

Longtime veterans advocate applauds decision to leave Afghanistan, mourns losses

By CANDICE SPECTOR Idaho State Journal

There are few things in this world about which Idaho resident Dan McKnight is more passionate than advocating for military service members.

Having served in Afghanistan from 2005 to '07 after being deployed to the Korengal Valley with the Idaho National Guard, McKnight has an intimate understanding of the 20-year war and what it means to have given a piece of himself for the cause.

As he watched U.S. troops chaotically pull out of Afghanistan last month, putting an end to America's on-the-ground involvement there, he felt simultaneously relieved and swarmed by painful thoughts.

"It's heart-wrenching and painful to watch something built up by (thousands of) Americans and \$2 trillion in 20 years of our lives fall in just a matter of days," McKnight said.

The Taliban, a militant group that controlled Afghanistan decades ago, quickly regained control of the country in late August as the U.S. began thinning its presence there. In the days leading up to the 20th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, the Taliban had retaken all of Afghanistan despite yearslong American military efforts there to prevent that from happening.

While McKnight, a 13-year veteran of the military, including service in the U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army and the Idaho Army National Guard, struggled to understand the strategy President Joe Biden's administration took in withdrawing U.S. service members, he was happy to see that an exit was finally being facilitated.

"I can't stress enough that I am very happy President Biden finally brought the troops home," he said. "He did something the three previous presidents couldn't do. But it's just that he did it completely backwards."

Through the organization that McKnight founded, BringOurTroopsHome.US, he has been a vocal advocate for an end to the war in Afghanistan.

The war there, he said, went on "far too long" and should've ended when the U.S. accomplished its mission about six months after putting boots on the ground.

"From that point on, our continued presence in Afghanistan was devastating," he said.



Dan McKnight poses for a portrait in his office on Nov. 5, 2020, in Meridian. *Jake King/Idaho Press*

McKnight said he's not surprised by how the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan went, and that the Taliban regaining control of the country was an inevitable outcome.

"That would have happened whether we left in 2002, whether we left in 2050 or whether we left this month. It wouldn't have mattered," he said. "Afghanistan has been fighting a civil war for 40 years. They just pushed the pause button while we were there for the last 19 and a half and they picked it right back up as soon as the referee left the battlefield."

Now that the war has ended, McKnight said his efforts will be focused on holding to account the federal elected officials who play a major role in shaping military policy and determining whether America goes back to war.

"The Taliban basically has all of the weapons and the tools that the U.S. was using to train the Afghan army," McKnight said. "Now we have an enemy that has an air force. We have an enemy that has an abundant supply of weapons, and we're gonna end up fighting a war one day, probably one day soon, against the enemy with our own weapons."