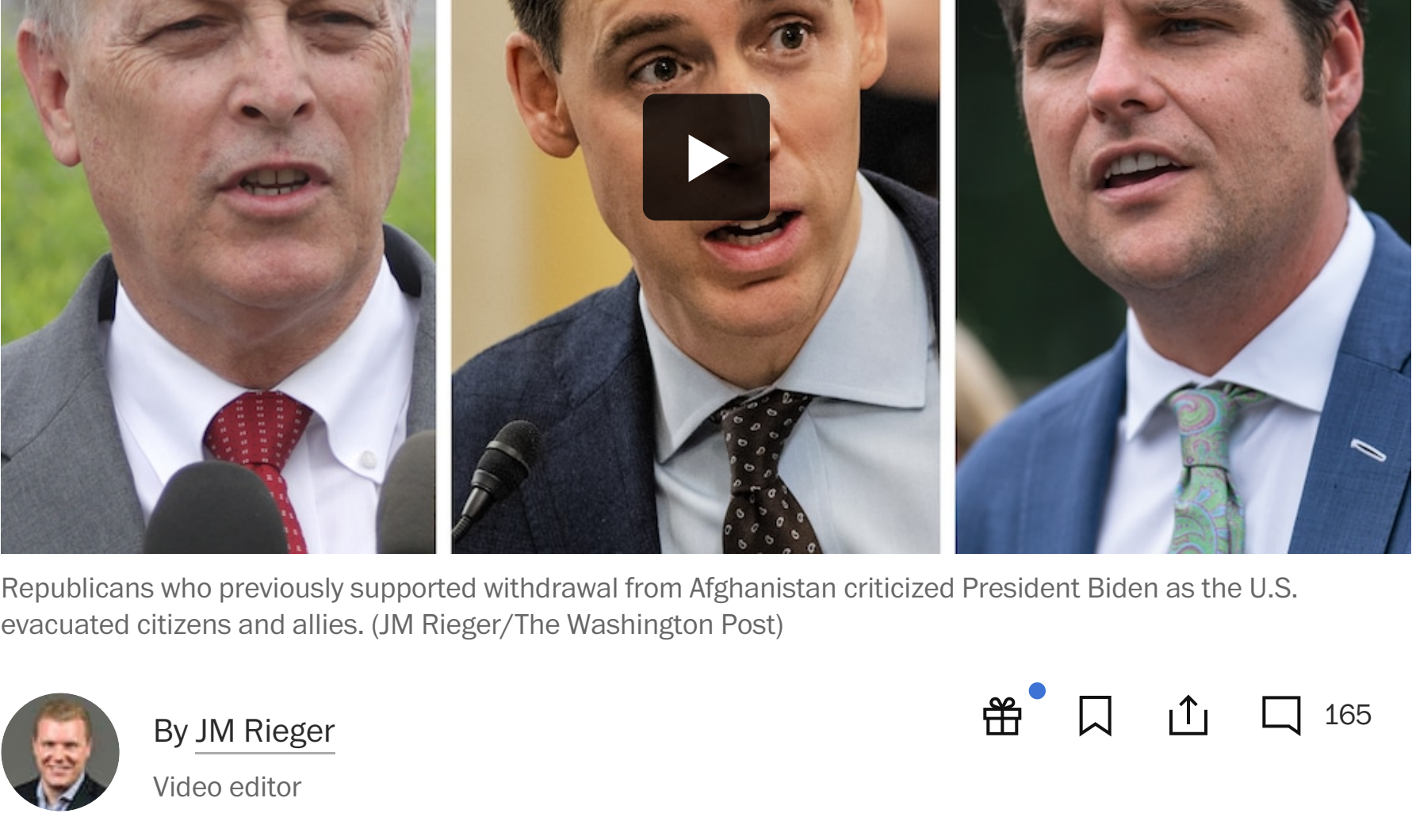


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The Fix Analysis

The GOP’s shifts in tone and substance on the Afghanistan withdrawal



Republicans who previously supported withdrawal from Afghanistan criticized President Biden as the U.S. evacuated citizens and allies. (JM Rieger/The Washington Post)



By JM Rieger

Video editor

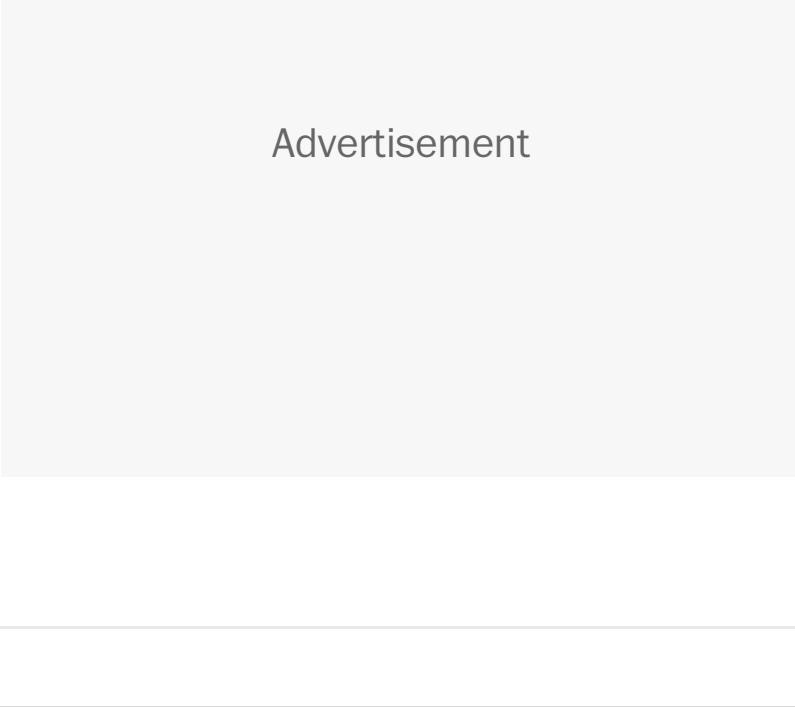
Yesterday at 9:30 a.m. EDT

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This post has been updated to more fully account for the comments of Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.).

A year and a half after some congressional Republicans praised the Trump administration’s [deal](#) with the Taliban to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan over the next 14 months, many of them have responded to the [chaotic withdrawal](#) by adjusting their rhetoric — both tonally and substantially — on both the deal and the decision to fully withdraw.

Many members of both parties have generally favored withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan for years, and there are plenty of [variables](#) involved. But the GOP’s efforts to blame the current administration for the situation calls into question their past comments, which included praising the engagement with the Taliban but now suggesting it was foolhardy, and supporting a quick withdrawal before suggesting it was too hasty or a residual force was needed. Most have offered [few specifics](#) on how the final withdrawal should have been executed differently.

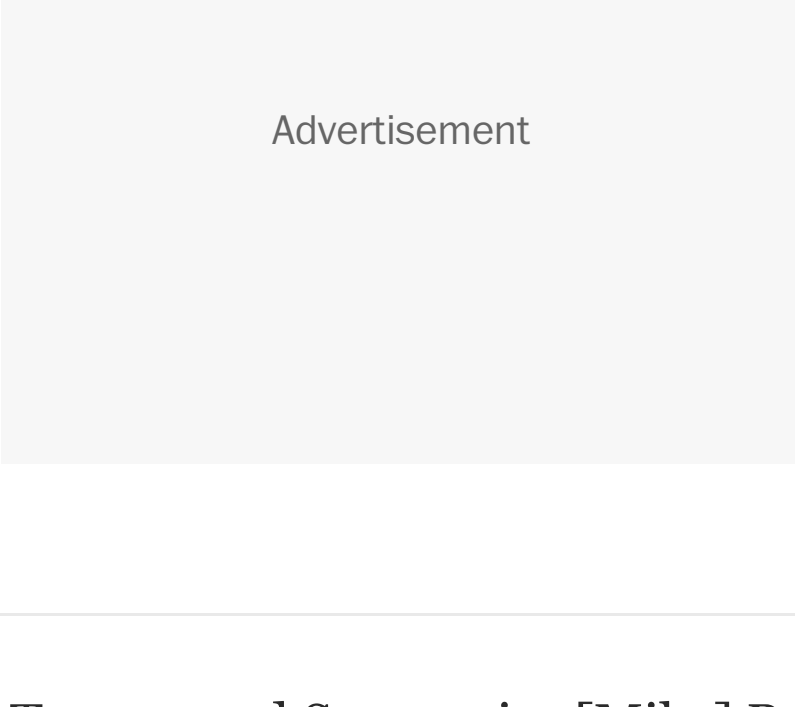


When the Trump administration announced its Taliban agreement in February of last year, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) [called it](#) a “positive step.” Now, McCarthy [is criticizing](#) the Biden administration for adhering to the agreement and has suggested that the United States should have kept troops in Afghanistan [indefinitely](#).

In July 2020, Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) said there was “[never] a bad day to end the war in Afghanistan.” Thirteen months later, Gaetz admonished President Biden for doing just that.

“The decision to withdraw was correct,” Gaetz [said](#) on Aug. 16. “The strategy and tactics, horrific and incompetent. The fundamental error was ever believing that the Afghan ‘government’ and ‘military’ would ever fight for or win anything.”

The day the agreement was announced, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.) praised it, while qualifying his support.

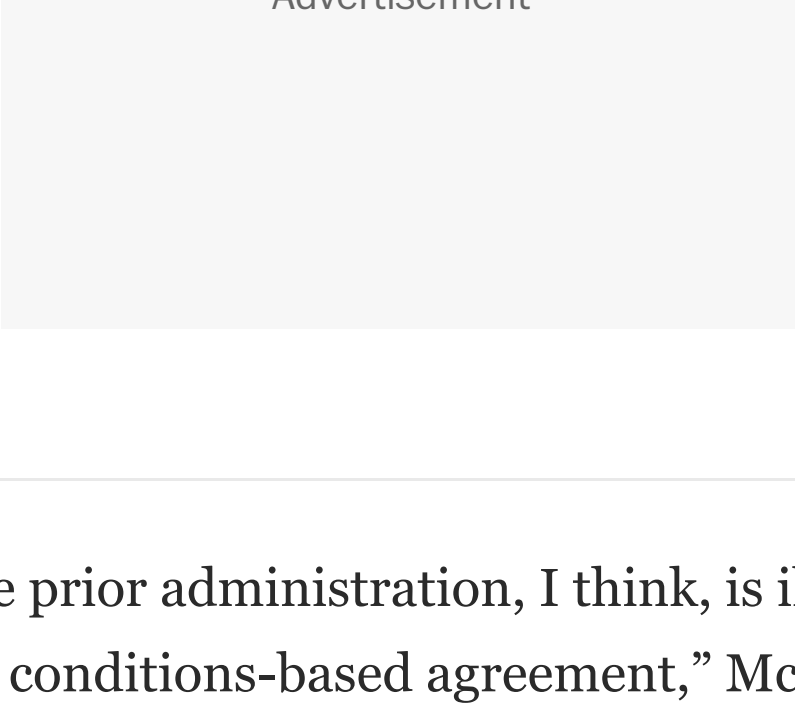


“I applaud President Trump, and Secretaries [Mike] Pompeo and [Mark T.] Esper for reaching an agreement with the Taliban and a corresponding joint declaration with the Afghan government,” McCaul [said in a statement](#) on Feb. 29, 2020, adding: “It is critical that a residual force remain in place until a lasting peace is achieved.”

Two days later, McCaul suggested there was no alternative to Trump’s talks with the Taliban.

“There’s a healthy amount of skepticism, but I think we have to give it a chance to work,” McCaul [told Politico](#) on March 2, 2020. “We knew the Taliban is not a nice organization; they’re pretty ruthless. But what’s the alternative?”

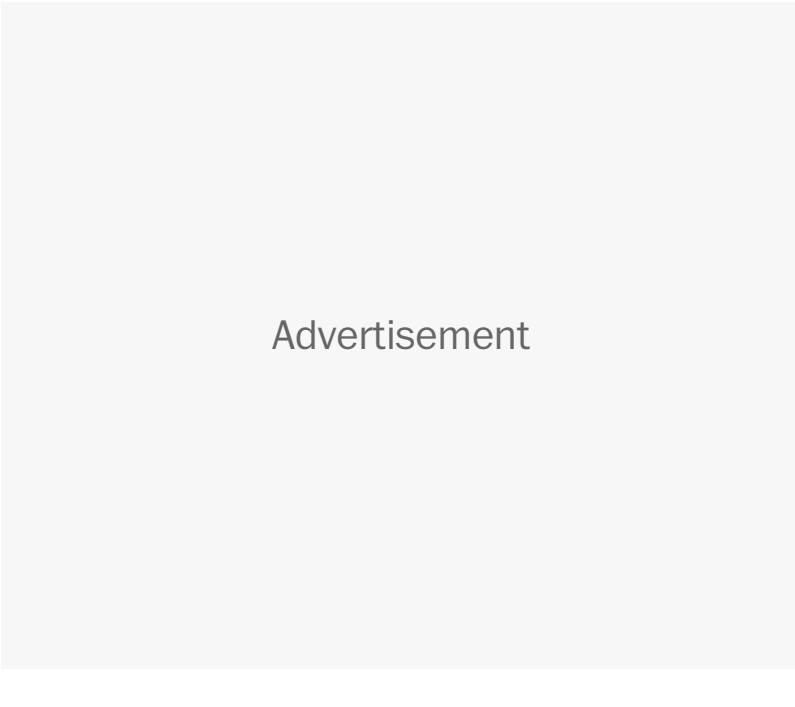
By the time the Biden administration was executing the final withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, McCaul had shifted to criticizing the White House’s [engagement](#) with the Taliban.



“To blame this on the prior administration, I think, is ill-conceived, because the fact is, this was a conditions-based agreement,” McCaul [said](#) on Aug. 16. “And the conditions were not being followed by the Taliban. ... I have always said you can’t really negotiate with the Taliban.”

In a statement to The Washington Post, McCaul said he repeatedly advised the Trump administration to leave a residual force in Afghanistan and to only withdraw troops if the Taliban met the conditions of the deal.

“That’s why I opposed legislation in July of last year that would have directed the president fully withdraw from the country without allowing for a residual force, and why I urged the Trump Administration last year not to follow through with the deal while the Taliban was not fulfilling their obligations,” McCaul said.



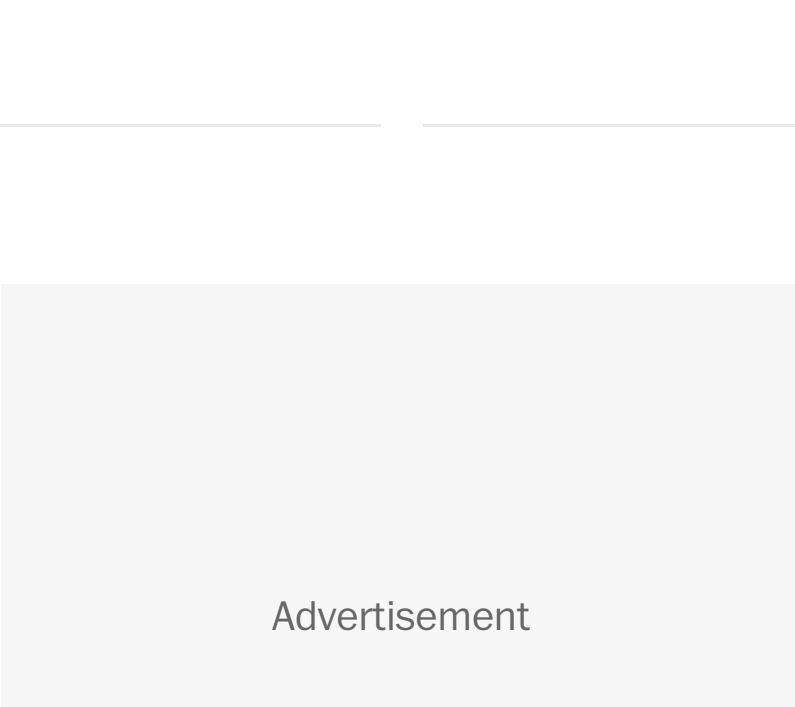
In April, Sen. Cynthia M. Lummis (R-Wyo.) [said](#) Biden should have maintained the May 1 troop withdrawal deadline that Trump set with the Taliban. By August, Lummis said Biden’s plan to withdraw by the end of the month had “[emboldened](#)” the Taliban.

Lummis’s office responded, “Her position has not changed about the need to withdraw, but she did note in the interview that the way the withdraw was executed was disastrous.”

In September 2020, Rep. Glenn Grothman (R-Wis.) praised Trump’s “[Taliban peace treaty](#).” Now, he [says](#) U.S. troops should have stayed in Afghanistan.

In November, Rep. Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.) told Fox News that it wasn’t “premature” to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan. On Tuesday, Biggs called the withdrawal “disastrous.”

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) and Rep. Mo Brooks (R-Ala.) also supported ending the war in Afghanistan. Both have since [slammed](#) the way the Biden administration conducted the final withdrawal while offering [few alternatives](#).



Appearing at a national security conference in June 2019, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) criticized the war.

“The American people, they look at what we’re doing in Afghanistan, they look at what we’re doing in Syria, and they say, ‘Why are we there again, exactly?’ ” Hawley said at the time.

By the time Biden announced in April that he would withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, Hawley [said](#) he should stick to Trump’s May 1 deadline, “but better late than never.”

When a suicide bomber [killed 13 U.S. service members](#) a week ago, Hawley again criticized Biden, this time for the withdrawal itself.

“We must reject the falsehood peddled by a feckless president that this was the only option for the withdrawal,” Hawley [said](#). “This is the product of Joe Biden’s catastrophic failure of leadership.”

Hawley did not specify how he would have conducted the withdrawal differently.

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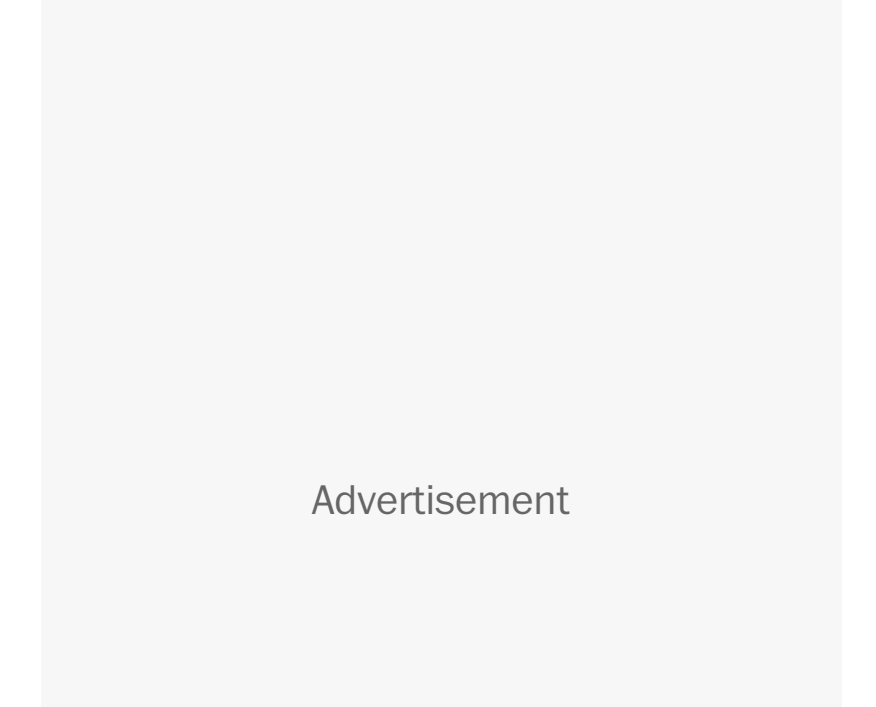
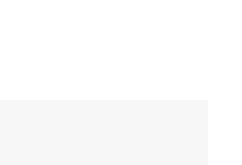
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