

America has fully withdrawn from Afghanistan, ending its longest war, and President Biden faces difficult questions about the way the U.S. went about leaving. The Delta variant of the coronavirus is still raging and spreading in the United States, complicating the start to the 2021-2022 academic year. On Capitol Hill, the House returned for a rare August session and both the House and Senate face a daunting agenda for the fall. The U.S. Federal Reserve held its annual symposium virtually. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issues its most comprehensive assessment on climate change to date, and its findings are grim.

### *Afghanistan Withdrawal*

The United States withdrew its remaining forces in advance of an August 31 deadline. As American troops withdrew, the Taliban quickly went on the offensive and the country fell into their hands as Afghan security forces surrendered, often without putting up a fight. The Taliban now control more of the country than they held before the 2001 invasion. The swiftness of the Taliban conquest stunned military and national security officials. Amid the withdrawal in August, Biden said in a statement that he had to make a choice and that he would not pass on the war to a fifth U.S. president. Biden has faced heavy criticism for his handling of the evacuation. As the Taliban advanced on the capital, Kabul, there were chaotic scenes and violent episodes, including a [suicide bombing](#) that killed 13 American Services members and over 170 Afghans at the Hamid Karzai International Airport as tens of thousands of Afghans rushed to flee the country. Before the last American C-17 cargo plane departed from Kabul the [U.S. airlift](#) managed to extract more than 120,000 Americans, Afghans and other allies from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there are dozens of American citizens and U.S. green card holders, as well as hundreds of other members of nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and women at risk, still trying to leave Afghanistan. While all American military and diplomatic personnel have left, there are a number of questions over the future of the security, governance, and humanitarian situation in the country.

### *Pandemic Update*

The Delta variant of the coronavirus continues to [rapidly spread](#) across the United States—the U.S. has surpassed 40 million confirmed cases, in some states hospitalizations are increasing at the fastest growth rates since the start of the pandemic, and deaths are beginning to surge since plateauing over the summer. However, there has also been a recent increase in the number of Americans getting vaccinated and more employers are likely to mandate COVID-19 vaccines for their workers now that the Pfizer shot has gotten [full approval from the Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA). The hope is that this full approval might push the hesitant to get the shot and [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#), chief medical advisor to President Biden, says if most eligible people get vaccinated the U.S. could have control of COVID-19 by the spring of 2022. Following the announcement from the FDA, President Biden called on public and private entities to “step up” coronavirus vaccine mandates. Last month, Biden announced a [new policy](#) requiring federal workers, military members, and onsite contractors to declare their vaccination status or face strict masking and testing protocols. [The Pentagon](#) is also mandating vaccinations for service members. Imposing vaccine mandates largely tracks with public opinion as [nearly two-thirds of Americans](#) say they would support federal, state, and local

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governments requiring everyone get a vaccine. Moving forward, it is increasingly likely that [boosters will be required](#) for all vaccinated adults and the FDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are currently drafting a plan.

#### *Back to School COVID Complications*

Students across America returned to the class-room as the continuing spread of the Delta variant of the coronavirus prompted fiery political debates, conflicting policies and uncertainty for parents, students, teachers and school administrators. The start of the school year brought chaos as school board members, doctors and local leaders were regularly confronted with angry taunts and some [teachers were violently assaulted](#). The 2021-2022 academic year is the third school year to encounter COVID-19-related complications and there is inconsistency across school districts on policies related to masking and vaccination (vaccines are still not available for children under the age of 12). Parents, teachers and students are eager for a return to in-person learning, as many students have already suffered severe learning loss and the pandemic has [highlighted significant racial and economic inequality in education](#)—a gap many worry could grow even wider. [Dan Domenech](#), executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, warns of more COVID-related disruptions due to disparities in vaccinations and rising case counts, saying “The outlook right now is too similar to what we went through last year.”

#### *The Fall Agenda on Capitol Hill*

In a rare move, the House of Representatives temporarily returned to Washington from their summer break to vote on the [\\$3.5 fiscal 2022 budget resolution](#), which includes reconciliation instructions, and a rule setting up consideration of the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package as well as [voting rights legislation](#), setting the stage for a very busy fall in both chambers. The House and Senate are set to return on September 20 and September 13, respectively. When lawmakers return they will face an October 1 government funding deadline, emergency disaster funding to address the devastation from Hurricane Ida and the raging wildfires in the American west, as well as a debt-limit fight. With respect to the latter, Democrats may try to attach a debt-limit to government funding legislation but [Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#) has vowed that Senate Republicans will oppose the measure setting up a complicated political environment. There is also a soft September 27 deadline for the House to pass the bipartisan infrastructure measure and congressional committees have until September 15 to produce their pieces of the reconciliation package, which would then be bundled together by the Budget Committees for floor consideration. Speaker Pelosi must navigate some complicated intra-party political waters as House Progressives have threatened not to vote on the infrastructure bill before the reconciliation package is completed and Moderates saying they won't vote for the reconciliation package without first voting on the infrastructure bill.

#### *The Fed's Annual Symposium*

In late August, central bankers met virtually for their [annual gathering](#) traditionally held in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell, facing uncertainty regarding his potential reappointment to the government's most powerful economic position, struck an upbeat tone in [his](#)

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[speech](#) and [signaled](#) that the Fed may start reducing economic support even as challenges still remain due to the coronavirus and labor market complications. Powell said that “while the Delta variant presents a near-term risk, the prospects are good for continued progress toward maximum employment” and suggested that before the Fed starts to reduce its \$120 billion in monthly purchases of U.S. government debt and mortgage-backed securities, he wants to see stronger job growth. The Chairman also made clear that even if the central bank begins to slow its asset purchases, that doesn’t mean it’s close to raising interest rates.

### *The Clear and Present Climate Crisis*

In August, the [United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) released its sixth and most definitive report on the causes and effects of climate change. [UN Secretary General António Guterres](#) said the report “is a code red for humanity” and it was clear in its warning: the world is in crisis, we are quickly approaching a crucial temperature threshold, and humans are unequivocally responsible. The report is the first major review of the scientific literature related to climate change since 2013 and comes at a crucial time, just months before the 26<sup>th</sup> UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) in Glasgow. The release of this report also coincides with a period of severe weather and climate-related events in the United States, including: [wildfires devastating areas](#) of California, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington; [hurricanes](#) striking the eastern United States with increasing severity and frequency; and an [acute water crisis in the American west](#), which lead officials to declare a water shortage on the Colorado River, a watershed that supplies water to seven states, for the first time in American history. [Nearly a third of Americans](#) have experienced a severe weather event this summer. It is clear that the climate crisis is here and policymakers in Washington will increasingly focus not only on emissions reductions, but on adaptation and mitigation to address the catastrophic risks and realities of climate change as events become increasingly more frequent, destructive and costly.

### *Personnel Updates*

*Department of Agriculture* – **Brook Jamison** has been appointed as associate administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service. **Regina Black** is chief of staff for trade and foreign agricultural affairs.

*Department of Commerce* – **Alejandra Y. Castillo** was confirmed as assistant secretary for economic development. **Viquar Ahmad** is the nominee for assistant secretary for administration and chief financial officer. **Matthew Axelrod** is the nominee for assistant secretary for export enforcement.

*Department of Defense* – **Gilbert Ray Cisneros** was confirmed as undersecretary for personnel and readiness. **Christopher P. Maier** is assistant secretary for special operations/low-intensity conflict. **Sasha Baker** is the nominee for deputy undersecretary for policy.

*Department of Energy* – **Andrew Light** was confirmed as assistant secretary for international affairs.

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*Department of State* – **Jose W. Fernandez** was confirmed as undersecretary for economic growth, energy and the environment as well as alternate governor of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. **Ken Salazar** was confirmed by the Senate as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. **Gentry O. Smith** was confirmed as assistant secretary for diplomatic security. **Elizabeth M. Allen** is now assistant secretary for global public affairs. **Dan Shapiro**, former Ambassador to Israel, is now senior advisor for Iran. The following ambassadorial nominations have been announced: **Thomas Barrett** for Luxembourg; **Mark Brzezinski** for Poland; **R. Nicholas Burns** for China; **Rahm Emanuel** for Japan; and **Marc Stanley** for Argentina.

*International Development Finance Corporation* – **Scott A. Nathan** is the nominee for chief executive officer.

*United States Agency for International Development* – **Carla Koppell** is the nominee for assistant administrator for development, democracy, and innovation. **Colleen R. Allen** is assistant administrator at the bureau for management.

*White House* - **Ethan M. Holmes** is director at office of private sector engagement. **Tyler T. Moran** is deputy assistant to the president and senior advisor for migration.