

Southern New Hampshire University

The United States in Afghanistan:

How U.S. Foreign Policy in the “Graveyard of Empires” Paved the Road to the Present

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By

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## **Abstract**

Over the course of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence and allies. Afghanistan was initially viewed as unimportant to U.S. interests and ignored. This caused the Afghans to turn to the Soviet Union for aid, loans, and military assistance. The U.S. reversed course and invested money and resources into the Central Asian nation, but the influence of Soviet-style communism spread through Afghanistan. A Marxist coup led to the Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-89, which caused the U.S. to invest heavily in covert operations to support the rebel Mujahideen. This support dried up after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, leading to the Afghan Civil War and the rise of the Taliban. Under the protection of the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and his terrorist organization, al Qaeda, planned and launched multiple attacks against the U.S. After the September 11 attack, the U.S. reentered Afghanistan and spent the next twenty years fighting a war in which it had little interest. The September 11 attacks changed life in the U.S., as well as around the world, forever. The issues faced today, including instability in the Middle East, an ever-widening gap between political ideologies, and the retrograde of rights and liberties can be traced back to U.S. policy concerning Afghanistan from 1955-2001. This paper analyzes the missteps, connects them to the current issues, and identifies future potential calamities that can still be avoided.

## **Dedication**

To my wife, Larisa. I did it! We're so proud of you!

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CENTCOM – U.S. Central Command

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

GOP – Government of Pakistan

ISI – Inter-Services Agency

KGB – Committee for State Security

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan

MI6 – British Secret Intelligence Service (Military Intelligence, Section 6)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSC – National Security Council

PDPA – People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan

SIGAR – Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

U.S. – United States of America

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

USG – United States Government

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)



### **Note on Spelling**

The spelling of some names, of individuals and groups, is inconsistent across the sources used within this paper. For example, the name used to describe the Afghan and Arab warriors who fought against the Soviet Union during the Afghan-Soviet War is spelled at least four different ways (Mujahideen, Mujahidin, Mujahadeen, and Mujahedin). For simplicity and consistency, Mujahideen has been selected as the standard spelling within this paper. Other spellings are used in direct quotes to align with the source material. Similarly, “Osama bin Laden” is used rather than “Usama bin Ladin,” and “Taliban” is used exclusively unless featured in quoted material. For Russian names, the accepted Westernized spelling is used, unless quoted or when the cited material was published under a different spelling.

## Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the shocking terrorist attacks perpetrated on September 11, 2001 in New York City, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the recurring questions for many in the United States were “Who did this?” “Why did this happen?” and “How could this have happened?” Over the days and weeks that followed, the world learned the name of Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for conducting the attacks. A segment of the notoriously geographically-unaware American population also discovered the existence of the nation of Afghanistan, including the country’s location on a map. Functional understanding of bin Laden’s organization and hatred of the United States was not considered common or prevalent knowledge. Though he was connected to the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, his name did not gain its current prominence with the general population until after the 2001 attacks.

For historians and experts in the fields of the Middle East, Islamism, Central Asia, or terrorism, the name Osama bin Laden and the nation of Afghanistan are well known. The first few years after 9/11 saw the publication of dozens of books and articles, both scholarly and non-academic, on bin Laden, his rise to the apex of the terrorism pyramid, and his life before 2001. Searching for a connection between bin Laden and the Afghan-Soviet War of 1979-89 was a logical pursuit. During this period, he fought with the Mujahideen, a loose collection of groups of men from Afghanistan and across the Arab world who joined the *jihad* against the Soviet Union in response to the global superpower’s invasion. While these connections were made, the limited availability of information delayed the arrival at more encompassing and viable conclusions. Since 2001, more information has become available, either through declassification,

leaking, or from accounts of those who were present and interacted with bin Laden or his associates.

The subsequent six chapters explore the recent history of Afghanistan, the Afghan-Soviet War, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Operation Cyclone, the Mujahideen and Taliban, the rise of terrorism, and the prolonged U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. This analysis provides the insight, evidence, and support necessary to defend the forthcoming arguments that the foreign policies of the U.S. regarding Afghanistan from the mid-1950s through 2001 had a massive impact on the current state of world affairs. While examples in the current scholarship connect the Afghan-Soviet War to the rise of terrorism in the twenty-first century, this paper argues that the true starting point should be three decades earlier in the 1950s. This shift in proposed start date is not to minimize the role of the war in the process but instead to explain what occurred to bring about an environment that fostered war.

The Afghan-Soviet War began as an attempt by the Soviet Union to remove an erratic and unpopular communist leader, Hafizullah Amin, but quickly mutated into a guerrilla war in which morale among the Soviet soldiers was shattered and one of the world's most powerful militaries was forced to retreat and cut their losses. Having been trained for traditional warfare on the European continent against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, the Soviets were unable to adapt to the fighting styles of the loose coalition of insurgents that made up the Afghan Mujahideen. The so-called "freedom fighters" hailed from all levels of society, with many traveling from their homelands to volunteer and fight. Though the common enemy of the Soviet Union provided a common bond, their differing ideologies and interpretations of the Islamic faith caused this bond to fray beyond recognition.

Through an alliance of nations who sought to prevent Soviet influence from spreading in the region, a great deal of the training and materials were provided to the Mujahideen: including guns, ammunition, rocket launchers, and other necessary supplies. These nations—including the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—allocated vast resources, money, and trained experts to those willing to fight against the Soviets.<sup>1</sup> U.S. President Jimmy Carter and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski originally saw the option to arm and aid those fighting the Soviets and communist Afghans as an opportunity to exact revenge on the Soviets for their role in the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Carter also sought to exude an aura of toughness in the midst of a much-beleaguered presidency, which suffered at home immensely in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis. The decision to aid the Mujahideen escalated into providing billions of dollars in military equipment and training for anyone willing to fight the Soviets that aligned with the ideals and goals of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), as they were the conduit that ran between the CIA and the resistance fighters.

Through secret deals, third parties, and covert operations, the United States funneled billions of dollars in cash and materials to Afghanistan through partners in the ISI, which had a lasting impact on the region and the world as a whole, as the involvement of the U.S. in the affairs of the Islamic world continues to be a contentious subject.<sup>3</sup> Some of the fighters armed and trained by the U.S. later joined a *jihad* declared against the West following the conclusion of the war. The aforementioned Osama bin Laden, a Saudi national who traveled to Afghanistan to

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Tamim Ansary, *Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012), 212.

<sup>3</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc., Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 67-68.

wage holy war on the Soviets, was one of these individuals.<sup>4</sup> During the war, this wealthy son of a Saudi construction magnate used his background and business connections to import building materials and machinery for a series of infrastructure projects, including the cave system in the Tora Bora mountains, out of which al Qaeda would later operate.<sup>5</sup>

At the conclusion of the war, a power vacuum was created and a civil war between the loose coalition of Mujahideen commenced.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1990s, a new group of Afghan youth who were educated at fundamentalist madrasas arrived from Pakistan. The Taliban–Pashto for “students” or “seekers”—were predominately Pashtun men who were forced from their homes and into Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet War.<sup>7</sup> Led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, an ultraconservative Islamist from Kandahar, the Taliban waged a successful military campaign against the warring Mujahideen factions and gained complete control of Afghanistan, one province and city at a time. Upon their ascent to power, they formed a fundamentalist Islamic caliphate, which banned Western-style clothing and popular culture while desecrating ancient Buddhist monuments carved into the sides of cliffs.<sup>8</sup>

The legacy of the war has been studied over the past three decades due to the fall of the Soviet Union that occurred in 1991. Scholars have compared the war to the Vietnam War and the resulting blemishes caused to the reputations of the Soviet and U.S, respectively.<sup>9</sup> The Afghan-Soviet War, and the involvement of the United States and its allies, provides an opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Scheuer, *Osama bin Laden*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49-50

<sup>5</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 156-157.

<sup>6</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 247-248.

<sup>7</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Oleg Sarin, and Lev Dvoretzky. *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 88.

analyze the political motives of the two superpowers, the strength of cultural heritage in the region, and the long-term ramifications that continue to play out in the present day, including the recent withdrawal of American troops after a twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a wide range of aspects of the Afghan-Soviet War, starting with an analysis of the recent scholarship on the subject. This is followed by the history of Afghanistan, focusing on the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, and how the policy decisions made during the period affected the nation's future. Also featured is an exploration of U.S. foreign policy as it pertains to Afghanistan in the twenty-five years leading up to the Soviet invasion. This is followed by an analysis of the short-term and long-term consequences of the covert actions taken by the U.S. and how the working relationship between the CIA and ISI affected the trajectory of humanity, along with an exploration of how life in Afghanistan was altered in the decade after the Soviet withdrawal. Finally, an examination of the CIA's role and assessment as to the potential level of blame for the rise of Osama bin Laden and the terrorist network al Qaeda, as well as an investigation into whether any lessons have been learned and warnings heeded, connects this slice of history to the current war in Ukraine and the NATO policy of providing unlimited arms to the Ukrainian military without oversight.

The research conducted and vetted, examined sources support an analysis and argument that neither pulls punches nor absolves the parties involved in the execution of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The foreign policies implemented by the United States with respect to Afghanistan between 1955 and 1979 laid the foundation on which the Central Asian nation resided for the remainder of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first. The approval and execution of CIA covert operations by the United States and its allies against the Soviet Union during the Afghan-Soviet War built upon this foundation and licensed the rise to power of the

ultraconservative and totalitarian theocracy implemented by the Taliban in Afghanistan during the mid-1990s. The funding and training of Islamic militants by these nations permitted the augmentation of terrorist activities around the world throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the decisions made by the U.S. government over the course of four decades caused long-lasting consequences and turmoil.

## Chapter 1: Recent Scholarship Analysis

Before exploring the evidence that supports the central thesis of this paper, an analysis of the most recent scholarship available on the Afghan-Soviet War is crucial. The historical scholarship can presently be divided into three eras. The first spans across from the mid-1980s, while the war was ongoing, through September 2001. The historical works written in this period are unique compared to those published later because they were written before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. All works after this event are written, at least partially, through this lens, as the biases of the post-9/11 world heavily influences the scholarship. Of the more than fifty sources published after 9/11 that were analyzed for this paper, all of them mentioned the attacks in one shape or form. The pre-9/11 sources feature analyses of the Afghan-Soviet War, as well as Afghanistan as a whole, that is not overshadowed or driven by the U.S. invasion of the landlocked nation.

An example of a source that escapes the biases of the post-9/11 world is *Out of Afghanistan* by Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison. Cordovez, Undersecretary-General for Special Political Affairs of the United Nations from 1981 through 1988 and negotiator for the Geneva Accords, and Harrison, a former foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post*, argue that the major contributor to the end of the Cold War was not the loss in Afghanistan. Rather it was the shift in demographics in the Soviet Union from the periods of Lenin and Stalin, including a population migration from rural areas to cities and a jump in number of students enrolled in universities from 1.2 million in 1950 to 5.3 million in 1984. “Just as Brezhnev’s decision to invade Afghanistan was one of the last spasms of a dying Stalinist old guard, so the



withdrawal marked the triumphant emergence of a new generation of leadership.”<sup>1</sup> Cordovez and Harrison shine a new light on the last decade of the Cold War by demonstrating the significance of perestroika and diplomacy in achieving withdrawal. Throughout the book, which is divided into six parts, each written by one of the two authors, they support this assertion by focusing on the repeated attempts by the Soviets to withdraw, dating back as early as 1981.<sup>2</sup> While both authors argue about the subject in a nuanced way that is atypical of the period, by rejecting the Western narrative of the U.S. dominating the Soviets into oblivion, they utilize the traditional military lens.

Comparatively, Charles Cogan, chief of the CIA’s Near East and South Asia Division from 1979-1984, analyzes the competing theories concerning the end of the Cold War in his 1993 article “Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979.” Cogan, who was a key figure in the initial covert operations in Afghanistan, argues that there is no question the Afghan-Soviet War figures centrally in the debate over what ended the Cold War and caused the downfall of the Soviet Union. He presents former U.S. diplomat George Kennan’s argument, who disputed the notion that the West “won” the Cold War, as well as that of French historian François Furet, who offered a stance similar to Kennan. Furet contends that it was neither Reagan’s “Star Wars,” nor the war in Afghanistan, nor revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe that ended the Cold War. They may have accelerated the rate of collapse, but the downfall itself was grounded in the social system put in place by Lenin and Stalin.<sup>3</sup> Cogan latches onto this

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<sup>1</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> Charles G. Cogan, “Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan since 1979,” *World Policy Journal* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 73.

theory to support his argument that timing was the key element in the war. According to Cogan, the Soviets faced a rising tide of Islamic revivalism during this period, which increased the difficulty of containing the Afghan rebellion. Time was also a factor in U.S.-Afghan relations, which he asserts could only be limited in duration due to the nature of the Mujahideen position of being against Western ideals, as well as the U.S.'s desire to remove the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

Cogan goes one step further and asks the question of whether the U.S. should have cut all aid to the Mujahideen after the Soviet withdrawal. He contends that the argument at the time of withdrawal was that the U.S. had a moral duty to arm the rebels, especially given the fact that the Soviets were still arming the remnants of the PDPA government. Cogan asserts that the more crucial factor that needs to be explored is the desire to be responsible for, and at the center of, all world events that has pervaded U.S. foreign policy for much of the twentieth century. He asserts this is due to historical messianism and the understanding of the power the U.S. has on the world stage. "In another respect, it is atonement for the 'sin' of American isolationism of the 1930s, which, if it had persisted, might have led to the death of Western, and indeed, American democracy."<sup>5</sup> Cogan follows this up with a 2008 retrospective in which he argues that it was a mistake to have zero interaction with Afghanistan from 1992-2001, but excuses it as the best of a very limited number of choices. To him, the U.S. invasion in 2001 was not a choice, but an imperative.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cogan, "Partners in Time," 74.

<sup>5</sup> Cogan, "Partners in Time," 82.

<sup>6</sup> Charles G. Cogan, "Retrospective: Afghanistan: Partners in Time," *World Policy Journal* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2008), 153.

The irony of Cogan's 2008 article is that he contradicts his argument concerning the U.S.'s need to tamper down on intervention into foreign affairs by arguing that it was time for the alliance with Pakistan to be eschewed for a stronger one with India.<sup>7</sup> He supports this assertion by presenting the various conflicts of interest pertaining to Pakistan and its relationship with the Taliban, al Qaeda, and the Pashtun people, as well as Pakistan's unwillingness to contain the spread of Islamic fundamentalism within its borders. "Our fundamental problem, it should be emphasized, is with Al Qaeda, and secondly with the Taliban, who sheltered Al Qaeda. We cannot be perceived as moving toward a colonial war, as happened in Vietnam. Nor should we be seen by the outside world, any more than we have been already, as provoking a clash of civilizations."<sup>8</sup> Cogan presents an argument that the U.S. should not be the world's police, which aligns with his previous views regarding U.S. aid withdrawal to Afghanistan in 1992. However, this further contradicts his thoughts on shifting the focus of relations in the region from Pakistan to India. Doing so would tip the balance of power in Central Asia and promote a clash of nuclear-armed civilizations, arguably more severe than any potential clash of civilizations in Afghanistan.

Another example of a pre-9/11 source is Alan J. Kuperman's 1999 *Political Science Quarterly* article, "The Stinger Missile and the U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan." In this scholarly journal, Kuperman argues against what he deems the "Stinger myth," which proports that the 1986 arrival of the Stingers caused the Soviet Union to announce their withdrawal.<sup>9</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> Cogan, "Retrospective," 154.

<sup>8</sup> Cogan, "Retrospective," 155-156.

<sup>9</sup> Alan J. Kuperman, "The Stinger Missile and the U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan," *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 220, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2657738>.

argument is supported through an analysis of the Stinger program's timeline, which he blames the Reagan administration for delaying and wavering throughout.<sup>10</sup> Kuperman further argues that the Stinger program was not worth the cost, both monetarily and militarily through the citation of statistics of Stingers that were commandeered by the Pakistani ISI. Those that reached the Afghan Mujahideen could only to be resold on the illegal market, and an even greater number were unaccounted for and deemed lost.<sup>11</sup> Kuperman's analysis and conclusions differ from those of George Crile, veteran journalist and author of *Charlie Wilson's War*, which was published in 2003 and later adapted into a Hollywood film loosely based on the actual events.

Comparatively, Kuperman focuses his research on the Stinger program and the long-term consequences, such as the aforementioned unaccounted missile units, while Crile explores Operation Cyclone, the CIA's covert mission to supply the Mujahideen with weapons, supplies, and money in their guerrilla war against the Soviets. Crile argues that Congressman Charlie Wilson spearheaded the Stinger program and should be credited for the success of Operation Cyclone.<sup>12</sup> Crile also presents the argument that the greatest folly of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was leaving after the Soviets withdrew. Published in 2003, Crile's writing style and arguments portray U.S. intervention in the Afghan-Soviet War as noble and correct at the time, while also flawed and the cause of blowback against the U.S. in later years. Published a year after the Taliban was driven out of Afghanistan and a new U.S.-backed Afghan government was formed, *Charlie Wilson's War* reads as an attempt to convey the positives of U.S. involvement in

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<sup>10</sup> Kuperman, "The Stinger Missile," 225-226.

<sup>11</sup> Kuperman, "The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan," 254-255.

<sup>12</sup> George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*, (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 6.

Afghanistan in order to promote the cost of the current military conflict and occupation. By highlighting the aftermath of Operation Cyclone's ending and the abandonment of the Mujahideen, the reader is subconsciously drawn to the conclusion that the U.S. must maintain a presence in Afghanistan in order to prevent radical Islamists from regaining control and the possibility of another action similar to those perpetrated on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

This is one of the three styles of writing that were common in most of the other works published in the second era of historical scholarship, which spans from immediately after the attacks through 2011. The second common approach in this period of scholarship involves investigation and a focus on the individuals responsible for the 9/11 attacks. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, historical analysis of Afghanistan and Islamic terrorism increased at a previously unseen rapid pace. Journalists like Steve Coll, Lawrence Wright, and Peter Bergen authored numerous books concerning al Qaeda, Afghanistan, the Taliban, and U.S. intelligence, including *Ghost Wars*, *Holy War, Inc*, *The Looming Tower*, and *The Bin Ladens*. Each author traveled extensively to interview key individuals and to research the events thoroughly.

In his 2005 Pulitzer Prize winner *Ghost Wars*, Coll traces 9/11 back to the Soviet invasion, and he explores the role of the CIA in Afghanistan from 1979 through 1989, as well as the turbulent civil war and Taliban years that followed from 1990-2001. Coll argues that the role of the CIA regarding 9/11 and Afghanistan is indeed central, but that the agency did not act alone and is not solely responsible for what happened. He concludes that the CIA "struggled to control its mutually mistrustful and at times toxic alliances with the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia

and Pakistan.”<sup>13</sup> The argument that the CIA did not in fact have control over their operations in Afghanistan during this period is valid as a number of the selected sources corroborate and place blame on the ISI for routing weapons and aid to Mujahideen leaders who aligned with the ideals and goals of Pakistan. However, this assertion does not absolve the CIA or the U.S. for its role in the rise of extremism in Afghanistan, and the roles of both the ISI and CIA will be analyzed in great detail later on in this paper. Coll leaves few stones unturned regarding Afghanistan, al Qaeda, and U.S. involvement, but the information available and declassified during the period in which he researched and wrote *Ghost Wars* pales in comparison to what is currently available to scholars. This is a recurring issue not just for the historical scholarship of this era, but also presently, as many government reports, correspondences, and other information remained, or continue to remain, classified. This includes information concerning the 9/11 attacks, as well as CIA operations during the Afghan-Soviet War. This by no means takes away from Coll’s work in *Ghost Wars*, which continues to represent one of the most outstanding historical analyses of the CIA in Afghanistan and should remain a foundation for the scholarship.

Coll followed up *Ghost Wars* in 2018 with *Directorate S*, a sequel of sorts that picks up immediately after the 9/11 attacks and analyzes how the CIA, ISI, and Afghan intelligence agencies influenced the beginning of a new war in Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban, as well as how that war fostered a revival of al Qaeda, its allied terrorist networks, and branches of the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> Coll puts forth the argument that the decades of civil war and instability that plagued Afghanistan following the end of the Afghan-Soviet War “have been fueled again

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<sup>13</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 5.

and again by outside interference, primarily by Pakistan, but certainly including the United States and Europe, which have remade Afghanistan with billions of dollars in humanitarian and reconstruction aid while simultaneously contributing to its violence, corruption, and instability.”<sup>15</sup> Combined, both of these books, as well as *The Bin Ladens*, his biography of the bin Laden family published in 2008, provide comprehensive exploration and analysis into a critically important topic that was previously overlooked by many historians in favor of other Cold War era proxy wars and conflicts, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and the erection of the Berlin Wall.

Artemy M. Kalinovsky approaches the topic with a focus on the Soviet military’s time in Afghanistan and diverges from the perspective of many other historians in his 2011 book *A Long Goodbye*. Rather than asking why the Soviet Union intervened, he questions why it took so long to withdraw in the first place. He relates this question to Soviet foreign policy in the 1980s, the emergence of the New Political Thinking, and the potential for superpower cooperation to facilitate UN involvement in resolving regional conflicts. “It examines the political struggles behind the troop withdrawal within the Politburo and other institutions involved in the Soviet Union’s foreign-policy process, including the military and the KGB [Committee for State Security].”<sup>16</sup> Kalinovsky argues against the assertion that military costs of war served as motivation for withdrawal and instead contends that Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev was

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<sup>15</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

willing to sacrifice the position of ending arms supplies to the Afghan resistance in favor of potentially improving relations with the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to both Cordovez and Harrison, as well as Kalinovsky, former United Kingdom Ambassador to the Soviet Union Rodric Braithwaite asserts in his 2011 book *Afgantsy* that the war effort was not that heavy for the Soviet military, regardless of the high casualty numbers, and was not a key direct contributor to the downfall of the Soviet Union. He argues that what the failure in Afghanistan actually did was reinforce the growing lack of confidence the Soviet people had in their government. This discontent was fed by many factors, including the seemingly never-ending succession of geriatric heads of government, the attempted coverup of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the economic strains of the arms race with the U.S., and the uncertainties and upheavals precipitated by Gorbachev's reforms. "All these were the symptoms that the Soviet economic and political system was no longer viable. It was collapsing even without the contribution of the war in Afghanistan."<sup>18</sup> Together with the two aforementioned sources, *Afgantsy* offers an interesting insight into the war, its short-term and long-term consequences for world politics, and its true role in the end of the Cold War.

The final major style of writing that is present during this era is the challenging of the government narrative of events and the connection between U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and the rise of *jihadi* organizations. Peter Dale Scott, a noted academic and former Canadian diplomat, explores this in his 2008 book *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of*

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<sup>17</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 330.



*America*. Scott attempts to explain why so much of the government moved from open and in public to secretive and hidden in the post-9/11 world, and argues that it was not the 2001 attacks that changed the U.S. system of government. Instead, Scott contends that 9/11 was systematically an unprecedented event and the culmination of trends in Washington over the previous half century.<sup>19</sup> He draws connections between the rise of influence of the wealthy in government affairs, including the founding of the CIA in the 1940s and the explosion of wealth inequality and private thinktanks beginning in the 1980s, as well as what he deems the bureaucratic paranoia that pervades U.S. politics and the creation of al Qaeda.<sup>20</sup> Rather than focus on Operation Cyclone and the CIA arming and training Afghan and Arab warriors, Scott draws the reader's attention to U.S. covert operations during the 1990s in which *jihadi* drug armies were financed and supported by the CIA and contends that this was more responsible for the rise of al Qaeda.<sup>21</sup> This is a unique argument that is not featured prominently by other scholars but is well supported by Scott with diverse evidence and sources.

Scott followed up *The Road to 9/11* with the 2010 article "The CIA's Secret Powers," in the journal *Central Asian Studies*, in which he argues the "secret extraconstitutional powers bestowed originally by the National Security Act of 1947 to deal with the perceived emergency of an expansionist Soviet Union" have escaped the checks and balances intended by the founding fathers and corrupted "all those who have access to them."<sup>22</sup> Scott asserts that many of the worst enlargements and perversions of these powers occurred with respect to Afghanistan and analyzes

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Dale Scott, *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *The Road to 9/11*, 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *The Road to 9/11*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Dale Scott, "The CIA's Secret Powers," *Central Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (October 2010), 234.

the out-of-control dealings between the U.S. and *jihadi* Islamists. He uses the article to present that these dealings underline the events of 9/11, the inability of U.S. media to report on what happened that day with honesty and integrity, and what these events reveal regarding the deep structure of U.S. global politics. He further contends that one of the many motives behind the 9/11 attacks was to provoke the predictable and shortsighted response of Washington: a military answer to a political problem.<sup>23</sup> Together, Scott presents a compelling analysis and exploration of the long-term consequences of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and surrounding nations. He offers an early voice of dissent against the government's version of events in an era focused on investigation of those who plotted and planned the attacks.

The third era of the historical scholarship extends from 2012 through 2021, a period in which Americans were less enthusiastic about entering a second decade of war and occupation. This is currently the modern age of the scholarship and is dominated by the challenging of official reports and narratives, which began in the previous decade, the leaking of classified information by self-described hacktivists on the internet, and a shift in focus toward the Afghan people, who have endured decades of war, occupation, and government change, but have not been prominently analyzed in the existing scholarship. Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers* is an example of a book that benefitted from the leaking of a series of classified interviews and reports conducted by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, (SIGAR.) Whitlock focuses his attention on how the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump presidential administrations failed to tell the truth of what was going on in Afghanistan, and his main argument is that these leaked documents offer a raw, unedited,

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<sup>23</sup> Scott, "The CIA's Secret Powers," 234-235.

unfiltered, and honest assessment of foreign policy concerning Afghanistan that had not existed in previously published reports or accounts of the war. SIGAR conducted hundreds of interviews with those who served in Afghanistan and those who collaborated with the policymakers in Washington, including commanders of the armed forces sent to Afghanistan, who spoke freely and on the record for the Inspector General's office.<sup>24</sup>

Whitlock further argues that no senior government officials had the courage to publicly admit the U.S. was losing a war that Americans had overwhelmingly supported at its start. Thus, Whitlock concludes, their complicit silence allowed military and political leaders to avoid accountability and bury their mistakes, which allowed the war to continue down the path of failure.<sup>25</sup> Though *The Afghanistan Papers* focuses on the U.S.'s war in Afghanistan, it also provides evidence of how the lessons of the Afghan-Soviet War were ignored, which caused the U.S. to reap what was sown between 1979-89. The support for the Mujahideen and the near carte blanche of weapons and money gifted with zero accountability or traceability brought forth an unstable Afghanistan where the Taliban gained control of the government and created a safe haven for Islamist fundamentalists and terrorist training camps. Whitlock's arguments are well-supported throughout the book and the leaked documents, which may have never become exposed yet provide some of the most authentic accounts of the U.S. occupation mismanagement of Afghanistan through the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021) xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, xx.

Spencer Ackerman's *Reign of Terror* expands on Whitlock's work by connecting the misinformation and lies perpetrated by the U.S. government and the expansion of partisanship and divisiveness in American society over the last twenty years. Ackerman argues that, while not the only factor, the War on Terror and its vague definition of who the enemy is led to the rise of Donald Trump and the growth far-right-wing activists. "It revitalized the most barbarous currents in American history, gave them renewed purpose, and set them on the march, an army in search of its general."<sup>26</sup> He also argues that the subtext of the War on Terror, "the perception of nonwhites as marauders, even conquerors, from hostile foreign civilization," was the engine that drove the U.S. to its current political and cultural climate.<sup>27</sup> Ackerman lays blame at the feet of the "architects of the war" and their inability to recognize that the War on Terror was seeding the ground for an individual like Trump to come to power. He contends that this attests to the supremacy of American exceptionalism, which he asserts is nothing more than white innocence applied on a global level.<sup>28</sup> Ackerman provides a blunt assessment of the effects twenty years of war has had on an entire generation of Americans, charging that the impact of the policy was to create a patriotic veil of illusoriness as a means to obscure the mutilation inflicted by and to the U.S. He dubs this the "red pill" and admits that he bought into this mindset for years after the 9/11 attacks. Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Ackerman spent much of the two decades that followed reporting from the front lines of Iraq, Afghanistan, and other warzones.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2021), xvii.

<sup>27</sup> Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, xv-xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, xv.

rawness of his writing delivers a sobering assessment of the last twenty years of U.S. foreign and domestic policy.

This rawness is similarly present in Rosa Brooks' *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything* in which she argues that the attitude toward the military and war in the U.S. has always been flawed and incorrect. Brooks contends that Americans view war as a distinct and separate sphere that should not intrude into everyday life. War was thought of as the sole domain of the military, which American society romanticized and ignored simultaneously, because the belief existed that war and military could be compartmentalized away from the rest of society and life.<sup>30</sup> Brooks, a former counselor to the Undersecretary of Defense for policy, uses the knowledge she gained while working in the Pentagon to assert that the War on Terror destroyed that narrative and way of thinking, writing, "war has burst out of its old boundaries."<sup>31</sup> Her theory is explored and supported in five distinct parts. The first is an introduction to the tensions and dilemmas that arise when there is war. The second highlights the struggles of the U.S. Military to define itself in the era of blurring lines between war and peace. Part three is an historical analysis of society's struggles to define, contain, and tame war. Part four explores how the blurred lines introduced in part two have increased and further undermined the ability to place constraints on violence and power. The final part is an exploration of future options to prevent a slide into chaos.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 8-9.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 22-24.

Brooks' analyses of how the current political climate has been shaped by the War on Terror provide crucial support to this paper's arguments concerning the connection to and long-term consequences from U.S. intervention in the Afghan-Soviet War and the proceeding decade of U.S. foreign policy regarding the region. Though Ackerman and Brooks fixate their attention on the War on Terror and the rise of the far and alt-right in American politics, their occasionally cynical analysis pulls back the curtain on these long-term consequences, including the destabilization of U.S. domestic politics as explored by Ackerman. As argued in later chapters, the current climate of the world is traceable back to before U.S. intervention in the Afghan-Soviet War. By tracing backwards from the present to 9/11, Both Ackerman and Brooks make vital connections to how the world reached current political climate. This paper utilizes this argument and takes one step further back into the past to show the connection between 9/11, the rise of global terrorism, and the CIA's operations in Afghanistan during the 1980s and creates a bridge between the two periods of U.S. history.

Vahid Brown and Don Rassler's *Fountainhead of Jihad* provides a unique analysis and approach toward this connection through their exploration of the Haqqani network. Though they were one of the most funded Mujahideen factions, the modern version of the Haqqanis were all but unknown to the West before 2006. They existed in eastern Afghanistan and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and had close ties with the Taliban during their first period of control. According to testimony from Rear Admiral Robert Moeller from March 2006, "Haqqani goals are limited primarily to obtaining autonomy in eastern Afghanistan and the FATA region. Although the most tactically proficient of the enemy we face in Afghanistan, they

present a limited strategic threat.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than disputing this description, Brown and Rassler felt as if there was a larger story being missed. They believed there was a significance to the organization that was neither reflected in the assessment provided by Moeller, nor in the existing secondary or historiographical literature. To remedy this, they amassed and studied over one thousand pages of primary sources that had not been analyzed before. “This book, through the lens of the primary sources, explores the Haqqani network’s rise to this position of power in the conflict economy.”<sup>34</sup> Brown and Rassler argue that this rise is due in part to the early dealings with the U.S. and Pakistan, which enabled them to consolidate their territorial dominance and become the “primary producers of violence” in the seemingly never-ending conflict in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

The relationship they fostered with Pakistan during the 1970s paid off in the long-run after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Their “strategic location and well-developed ability “for mobilizing the tribes for war made them the most favored recipient of the massive amounts of military and financial aid that the United States, Saudi Arabia, and several other states poured into Pakistan to counter the Soviet advance.”<sup>36</sup> In the period after the war, U.S. aid dried up, but the relationship with Pakistan continued. Brown and Rassler argue a key reason the Haqqanis were so favored by Pakistan is revealed by a purported quote from Pakistan President Zia ul-Haq from 1980 in which he said “the biggest share of the international arms and

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<sup>33</sup> Vahid Brown, and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, 5.

American financial assistance” would be given to “whoever trains out boys from Kashmir.”<sup>37</sup> By the 1990s, the support provided during the war gave the Haqqanis a head start over the other groups vying for power during the early 1990s and provided them the opportunity to construct a series of terrorist training camps, where *jihadists* heading to Kashmir could train, as well as other *jihadists*, like the newly formed al Qaeda. *Fountainhead of Jihad* uniquely bridges the funding of the Mujahideen to the rise of al Qaeda by analyzing thousands of writings, both published and private, of the Haqqani network, dating back over forty years. While they do not outright blame the CIA for directly funding the rise of terrorism against the West in the twenty-first century, Brown and Rassler’s contribution to the scholarship not only supports the central thesis of this paper, it also provides a unique exploration of the unintended long-term repercussions of U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

The current available evidence neither supports the argument that the CIA actively sought to create the Taliban or al Qaeda, nor that they explicitly funded their founding. Instead, the scholarship continuously bolsters the conclusion that ineptitude and ignorance within the CIA caused the environment needed to foster the growth of both organizations. Ahmed Rashid explores this in his book *Taliban*, originally published in 2000, but updated with an additional chapter in 2010. According to Rashid, during the war the Soviet Union spent \$45 billion to subdue the Mujahideen, while by comparison the U.S. spent \$5 billion. U.S. aid was matched by Saudi Arabia and other European and Islamic countries to lift the total to over \$10 billion. As shown in *Fountainhead of Jihad*, much of this aid was given to the favored groups of Pakistan. The Durrani Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan and Kandahar received far less aid through the

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<sup>37</sup> Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, 7.



CIA due to the ISI, “who tended to treat Kandahar as a backwater and the Durrani with suspicion.”<sup>38</sup> By not having the ability to control where the money and aid flowed, the CIA inadvertently created the necessary ingredients for radicalism to explode. Sending \$5 billion in aid, which was matched by other nations, the U.S. brought forth two organizations that went on to cause havoc in Afghanistan and around the world.

It must also be noted that the scholarship does not argue that the CIA had direct contact with Osama bin Laden. According to Coll, CIA archives contain no record of any direct contact between officers and Osama bin Laden during the 1980s. CIA officers went so far as to deliver sworn testimony before Congress in 2002 asserting this is true.<sup>39</sup> While this may be true, the fact that the U.S. led the charge to invest \$10 billion in aid and weapons to Afghanistan means there is still blame to be cast on Washington for the founding of al Qaeda. The CIA being forced to hand shipments over to the ISI for distribution created an environment of zero accountability or traceability for the U.S. It has currently been corroborated among those present and involved that the CIA did not have direct contact with bin Laden, which does not rule out indirect contact.

The funneling of funds and weapons by the ISI has been proven to have been managed laxly and some weapons and supplies ended up being sold on the black market. It is not unrealistic or outlandish to argue that the incredibly large amount of aid provided to Afghan rebels by the U.S. had a trickle-down effect that allowed for bin Laden to enhance his standing and expand his influence. Elisabeth Leake argues that the CIA was too focused on the tribalist nature of Afghan society at the time to realize the long-term repercussions of their actions, and

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<sup>38</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 17-18.

<sup>39</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 87.

failed to envision what a post-war Afghanistan would look like.<sup>40</sup> While this may be true, it does not absolve the CIA for their failures. Furthermore, by not having control over who received U.S. supplied aid, as well as cutting off aid to the Mujahideen in January 1992, Afghanistan devolved into a civil war that ended with the Taliban assuming control of the country and providing a safe haven for bin Laden to build his terrorist empire. An empire that went on to launch multiple attacks against the U.S. and other nations, including the September 11 attacks.<sup>41</sup>

Exploring and analyzing these connections not only allows for a greater understanding of why the current political climate exists but also provides a deeper understanding of the connection between vague, rash, and broad policy decisions and their effects on humanity. These effects are present in the other main segment of the current scholarship. While leaked documents and deeper questioning of government narratives dominate much of the latest historical analyses, this period is also unique from the previous eras in that it features a great deal of exploration through the lenses of social, cultural, and people's history. A textbook example of a people's history exploration of Afghanistan is Anand Gopal's *No Good Men Among the Living*, in which the argument is made that the premise of the War on Terror was a vague sense of "good versus evil" without any truly defined enemies. Gopal asserts that this approach appeared to work in the early portion of the war, when the U.S. was searching for Taliban and al Qaeda leaders, but it went wrong in 2008 for one reason or another. In order to identify and explain why U.S. policy

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<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Leake, "Spooks, Tribes, and Holy Men," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 1 (January 2018), 240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26416685>.

<sup>41</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 233.

in Afghanistan failed, Gopal assimilated himself within Afghan culture and interviewed locals who were impacted by the change in government and the reintroduction of foreign occupation.<sup>42</sup>

His research led him to the conclusion that neither the U.S. and the Afghan government it oversaw the creation of nor the Afghan rebels and Taliban sympathizers offered much hope of a better future for the average Afghan. During a discussion of an interview he conducted with an Afghan man, Gopal came to the realization that “the categories of the American war on terror – terrorist and non-terrorist, fundamentalist and democrat – mattered little, not when his abiding goal, like that of so many caught in the conflict, was simply to finish each day alive.”<sup>43</sup> Noah Coburn’s *Losing Afghanistan: An Obituary for the Intervention* also explores Afghanistan through a people’s history lens. Coburn, who spent time in Afghanistan in 2005 and 2009, set out to write “a more nuanced history of the intervention in Afghanistan, a history that looks at how individual lives were shaped socially and economically by the vast resources that flooded the country.”<sup>44</sup> Coburn comes to a similar conclusion as Gopal, that while the war and U.S. occupation was initially hailed by Afghans as a welcomed change, the good times did not last due to the inability to understand local customs and desires.

An example presented is the early investment into the justice system. A common point of contention in rural areas of Afghanistan was land disputes. To mitigate this, the U.S. invested millions into building courthouses and training prosecutors without bothering to ask whether these communities saw a need for local courts or if they believed prosecutors would be useful.

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<sup>42</sup> Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: American, The Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, (New York: Picard, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Noah Coburn, *Losing Afghanistan: An Obituary for the Intervention*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 12.

“In fact, most of those in local communities whom I interviewed were happy with courts in distant provincial capitals where they could bring serious criminal cases, but they wanted to be left in peace to resolve things like land disputes on their own.”<sup>45</sup> The lack of understanding is a recurring theme in much of the scholarship and accounts provided by those on the ground in Afghanistan.

*No Good Men Among the Living* offers a perspective that has previously been overlooked by many historians, but one that is also present in Tamim Ansary’s *Games without Rules*. Ansary similarly deviates from the traditional focus of Afghan historical writing. Instead of concentrating on the foreign interveners, he sheds light on the intervened-upon, whom he argues have their own story to tell. “In *this* story the interventions are not the main event but interruptions of the main event. And if the foreign interventions tend to follow the same course, it’s partly because they keep interrupting the same story, a story that never quite gets resolved before the next intervention disrupts the progress made.”<sup>46</sup> By shifting the narrative focus to those who have been previously ignored, Ansary produces a work that is remarkably different than much of the historiography.

Ansary’s exploration of Afghan life, both in the tribal areas, as well as in Kabul, are important to the overall story. As illustrated by Ansary, “the global story explains why Afghanistan keeps getting invaded; the Afghan story helps illuminate why the interventions keep foundering.”<sup>47</sup> Sandy Gall also approaches the subject of Afghan culture and people’s history in

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<sup>45</sup> Coburn, *Losing Afghanistan: An Obituary*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 5.

his book *Afghan Napoleon: The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud*. Massoud, a skillful and brilliant military leader of the Northern Alliance, was one of the Mujahideen leaders from the Afghan-Soviet War. Gall explores Massoud's struggles within the Mujahideen and his later resistance to the Taliban and al Qaeda, which Gall argues is a continuation of his resistance to outside interference.<sup>48</sup> In *Afghan Napoleon*, Gall asserts that the CIA's unwillingness to back Massoud, through the urging of the ISI, was a mistake. After showering Hekmatyar with millions of dollars in weapons and aid, Gall contends that the CIA finally understood the errors of their ways, but it was too late. He also presents a companion argument from Gerry Warner, the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) agent who made first contact with Massoud during the Afghan-Soviet War. "The CIA had no option but to support Hekmatyar. He and his allies were the strongest force, the only ones accessible; nor did they [the Americans] have any option but to work with the ISI. As Churchill did with Stalin."<sup>49</sup> These two arguments connect with Coll's argument in *Ghost Wars* regarding the CIA's role and responsibility for how aid and weapons were distributed to the Mujahideen during Operation Cyclone, which will be fully analyzed later in this paper.

As the U.S. war in Afghanistan only concluded in 2021, the available scholarly historical analyses are limited but not nonexistent. Carter Malkasian, former political advisor to General Joseph Dunford, commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, produced a detailed and diverse exploration of the war through a synthesis of earlier works, as well as an incorporation of new research. Malkasian learned Pashto in order to review Afghan sources previously ignored by

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<sup>48</sup> Sandy Gall, *Afghan Napoleon: The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud*, (London: Haus Publishing, 2021), xvii

<sup>49</sup> Gall, *Afghan Napoleon*, 227.

Western scholars, including a biography of Taliban leader Mullah Omar written by his former spokesman, Abdul Hai Mutmain, the memoir of former Taliban foreign minister Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil, and a history of the Taliban movement by Abdul Salem Zaeef, the former ambassador to Pakistan. He also conducted interviews, direct and indirect, with Taliban fighters and commanders for the purpose of compiling the most accurate and full account of the war to date.<sup>50</sup>

According to Malkasian, the connection between the Taliban and what it means to be Afghan was necessary to the U.S.' defeat, but the literature to date neglects this aspect. He contends that while studies of Islam in Afghanistan exist, the possibility that Islam and resistance to occupation played a role in the war remains unexplored. Malkasian further argues that this connection answers many questions that grievances with Pakistan cannot. This is not the singular condition necessary for the outcome of the war to occur but instead a necessary one. Furthermore, according to Malkasian, any Afghan government was doomed to fail if it was aligned with the U.S., which in turn caused the U.S. to stay longer.<sup>51</sup> Malkasian does an excellent job supporting his thesis throughout the work, and his writing provides an experienced and educated voice in the most recent scholarship.

The aforementioned sources epitomize the finest representation of the current and previous scholarship concerning the Afghan-Soviet War, U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan, and the short-term and long-term ramifications of said policy and war. Combined with a selection of

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<sup>50</sup> Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 6.

declassified government reports, memoirs of those who were present in Afghanistan, and additional scholarly secondary sources, the analyzed works will provide the evidence necessary to successfully support the main thesis of this paper. The next four chapters explore the road to the Soviet invasion, the motivations that existed and drove the U.S. to intervene on behalf of the Mujahideen, the events of the war itself, the turbulent decade between the Soviet withdrawal and the U.S. occupation that saw the rise of the Taliban, and the blowback of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan and the Middle East as a whole, while analyzing whether any lessons have been learned from the events that transpired over the last four decades. In order to understand the consequences, it is vital to first learn how the environment that caused the Soviets to invade came to be.

## Chapter 2: A Brief History of Afghanistan Through 1979

The history of Afghanistan and the Afghan people is littered with internal strife, attempts of foreign conquest, and a fierce loyalty and desire to remain close to their roots of tribal politics and society. The Central Asian nation earned the sobriquet “the graveyard of empires” due to the failed attempts in nineteenth and twentieth century by Great Britain and Russia to conquer and control its challenging and varied terrain, brutal winter weather, and the tribal people who have lived there for thousands of years.<sup>1</sup> However, this colloquial moniker, which continues to gain prominence in the twenty-first century in the aftermath of the United States’ military withdrawal, ignores the successful military campaigns of the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great, and Genghis Khan, who each controlled large swaths of land in present day Afghanistan during their respective reigns.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this reductionism simplifies and disservices the complex nature and history of the region and its people.

Unlike other mountainous nations, such as Peru, Nepal, Norway, and Switzerland, Afghanistan has not possessed the luxury of enjoying a relatively peacefully existence from the rest of the world. On the contrary, it has taken a vital role in the imperial aspirations of various empires dating back to when the Persian Empire swept across the Asian continent.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Afghanistan has been a powerful piece to control for ambitious empires. In the age before nations could harness the power of the sea and transport goods over the oceans, Afghanistan was

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 255.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History*, 1.



a meeting point for the civilizations of India, East and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. This economic importance changed after explorers such as Christopher Columbus opened up new avenues for commerce and conquest that were not dependent on the ancient land routes that passed through various empires which required tariffs to be paid for passage. This cost Afghanistan the status as a vital corridor between civilizations and converted it to an area more aptly described as a no-man's land or buffer state between empires.<sup>4</sup>

Nineteenth century Afghanistan was dominated by the British and Russian Empires vying for control of Central Asia in what is known as the "Great Game." Both nations sought to spread their influence across the Central Asian region, and Afghanistan lay squarely in the middle. Russia was in search of a warm seaport that could be used year-round as its ports in the Black Sea and Arctic Ocean offered limited maritime and military benefits. Eastward expansion past the Ural Mountains and south through Afghanistan would allow access to warm water ports on the Arabian Sea. Britain viewed these grand designs as hostile actions and was opposed to Russia expanding its borders to India, which could risk British influence there.<sup>5</sup> Over the ensuing century, Afghanistan was invaded and occupied by the British, who redrew its border with India without consulting with the Afghan government. The new boundary, the Durand Line, divided the spheres of influence between India and Afghanistan, while dividing the Pashtun people who lived in the region. It also created the narrow, angular area in the northeast corner of Afghanistan, which stretches to the border with China and has functioned as a buffer between Russia and India. The Afghan government during this time was also heavily influenced by Great Britain, who controlled the foreign affairs of the Central Asian nation. It was not until 1919 that

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<sup>4</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History*, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 36-37.

Afghanistan gained independence from British control and the modern nation that we know of today was born.

This modern age featured cyclical eras of general peace interrupted by internal strife, which remained an issue that prevented the establishment of permanent unity among the different ethnic peoples. In this period, Afghanistan was made up of two ideological camps: traditionalists and reformists. Regardless of who was in power, the other faction was naturally at odds with the ruling government. At the same time, neither party was strong enough to permanently displace the other and create a lasting and unifying nation.<sup>6</sup> The longest period of stable, peaceful government was the reign of the Musahiban Dynasty between 1929-78. Under the rule of King Nadir Shah, and later his son Zahir Shah, taxes on rural lands were lowered in an attempt to quell rebellions. To supplement the loss of income, the Musahibans turned to trade tariffs, government monopoly enterprises, and, especially in the age of the Cold War, foreign aid and loans.<sup>7</sup>

After World War II, Afghanistan sought to maintain neutrality as much of the rest of the world was carved up into U.S. and Soviet spheres of influence. As explained by historian Thomas Barfield, when discussions regarding a possible partnership between Afghanistan and the U.S. commenced, the U.S. “was unwilling to formally guarantee Afghanistan’s security against a Soviet attack or provide direct military assistance to modernize Afghanistan’s army. Both of these decisions had their roots in the closer relationships between the United States and neighboring Iran and Pakistan which made Afghanistan appear peripheral in U.S. eyes.”<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 209.

decision is one of many that initiated Afghanistan's turbulent future. Though they remained neutral on paper, the Afghans took umbrage to the U.S.' blasé attitude and agreed to a series of aid agreements with the Soviet Union for \$25 million worth of tanks, jets, and arms.

While this provided the Afghan military the ability to repel any internal opposition and challenge to the monarchy by rival factions, it also opened the door for Afghan men, especially military officers, to travel to the USSR. for education and training. Those who spent time in Moscow and other major Soviet cities were not only formally educated in science, math, and other technical fields, but also received indoctrination into Marxist ideology and history. Upon their return to Afghanistan, the tenets of communism circulated among young people in Kabul, which functioned as the kindling for the forthcoming wildfire of the ideology that expanded across the country in the 1970s. According to Henry S. Bradsher, from 1954 through 1979, Soviet military aid totaled \$1.25 billion and 3,725 Afghan military personnel received training in the USSR, where they were also exposed to the aforementioned ideological indoctrination.<sup>9</sup> The increasing cooperation between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union shifted the U.S.' perception of the Central Asian nation's strategic importance, and they began providing aid in an effort to prevent the Soviets from having exclusive influence with the Afghan government..

For their part, the Afghans masterfully played the two superpowers off of each other, as demonstrated by the Soviet construction of grain silos, which were then filled with wheat provided by the U.S. They also arranged for the two superpowers to share in the construction of a new road network that would connect the distant regions of Afghanistan together, as well as link the nation to the outside world. By the mid-1960s, Afghanistan was the beneficiary of more

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<sup>9</sup> Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

than a billion dollars in foreign aid and loans, which permitted the nation's development budget to exceed its regular budget during this period. At the same time, the economic system was transformed into one which was entirely dependent on an enduring inflow of foreign aid.<sup>10</sup> Nations that are overly reliant on foreign aid are susceptible to being at the mercy of the governments providing them with assistance, which can erode their independence.

This was also a period of governmental change. In 1964, a new constitution was established, which barred members of the royal family from holding office and created a new parliamentary system to share power with the monarchy. These changes forced Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan, the first cousin of the King, to step down from his position. An influential leader whose reign as Prime Minister lasted from 1953-63, Daoud would not remain outside the political arena for long. The constitution also prohibited the formation of political parties, but this too would not have a long shelf life.

The fifteen years leading up to the Soviet invasion and occupation of the capital of Kabul in December 1979 were dominated by political instability, civil protests, assassinations, and coups. The establishment of the constitutional monarchy did little to limit the political power of the royal family and instead bred a desire for political change. Within a year of the Afghan parliament's formation, the first modern political party of Afghanistan was established. In a modest Kabul home, a small group of likeminded men, a few dozen in total, met to discuss the future of Afghan politics. Mohammed Taraki, a writer, journalist, and communist, and Babrak Karmal, the son of an Afghan Army general, led the January 1965 meeting in which the orthodox Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was established. The

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<sup>10</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 210.

PDPA's founding was instigated by the Soviet Union, whose influence in Afghanistan continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Within a year of the PDPA's creation, the party fractured along heritage, family background, ideology and lineage. Taraki and Hafizullah Amin led a group mainly made up of dissatisfied rural Pashtuns and called themselves The Khalk, meaning "People" or "Masses," and advocated for the abolition of the monarchy as the first step in establishing a socialist state. Babrak Karmal led the Parcham, meaning "Flag" or "Banner," which was mainly Persian-speaking city dwellers who derived their power in the bureaucracy and educational institutions. The Parcham were more cautious in nature, as Karmal did not believe the time was right to dissolve the monarchy. Instead, he advocated for cooperating with progressives within the existing government and envisioned a slower economic transition.<sup>11</sup> Each sect of the PDPA developed separately and were hostile toward each other but remained under the same party umbrella.<sup>12</sup> Though small in size, the PDPA was able to play an outsized role in Afghan politics, and Karmal and the Parcham aided in the regime change that occurred in 1973.

While on vacation in Italy in July 1973, King Zahir was overthrown by former Afghan Prime Minister Daoud in a nearly bloodless coup.<sup>13</sup> Daoud regained control of the government with the assistance of the Parcham sect of the PDPA and assumed the office of President of Afghanistan a decade after his first tenure was cut short. The changes in political climate, including the rise of political parties like the PDPA and various Islamist parties, galvanized Daoud who saw this as an opportunity to bring Afghanistan and its economic structure into the

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<sup>11</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992: What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost*, (New York: Brassey's, 1993), 76-79.

<sup>13</sup> Ansary, *Game without Rules*, 176.

modern age. Though the Parcham assisted in Daoud's rise to the Presidency, Taraki and the Khalk refused pressure from the Soviets to provide their full support to the new regime. This order was heeded by Karmal, which caused the PDPA schism to widen into a full breakup.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this period, both the Khalk and the Parcham claimed to represent the "true" PDPA and tensions between both factions remained contentious for the duration of Daoud's time in office.

During his reign, Daoud attempted to maintain international non-alignment and continued to accept aid from all nations willing to provide it. Soviet military training and aid for Afghan forces, which had already trained more than 7,000 Afghans between 1961-70, further expanded under Daoud, serving as another catalyst for the eventual downfall of Afghanistan in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In 1975, he announced a Land Reform Law that transferred farmland from wealthy landowners to landless peasants. This law proved to be a disaster due to water rights remaining with the former landowners and the lack of provisions to provide peasants with the necessary seeds, tools, and loans to produce and sell crops. Inept policy decisions like this caused many in Afghanistan to sour on Daoud. The implementation of communist policies shifted the political resistance away from a desire for Zahir's return to an Islamic anti-Daoud movement.<sup>15</sup> The combination of the announced land reforms, Mullahs arousing anger at the perceived anti-Islamic government, and feelings of discontent concerning the predominately Pashtun dominated government caused violence to erupt in the Panjshir Valley in July 1975. The three days of anti-government violence culminated in the deaths of at

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<sup>14</sup> O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992*, 80.

least seven protestors and three police officers and soldiers.<sup>16</sup> Though the Afghan government tried to control the narrative and limit the spread of information, the news spread across the tribal regions of the nation and ignited further anger toward the Afghan president.

The two main ideologies that emerged from within the anti-Daoud movement shared a common distain for Daoud and sought his removal from power. They were merely opposed on how to accomplish that goal. The Fundamentalists, who derived their ideology from the Muslim Brotherhood, believed in conducting a *jihad* according to the Sharia against Daoud and establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan. The Traditionalists, later known as the Moderates, believed that a *jihad* should be fought using local customs and means in order to achieve a traditionally independent nation-state in which community problems were solved in the Afghan way, while personal lives were guided by Islam. These two competing groups, along with the two wings of the PDPA, developed a four-sided struggle of resistance against Daoud.<sup>17</sup>

By 1977, Daoud was a man on borrowed time following a meeting in Moscow with Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, in which the Afghan leader was vociferous and belligerently yelled at his counterpart after the Soviet requested that the number of Western aid personnel in Afghanistan be curtailed. “Daoud retorted that the USSR could ‘not dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan’ and abruptly walked out of the meeting.”<sup>18</sup> Brezhnev took umbrage with this treatment. At the behest of the Soviets and the Indian Communist Party, the two Khalk and Parcham reunited under a shared PDPA banner later that year. With a reunified and invigorated left wing, Daoud’s position of power became even

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<sup>16</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan, [*Violence Erupts in the Panjshir Valley*], July 28, 1975.

<sup>17</sup> O’Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992*, 80-81.

<sup>18</sup> Brown and Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad*, 50.

more precarious. After years of Soviet military training for Afghan officers, as well as financial aid to maintain his position of power, Daoud's disrespectful display toward Brezhnev proved costly.

In an effort to suppress the growing communist fervor, Daoud ordered the arrest of Taraki and other PDPA leaders in the early hours of April 26, 1978. In response to this, a meeting of senior military officers was held, and the decision was made to revolt rather than risk also being arrested. On the morning of April 27, the Afghan military seized the Kabul airport and surrounded the royal palace. By dawn on April 28, Daoud and his family had been executed and the military handed power to the newly-freed Taraki and other PDPA leaders, who announced the formation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Taraki was named president with Karmal as his deputy premier. The unity between the Khalk and Parcham elements was short lived, as infighting between the Khalqis and Parchamis grew. By July, most Parchamis had been banished abroad, including Karmal, who was named the ambassador to Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup>

PDPA rule began with noble and progressive decrees, including the prohibition of underage marriages, the domination of daughters and wives by their husbands, and the bride price.<sup>21</sup> It was also decreed that literacy classes be established for women and mandated 270 days of paid maternity leave to new mothers. What these decrees all had in common, besides the elevated status of women, were that they only affected life in Kabul. Later decrees focused on rural life, including the cancellation of all debts of peasants to landlords and the outlawing of

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<sup>19</sup> Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, 29-31.

<sup>20</sup> Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> United States Embassy Afghanistan, *New Afghan Decree Liberalizes Marriage Arrangements* October 1978.



high-interest loans that were secured by land. This type of financial agreement existed to circumvent the Quran's prohibition on charging interest on loans.

These decrees had unintended consequences for rural peasants. Most loans were given to finance marriages and funerals. In response to the governmental decree, landowners and rich merchants ceased to loan money for any purpose. This prevented young men from getting married unless they were rich, causing sexual and emotional frustrations to boil up among the impoverished and rural Afghans. It also prevented poor families from holding traditional funerals, which brought forth feelings of shame and dishonor among the least fortunate. "When things started to go wrong, the feudal lords had no trouble convincing the penniless poor that the regime was attacking their interests, their lives."<sup>22</sup> Resentment toward the communist government continued to grow into 1979, including tribal revolts in the Nangarhar, Oruzgan, and Parvan Provinces, which the CIA viewed as a "potentially dangerous trend" for the Taraki regime.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only rural Afghans who resented the government of Taraki and Amin. The Soviets were unenthused about their rise to power. Taraki was viewed as dim-witted and unable to effectively run the government. Amin owned the reputation of being a ruthless, cunning, and well-educated political manipulator, but lacked the trust of the Soviets. Rumors that he was a CIA asset were rampant due to his time as a student in the U.S., during which he headed the Afghan Student Association. Years later, it was exposed that the CIA funneled money to the group through the Asia Foundation, a quasi-governmental aid organization.<sup>24</sup> While never

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<sup>22</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 180-181.

<sup>23</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Afghanistan: Tribal Unrest* January 26, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 186.

proven if he was in fact working with the CIA, Amin stated publicly that he wanted to maintain friendly relations with the United States.<sup>25</sup> This was reiterated shortly thereafter by two Afghan officials, one from the Ministry of Planning in a conversation with an United States Agency for International Development (USAID) worker.<sup>26</sup> This, along with Amin's desire to carve out autonomy for his country, like Yugoslavia or Albania, was unacceptable to the Soviets.<sup>27</sup>

Amin further alienated his Soviet counterparts during a botched rescue mission of U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs in February 1979. On Valentine's Day, the ambassador was abducted by members of Setem-i-Melli, a Tajik splinter group of the PDPA, and held for ransom in exchange for the release of three imprisoned party members. Amin refused to negotiate with the group and authorized an ill-advised raid on the barricaded Kabul Serena Hotel room with Afghan police and Soviet advisers in an attempt to save the ambassador. Instead, Dubs died during the melee, causing the U.S. to blame the Soviets for their role, which they denied. Many Western nations suspended their aid programs as a result and tensions in the Kremlin further flared.<sup>28</sup>

The final catalyst for the fall of Afghanistan was the spread of radical Islamism throughout the region that threatened to cut the communist regime's time short and place an Islamist theocracy on the border of the USSR. Afghan Islamists who moved to Pakistan after the coup were aided by Pakistan to return to their homeland and destabilize the PDPA. The Soviets blamed the deterioration of PDPA control on Amin, who they viewed as an incompetent,

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<sup>25</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan, *Prime Minister Amin Reiterates that He Wants "Friendly Relations with the U.S."* September 11, 1979.

<sup>26</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan, *Khalqis Possibly Waving Olive Branch Toward Washington?* September 20, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 185-186.

<sup>28</sup> Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, 47.

uncooperative, counterproductive liability to the spread of communism.<sup>29</sup> In the summer of 1979, while returning from a socialist conference in Cuba, Taraki was summoned to Moscow where he was ordered to assassinate Amin.<sup>30</sup> Taraki and his men failed this mission and Amin assumed sole authority over the government in September 1979. This led the Soviets to fear Amin would turn to the Americans, who needed a new ally in the region after the Iranian Revolution in 1978, and some within the Soviet circles believed the time was right to take direct action, similar to what occurred in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>31</sup>

For the better part of 1979, the Afghan government requested Soviet troops be sent to support the Afghan military and government, but these requests were repeatedly rebuffed by Moscow. The removal and death of Taraki, thus making Amin the central leader, caused the Soviet Politburo to reevaluate their position.<sup>32</sup> On December 8, 1979, in a meeting held in Brezhnev's private office at the Kremlin with a small group of trusted Politburo members, the Soviet response was decided. "At the end of the meeting they have decided, as a preliminary plan, to develop two options: (1) to remove H. Amin by the hands of KGB special agents, and to put Babrak Karmal in his place; (2) to send some number of Soviet troops on the territory of Afghanistan for the same purposes."<sup>33</sup> Before the year was out, the Soviets crossed into Afghanistan, infiltrated the royal palace, and executed Amin. In a move that was designed to stabilize the nation, the Soviets inadvertently lit the fuse of a decade long war that cost them greatly in financial, emotional, and political terms. They also created an environment in which

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<sup>29</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 188.

<sup>30</sup> United States Embassy, Soviet Union, *Taraki Visit to Moscow* September 13, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Ansary, *Games without Rules*, 189-190.

<sup>32</sup> Georgy M. Kornienko, *The Cold War: Testimony of a Participant*, (Moscow, Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994), 193.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Lyakhovsky, *The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghani*, (Moscow: 1995), 109.

the U.S. entered on behalf of those fighting the Soviets. The small decisions that occurred between the 1950s and 1979 coalesced in the 1980s, and the fury of the Afghan-Soviet War was unleashed upon the world.

### Chapter 3: U.S. Policy in Afghanistan: 1955-79

The history of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan does not begin in 1979, but instead in the first decade after the Second World War. As explained in chapter two, in response to Afghanistan's decision to remain neutral during the 1950s era of the Cold War and their refusal to join the Baghdad Pact, a military partnership between Central Asian and Middle Eastern nations and the Western powers, the U.S. refocused its attention and resources toward Iran and Pakistan, who were more willing partners.<sup>1</sup> After Afghanistan signed aid agreements with the Soviet Union and its allies in Europe in the early 1950s, the U.S. reevaluated its stance concerning Afghanistan. In an April 1956 report, the CIA warned of the potential consequences of the economic and political programs of the "Sino-Soviet Bloc" in poorer nations such as Afghanistan.

The agency believed there would be an increase in the Bloc's influence in the region over the coming years and bluntly stated why the Bloc was viewed more favorably than the West. "By associating itself with these nations on colonial issues, by expanding economic relations, and by exploiting other psychological conditions, the Bloc may be able to increase Communist influence and to weaken significantly the role of the West in the area."<sup>2</sup> This is a great example of the "domino theory" that dominated U.S. foreign policy for much of the Cold War. The CIA understood how the history of Third World countries played a pivotal role in modern politics. "The Sino-Soviet Bloc is wooing the underdeveloped areas by identifying itself with anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 209.

<sup>2</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Sino-Soviet Policy and its Probably Effects in Underdeveloped Areas*, April 24, 1956.

colonial and nationalistic aspirations. Nearly all of the underdeveloped countries have at some time in their history come under the domination of one or another of the Western Powers.”<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of the paper offered an honest assessment of what the future would hold if the Bloc were the only parties offering economic aid at the level they were. “If present Bloc policies are continued, many of the underdeveloped countries will probably come increasingly to regard the USSR and Communist China as acceptable members of the international community.”<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, according to the CIA, the lasting political effects of the Bloc’s policies depended on how interested the West was in the needs of these underdeveloped countries. This is a clear example of the CIA recognizing the importance of extending foreign aid to nations that offered little-to-no strategic value to U.S. security or national interests. Instead, the agency suggested that aid be provided and experts be sent to Afghanistan in order to assist the Afghans and introduce the American style in order to limit Soviet and Chinese influence, which was a hallmark of U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War, as seen in the conflicts along the eastern and southeastern areas of Asia.

The U.S. continued to monitor the amount of aid offered to underdeveloped countries by the Bloc throughout the rest of the decade and into the 1960s. In an October 1956 National Security Council (NSC) briefing entitled *Background—Bloc “Trade and Aid,”* it was noted that over the previous year, loans and aid to non-Bloc nations increased to \$1.2 billion.<sup>5</sup> This included a delivery of eleven MIG jet aircraft and thirty-six Soviet training planes, as well as Soviet pilots and technicians to train the Afghan military, which were supplied under the Soviet-

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<sup>3</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Sino-Soviet Policy*.

<sup>4</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Sino-Soviet Policy*.

<sup>5</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Background--Bloc "Trade and Aid"*, October 23, 1956.

Czech-Afghan arms deal in which the Soviet Union sold the planes to the Czechs, who then sold them to the Afghans, purchased using aid money from the Soviets. The U.S. responded to this by providing funding for an Afghan-Pakistan transit project to connect Kabul and Kandahar to Pakistan, before continuing to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. The project was agreed upon to compete with a Soviet rail project to connect Afghanistan to the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> While the U.S. continued to refuse requests for military aid, they did provide funding for education-, medical-, and transit-related projects such as this one. Unlike in the Western Hemisphere, it is clear that the U.S. was only interested in maintaining a neutral buffer state between the oil rich nations of the Middle East and the Communist Soviet Union rather than dominating Afghan politics and placing an ally on the southern border of the Soviet Union. If the U.S. had attempted the latter option, they would have been responsible for the safety and security of a country that offered little value to its national security. A neutral buffer area, as the British sought during the nineteenth century, was good enough in their opinion.

This attitude persisted into the Kennedy administration as shown in a 1961 report entitled *Long-Term Commitment to Afghanistan's Economic Development Program*. The purpose of the report was to answer the question “Should the United States at this time, make a long-term commitment to Afghanistan’s economic development program?” After noting that the Afghan government was eager for the U.S. to maintain its presence and influence in the nation, the main argument for continuing aid was made. While it was not suggested that the U.S. enter a direct competition with the Soviets on a dollar amount, a commitment to the participation in the Afghan Second Five-Year Plan was seen as necessary because if not, “the USSR will

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<sup>6</sup> United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Current Intelligence Bulletin*, October 24, 1956.

monopolize the Plan and, in time, obtain a strangle-hold on the Afghan economy which at a later date the United States may find impossible to lessen.”<sup>7</sup> In hindsight, that final line reads as an ominous warning. Continue to offer aid, not necessarily at the same level as the Soviet Bloc, or allow Afghanistan to drift into the Soviet orbit and open the door to the Middle East for the Russians.

Aid continued to flow into Afghanistan from the U.S., but slowed down in the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s. This slowdown coincides with the expansion of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, a period in which the focus of foreign policy was shifted south and east of Afghanistan. A 1971 State Department review of the Afghan policy spoke plainly concerning previous aid packages and the returns received from them. While they acknowledged that U.S. direct interest in Afghanistan was limited, it still offered considerable significance on a broad level, which aligns with the views presented in the 1950s and 1960s. However, it was recognized that the negatives of Afghanistan outweighed the positives.

For the United States, Afghanistan has at the present limited direct interest; it is not an important trading partner; it is not an access route for U.S. trade with others; it is not presently as far as is known a source of oil or scarce strategic metals nor does it appear likely that it will become so; there are no treaty ties or defense commitments; and Afghanistan does not provide us with significant defense, intelligence, or scientific facilities.<sup>8</sup>

The State Department offered three options concerning economic and technical assistance. The first was to phase out U.S. assistance. This option opened the possibility of Afghanistan falling under complete Soviet control and influence and was rejected in the proposal. The second was to

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<sup>7</sup> United States Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern and South, Asian Affairs, *Long-Term Commitment to Afghanistan's Economic Development Program*, 1961.

<sup>8</sup> United States Embassy, Pakistan. *Press Stories Re Arms Provision to Afghan Insurgents*, March 3, 1980. (Sections underlined in the quote are copied from the original document)



maintain aid at the present level or modestly increase it, with the argument being that the current level of aid was enough to maintain influence in the nation and preserve diplomatic relations. The third was to accept that more work needed to be done in Afghanistan and provide \$15-20 million in aid per year, which they believed would provide a “50-50 chance” of forcing the highest levels of the Royal Afghan government to further commit themselves to development and the sharing of power with the elected parliament. In the end, it was recommended that options two and three be implemented, with the latter dependent on the performance of the Afghan royal government.<sup>9</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, the royal government was overthrown in a coup in 1973, which initially raised alarm bells in Washington. The U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan was not caught off guard by the deposing of King Zahir as shown in a March 1972 cable from Ambassador Robert G. Neumann in which he recounts a conversation he had with Wahid Abdullah, a supporter of former PM Daoud and the Director of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan (MFA), at the embassy. “At that time he asked me what would be [the] USG [United States Government] reaction to Daoud’s re-assumption of power. In response I inquired whether he was asking under instructions from Daud. He stated cryptically ‘Daud knows I am here.’”<sup>10</sup> Though Neumann made clear that internal Afghan politics were not for him to discuss, the conversation with Wahid continued the following month.

In response to the question of how a change in government would occur, Neumann recalls Wahid responding, “Some members [of the] Royal family ‘would favor Daoud’s

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<sup>9</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan. *Policy Review: A U.S. Strategy for the 70’s*. 1971.

<sup>10</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan. *Afghanistan—Political Uncertainties*, March 31, 1972.

return.”<sup>11</sup> In the 1972 policy review of the U.S. Mission to Afghanistan, the Department of State once again noted that the only area of concern Afghanistan posed to the U.S. was the potential to fall under the auspices of the Soviet Union and thus providing a direct route for Soviet domination in Central Asia. The State Department also warned that the current Afghan government appeared to be on borrowed time. “Despite some encouraging efforts during the last six months, the present Prime Minister and government could be evicted within a year by popular discontent and parliamentary disapproval.”<sup>12</sup> These three documents offer a glimpse into how the U.S. viewed Afghanistan’s immediate future and the preparations that were made concerning a possible coup. It also presents an example of why U.S. aid and influence in Afghanistan was not as high as it was in the 1950s. An unstable government fails to instill foreign nations with the confidence that their investment into a country will be worthwhile or have the desired effect.

Upon the ouster of the Afghan monarchy and the declaration of the Republic of Afghanistan, Daoud met with Ambassador Neumann to soothe any lingering fears regarding the incoming regime. The new Afghan president reassured the ambassador that he was fully committed to maintaining relations with the U.S. and other nations.<sup>13</sup> His words and actions in the initial days of his presidency had their desired affect because the 1974 review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan recommended a continuation of the plan set forth in 1971.<sup>14</sup> Where the U.S. was concerned was with Afghan-Pakistan relations, specifically the issue of Pashtunistan, a

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<sup>11</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan. *Afghanistan—Response to Prince Daud*, April 13, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> United States Department of State, *United States Mission to Afghanistan: 1972 Policy Review—Report of the Kandar Conference, April 21-24, 1972*, April 24, 1972.

<sup>13</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan, *Meeting with President Daud*, July 22, July 23, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> United States Department of State, *Review of U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan*, April 10, 1974.

region that is spread across the Afghan-Pakistan border. Daoud assured the U.S. that the border dispute would be solved through peaceful negotiations.<sup>15</sup> This issue remained at the forefront of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan throughout the rest of the decade and was a topic of conversation during a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and MFA Foreign Policy Adviser Mohammed Naim. The latter claimed that Afghanistan neither sought the disintegration of Pakistan, nor to claim any of their lands, but instead to guarantee Pashtuns rights according to the Constitution of Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> For the U.S., it was vital to maintain good relations with both nations because of the different interests each provided, including the continued balance of power and avoidance of war between Pakistan and India, whom were both in varying stages of their nuclear weapons programs. By preserving diplomatic relations with the new Afghan government, the U.S. continued to monitor and influence any Afghan policy toward Pakistan and the Pashtunistan region.

After the Saur Revolution of 1978 and Daoud's assassination, the U.S. was forced to reevaluate its foreign policy decisions once again. Upon his 1976 election and subsequent inauguration, President Jimmy Carter sought a departure from the style of policy implemented by the previous administration, including a more humane and moral strategy. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski recalls that these views were formed during Carter's time on the Trilateral Commission.<sup>17</sup> The Carter administration's stated foreign policy goals included obtaining "a comprehensive Middle East settlement, without which the further radicalization of

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<sup>15</sup> United States Embassy, Afghanistan, *Meeting with President Daud*.

<sup>16</sup> United States Department of State, *[U.S.-Afghan Relations]*, November 1, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 48-49.

the Arab world and the reentry of the Soviet Union into the Middle East could not be avoided. Failure to do so would pose serious consequences for Western Europe, Japan, and the United States.”<sup>18</sup> Neither Carter nor Brzezinski desired to allow the Soviet Union to gain a foothold in the Middle East and risk the lucrative oil flow of the Persian Gulf. They maintained the allyship that existed with Pakistan, India, and Iran in an effort to deter the undoing of the status quo. Unfortunately for them, the house of cards came tumbling down in 1979.

Upon the fall of the Shah of Iran, the U.S. lost its biggest ally in the Middle East. The establishment of an Islamist Republic and the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran proved costly for Carter. “It undid the political benefits of his effective leadership in obtaining the Camp David agreements, it obscured public appreciation of his boldness in achieving normalization of relations with China, and it weakened the credibility of his efforts to oppose the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.”<sup>19</sup> The Iranian Revolution concluded in February 1979 and forced the U.S. to find a new leading partner in the region. The fight against the communist government of Afghanistan caught the attention of Brzezinski, who lobbied Carter to register formal concerns over the ever-increasing Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the next month. Regarding possible outcomes in Afghanistan, Brzezinski “warned the President that the Soviets would be in a position, if they came to dominate Afghanistan, to promote a separate Baluchistan, which would give them access to the Indian Ocean while dismembering Pakistan and Iran.”<sup>20</sup> In response to this, Carter instructed the State Department to explore the issue further.

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<sup>18</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 398.

<sup>20</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 426-427.

For Carter and National Security Advisor Brzezinski, the situation in Afghanistan was an opportunity to not only expand Western influence and hamper Soviet operations, but to also save face in the aftermath of Iranian Revolution and ongoing hostage crisis. Unfortunately for them, prior U.S. foreign policy concerning Afghanistan was essentially nonexistent. According to a RAND Corporation report by Alexander Alexiev, funding for Afghanistan during the 1950s and 1960s reached as high as \$500 million. By 1975, the allocation of funds was cut to \$15 million.<sup>21</sup> These funds were reduced further after the assassination of Ambassador Dubs, which drove the U.S. and other non-communist nations to pull aid for Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> Carter also faced the challenge of running a nation that possessed zero appetite for intervention in Asia.

For much of the 1970s a majority of Americans had grown tired of U.S. intervention in foreign affairs, especially in Asia. The thought of becoming ensnarled in yet another drawn out military conflict in a nation that was thousands of miles away was revolting to most. During the 1976 election, Carter was seen as a calming presence and stark change from the days of the Nixon administration. He campaigned on the promise to return honesty and integrity to the federal government and agencies. Upon the start of his presidency Carter ordered an overhaul into the practices of the CIA. After multiple scandals had plagued the agency, trust from the public needed to be restored. The belief existed that the CIA was uncontrollable and functioned as a shadow government. Carter chose Admiral Stansfield Turner to head the agency and cut the rot out of its core. “By the end of 1979 the new ground rules put down by the president and

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Alexiev, “The United States and the War in Afghanistan,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1988), 2, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P7395.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, 47.

Congress had gone a long way toward altering the very culture of this embattled Agency.”<sup>23</sup> The initial results of Carter’s attempt to reform the CIA were positive and faith in the government began to be restored, but this proved to be short-lived as the November 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis poured ice cold water on the less militaristic foreign policy plan.

The loss of Iran, a key ally in the region, was a major blow to Carter’s presidency and the influence in the Middle East and Central Asia was waning dramatically. When the possibility to expand U.S. influence in Afghanistan after the Iranian Revolution, Carter and Brzezinski leaped at the idea. By the summer 1979, the CIA was authorized to begin aid operations with the Afghan rebels. Much has been made about this decision and whether or not it was done to provoke the Soviets into invading Afghanistan. The evidence used to support this argument comes from an interview Brzezinski conducted with the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. In the interview, Brzezinski confirmed that the CIA began its aid of the Mujahideen in July 1979, which corroborates the accounts of former CIA officials Charles Cogan and Robert Gates.

Brzezinski was further quoted as saying, “On that day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid would lead to a Soviet military intervention,” admitting that the administration had “knowingly increased the probability” of Soviet military intervention. He furthermore maintained the “secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap.”<sup>24</sup> As argued by Conor

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<sup>23</sup> Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Conor Tobin, “The Myth of the ‘Afghan Trap’: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978-1979,” *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 2 (April 2020), 237.

Tobin, this was not the case. Instead, he contends that Brzezinski was misquoted by the magazine due to translation issues. The magazine interview was conducted in English, then translated to French for the article, and then retranslated into English by historians and the press. The journalist who conducted the interview later admitted that the quote in the article titled “The revelations of a former adviser to Carter: ‘Yes, the CIA came into Afghanistan before the Russians...’” was not an actual quote from Brzezinski but was “invented” by the editors. Brzezinski also claimed the interview was heavily edited and he was not contacted to approve the alleged quotes that were published. This claim is supported as there has neither been another documented example in which Brzezinski referenced a systematic plan for an “Afghan trap,” nor has he ever publicly remarked that he was satisfied with the strategy he employed in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of the “Afghan trap,” declassified Carter administration documents reveal the actual decision-making process and plan for covert activities in Afghanistan. Immediately after the Saur Revolution, the CIA rejected the idea of covert action in Afghanistan. According to a letter from Brzezinski to Carter, “Covert action is not appropriate at this time; we are, however, reviewing our *intelligence collection* priorities and capabilities.”<sup>26</sup> The argument against covert action continued into February 1979.

The issue is, then, whether much will be gained. Most of those present thought that the answer would be no. There will be a lot of fighting, the government will be distracted, the Soviets will get more involved, but overall the odds are against it having much effect on

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<sup>25</sup> Tobin, “The Myth of the ‘Afghan Trap,’” 238-239.

<sup>26</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan*, eds. David Zierler and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2018), Document 20.

the strategic outcome. If that is the case, and given the problems we might have “consulting” with Congress on this, the consensus was to keep hands off.<sup>27</sup>

The sentiment in Washington shifted considerably after the assassination of Ambassador Dubs. A CIA memorandum from February 28, 1979, explored the covert action options available, including propaganda campaigns, support of the Afghan rebels with non-lethal aid, support with lethal aid, and orchestrating a coup-d'état.<sup>28</sup> While there were no suggestions of which represented the best option, the change in opinion on the usage of covert action is abundantly clear and corroborates Brzezinski's account in *Power and Principle*. Over the course of the Spring and Summer, correspondence demonstrates the evolution of policy.

An August 1979 CIA report offers details of preliminary covert operations that occurred during the alleged “Afghan trap” period. A portion of the report describes the result of “*Option 2: Provide Cash and Nonlethal Support to the Insurgents*,” in which an undisclosed amount of cash was provided to an asset from northeastern Afghanistan, additional funds were given to an asset with ties to the insurgent leadership in Peshawar to aid dissident Afghan leaders, and Pakistan agreed to liaison between the CIA and the insurgents.<sup>29</sup> Here is an early example of the folly that would befall the U.S. and CIA operations in Afghanistan. The reliance on Pakistan as an intermediary will be discussed further in chapter four.

In September, Carter requested additional research into the available options if the Soviets ultimately invaded Afghanistan as was feared. Brzezinski recalled his conversations with the President. “On September 19, in the midst of the ‘Soviet brigade in Cuba’ flap, I informed

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<sup>27</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, Document 35.*

<sup>28</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, Document 38.*

<sup>29</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, Document 59.*



the President that a direct Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was becoming more probable and again recommended further public statements by the Administration.”<sup>30</sup> A feeling of dread continued to hang over the Carter White House in the closing months of 1979. According to historian John Prados, “A decision to expand the project followed a meeting of the NSC Special Coordinating Committee on December 17, 1979. Thus, the inception of the CIA project in Afghanistan preceded the Soviet intervention, with three motorized and airborne divisions and other units, that came on December 25, 1979.”<sup>31</sup> Prados argues two points in his 2002 article. The first is that there is unmistakable evidence that U.S. covert operations in Afghanistan were not authorized as direct responses to any particular Soviet maneuver but rather as precautionary measures for an inevitable invasion. Second, the Soviet intervention was not a response to CIA covert operations, except in the sense that Mujahideen activities endured and proved resilient against the Afghan Communist government.

As shown earlier, the level of aid provided by the U.S. during the Summer of 1979 was miniscule compared to the aid that would follow and what was necessary at the time and represented a drop in the bucket for the Mujahideen. The correct connection that should be made between CIA covert operations in the pre-war period and the events that followed is that the CIA used this period to construct the network they employed during the war. By utilizing Pakistan and the ISI as intermediaries with the Mujahideen and agreeing to not deal with the Afghan

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<sup>30</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 427-428.

<sup>31</sup> John Prados, “Notes on the CIA’s Secret War in Afghanistan,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2, History and September 11: A Special Issue, (September 2002), 467.

warriors directly, the CIA allowed the monstrous and disastrous system of aid distribution to come into existence rather than designing a safer, more direct pathway.

When the Soviets finally invaded on Christmas Day, Brzezinski immediately prepared a new overarching administration defining foreign policy to present to the president. In his 1980 State of the Union address, President Carter introduced the Carter Doctrine. Modeled on the Truman Doctrine, which was created in response to Soviet threats to Greece and Turkey, the Carter Doctrine stated that any outside attempt to gain control over the Persian Gulf region would be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the U.S. and would be repelled by any means necessary.<sup>32</sup> Not only was this a clear attempt to bolster Carter's image for his upcoming reelection campaign and overshadow the ongoing Iranian Hostage Crisis, the core tenets of the Doctrine remain integral to U.S. policy regarding the Persian Gulf region to this day. By taking a strong stand on maintaining the flow of oil, stopping the spread of communism, and limiting Soviet influence in Central Asia, Carter exhibited an understanding of the domestic issues that coincided with the rise of fuel costs and how a war on the other side of the world could impact life in the U.S. As the following chapters demonstrate, the policy decisions of this period and the motivations that drove them had a lasting impact not only on the Afghan-Soviet War but the decades that followed its conclusion.

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<sup>32</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 444-446.

## Chapter 4: The Afghan-Soviet War

The events of the Afghan-Soviet War produced long-lasting consequences for Afghanistan, the USSR, and the U.S. What Moscow believed would be a short and simple military operation ballooned into a multibillion-dollar folly that ended the lives of thousands and altered the lives of countless more. To understand the events that followed the war, including the Afghan Civil War, the rise of the Taliban and al Qaeda, and the 9/11 attacks, it is vital to explore and analyze the war, including how it was fought and the key individuals involved. This chapter examines these factors, as well as presents the follies that occurred and snowballed after the war, which created the environment necessary for the rise of the Taliban and al Qaeda. As this war included three major parties, the USSR, the Mujahideen, and the U.S., this chapter is divided into three sections in order to better group together the different pieces of the story.

### The Soviets

By December 1979, the Soviet Union was forced to intervene in order to prevent the collapse of a communist nation along its border from occurring. “Having declared Afghanistan a member of the Soviet bloc, its government could not be allowed to fall.”<sup>1</sup> In the months leading to this moment, Brezhnev and the Soviet Politburo rejected Amin’s repeated requests for military assistance due to the fear that the USSR would be viewed as aggressors and be treated as pariahs on the international scene for interfering with the affairs of a sovereign nation.<sup>2</sup> The mood was

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<sup>1</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 233.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 11-12.

altered after Amin committed several missteps, including the botched rescue of U.S. Ambassador Dubs, the further alienation of rural Afghans through policy changes and the rejection of traditional Afghan customs and values, and his alleged meetings with the CIA. The latter development worried the Soviets due to the lingering fear of a vital regional ally switching sides, which hovered over the entirety of the Cold War. Amin's actions and decisions as president inflamed relations between Afghan tribes and the communist government, and he was seen as a liability and a detriment that stood in the way of the spread of communism.

In order to prevent any partnership with the CIA, as well as to cauterize the wounds of the Afghan communist movement, it was decided in the waning days of the 1979 that Soviet forces would enter Afghanistan in an attempt to restore order and prevent the overthrowing of the PDPA government.<sup>3</sup> When Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul, Amin believed his saviors had arrived and he was saved from the rebel forces who threatened his reign. Instead, the tanks and the soldiers who arrived with them were there to end his presidency by any means necessary. Afghanistan was now free of Amin, and a newly-established government was headed by Karmal, the banished leader of the Parcham factions whom the Soviets viewed as more levelheaded and easier to control.<sup>4</sup> On paper, this should have been the end of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, but it proved to only be the beginning. Instead of calming the situation and returning order to the nation, the Soviet occupation of Kabul and other major cities further aroused the ire of tribesmen, religious leaders, and those with military backgrounds, who used this as a rally cry for all Afghans to join a holy war against the latest foreign invaders. The loosely-connect network of

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<sup>3</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 103.

guerrilla fighters who fought Amin's forces coalesced and grew their numbers with the arrival of non-Afghan Muslims who felt the call to ultimately defeat the Soviets and end the communist system of government in Afghanistan that was being propped up. For Afghans living in Kabul, panic and fear engulfed their daily lives. Enjeela Ahmadi-Miller, who was four at the time of the invasion, recounted in her memoir the words of her father: "The Russians are taking over the city! You can't go outside anymore."<sup>5</sup>

For most Soviet military officers who took part in the initial period of the war, there was a belief in the nobility of the cause to support the PDPA. "At least to start with, they believed that they were indeed in Afghanistan to protect it from outside interference and domestic rebellion."<sup>6</sup> The simplicity of the original goals of the Red Army bred enthusiasm. Initially, the military was tasked with the establishment of a secure military environment for the PDPA through a consolidation of control over cities, roads, airports, and other areas of government infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> Between 1980 and 1985, the three main objectives evolved into fighting the opposition while training and developing the Afghan army, strengthening the regime and making it more attractive to the populace, and aiding Kabul in diplomatic efforts to gain recognition and end foreign aid to the Mujahideen.<sup>8</sup> The original key objectives were designed to prevent the Soviets from becoming entrenched in Afghanistan in the same way that the U.S. was in Vietnam, but the prolonged counterinsurgency campaign that arose eroded that aspiration.

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<sup>5</sup> Enjeela Ahmadi-Miller, *The Broken Circle: A Memoir of Escaping Afghanistan*, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 14.

While the Soviet public was dissatisfied with the continued involvement in Afghanistan, criticism at home remained low among the wider populace.<sup>9</sup> For those unfortunate enough to be sent to the war, the initial optimism faded at a faster rate. With the vast majority of the Soviet military being conscripted into two years of service, there was both high turnover and low morale. Conscription occurred twice per year, once in the spring and again in autumn, and featured one month of basic training, including instruction on the ideals of patriotism, duty, and the superiority of communism and the Soviet way of life. Conscripts then proceeded to training camps in the Central Asian republics for three months of “quarantine” and acclimation to the area. The remaining twenty months of mandated service were served in Afghanistan. Fresh batches of barely trained soldiers entered the war every March and August and were predominately composed of rural and working-class backgrounds.<sup>10</sup>

During a period in which nearly two-thirds of the population lived in cities, a 1986 survey of fifteen hundred soldiers found more than two-thirds lived in the countryside or were from working-class families with no secondary education. This was due in large part to wealthy and connected families from Moscow, Leningrad, and the Baltic States bribing recruiting offices in order to keep their sons out of the army. None of the fifteen hundred soldiers surveyed came from a family connected to the Communist Party, bureaucratic, institutional, or military elite. Colonel General Krivosheev, a military historian, sarcastically commented that the old name of the military, The Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, should return.<sup>11</sup> This can also be seen in the per capita deaths during the war as broken down by region. The death rate for the entirety of the

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<sup>9</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 170-171.

Soviet population was 52.7 per million. Regionally, the Central Asian republics bore the most significant brunt of deaths, at sixty-five per million. For Slavs, the figure was 53.5 per million, Russians 51.1 per million, and 25.8 per million and seventeen per million in the Caucasus and Baltic regions respectively.<sup>12</sup> It is not difficult to understand why morale in the military continued to plummet throughout the war.

There are many abounding myths concerning why the Soviets invaded, why they lost, why it took so long to withdraw, and what effect the loss in Afghanistan had on the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Out of Afghanistan* is an early source that tackles these questions. One of the prevailing theories in the West concerning this period contends that the USSR collapsed due to four decades of geopolitical containment and military deterrence by the U.S. and its allies. This reasoning is extended to explain why the Soviets failed and withdrew from Afghanistan and, when taken to the extreme, credits the CIA's covert operations as not only tipping the scales of the war, but also ultimately causing the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Cordovez and Harrison, reject this interpretation and instead ground their argument in the George Kennan school of thought.<sup>13</sup> Kennan, the architect of the U.S. policy of containment and later staunch critic of his own creation, emphasized the profound changes taking place within Soviet society during the Cold War, the failure of the Communist system to adapt to these changes, and the resultant emergence of new leaders who were committed to reforms as the true reasons the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

The more America's leaders were seen in Moscow as committed to an ultimate military rather than political resolution of Soviet-American tensions, the greater was the tendency

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<sup>12</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 329.

<sup>13</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 3.

in Moscow to tighten the controls by both party and police, and the greater the braking effect on all liberalizing tendencies in the regime. Thus the general effect of cold war extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980's.<sup>14</sup>

Kennan's argument holds up when analyzing the Soviet efforts to withdraw from Afghanistan early on. After the death of Brezhnev in 1982, Yuri Andropov assumed control. Originally a key figure in the decision to intervene in Afghanistan, Andropov spent his brief time as General Secretary pursuing an exit through diplomacy. The emerging consensus in the Soviet Union was that the war could not be won and the need for the UN to step in and assist in resolving the conflict was accepted as a necessity. Unfortunately for the Soviets, tensions with the U.S. in 1983 sank any chances of ending the war. The death of Andropov in 1984 and the poor health of his successor, Konstantin Chernenko, meant that peace talks did not resume until 1985 with Gorbachev.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, the Mujahideen escalated their ferocious assault on Soviet and Afghan government forces with the assistance of foreign aid from the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and other nations. This aid, along with the military strategy employed by the rebels, made the lives of the Soviet soldiers even more miserable than they already were.

### **The Mujahideen & Guerrilla Warfare**

The various groups of Afghans and non-Afghans who fought against the Soviets are collectively known as the Mujahideen. It is vital to understand that the groups that existed were not ideologically aligned on most issues, including the role of Islam in Afghan government and the return to power of the monarchy. The leaders of the Mujahideen groups were diverse in

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<sup>14</sup> George F. Kennan, "The G.O.P. Won the Cold War? Ridiculous.," *New York Times*, October 28, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 54-55.



nature and represented the interests of their regional homelands and tribal principles. One of these leaders was Ahmad Shah Massoud, a brilliant military commander of Tajiki heritage from the northern region of Afghanistan, who dedicated a substantial portion of his life to learning the art and strategy of guerrilla warfare. The son of a colonel in the army of the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, Massoud excelled during his time at the Kabul Polytechnic Institute, a Soviet-sponsored school near his family home.<sup>16</sup> While there, he learned the teachings of Burhanuddin Rabbani, an Islamic cleric who formed Jamiat-e Islami, a Tajik political party aligned with fundamentalist Islam.<sup>17</sup> Though Massoud did not remain committed to the belief structure of Jamiat, the group still held sway over many of the other Mujahideen leaders, including Massoud's chief rival, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former ally and a hardline Islamic fundamentalist hellbent on creating an oppressive Islamic caliphate in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

Having spent the better part of the 1970s fighting the oppressive government that ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist from the capital of Kabul, Massoud gained the tactical knowledge and expertise necessary to become a military genius. This was no surprise, as Massoud vehemently opposed the rule of Daoud, and later the PDPA, and sought to see Afghanistan return to its roots as an agrarian society that followed local tribal customs. As explained by Masood Khalili, Massoud's lifelong friend, there were only two options if you were against Daoud: Islamism or communism. "Massoud had joined the Islamist movement because it was closer to his family background and the beliefs of his father and grandfather than communism and it

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<sup>16</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 108-109.

<sup>17</sup> Marcela Grad, *Massoud: An Intimate Portrait of the Legendary Afghan Leader*, (St. Louis, MO: Webster University Press, 2009), xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Peregrine Hodson, *Under a Sickle Moon: A Journey Through Afghanistan*, (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 3-4.

opposed the authoritarianism of the Daoud government, but not because of any particular conviction for political Islam or any leaning towards religious extremism.”<sup>19</sup> Of the noteworthy and prominent Mujahideen leaders, Coll argues Massoud was the least conservative and showed less interest in establishing an Islamic caliphate in comparison to his rivals.<sup>20</sup> Massoud also proved his vast military aptitude in the early stages of the war.

Days into the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, soldiers of the Afghan military revolted against their commanding officers and abandoned their units in favor of joining the *jihad* against the invaders.<sup>21</sup> Massoud quickly integrated some of these soldiers into his militia, the Northern Alliance, and commenced his assault against enemy convoys traveling to Bagram Air Base. In response to this, the Soviets were forced to send thousands of troops and launch multiple offensives against him for the first three years of the war.<sup>22</sup> These efforts proved ineffective, as Massoud utilized the guerrilla warfare strategies he learned through his readings of Che Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung, two influential guerrilla war theorists and tacticians, in order to successfully evade the Soviet forces and cause maximum casualties while limiting the losses sustained by his own forces. By June 1980, Massoud and the Mujahideen controlled much of the Afghan countryside, while the Soviets controlled the major population centers, including the capital city of Kabul.<sup>23</sup> The guerrilla tactics employed by the splintered, motley crews of the Mujahideen

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<sup>19</sup> Gall, *Afghan Napoleon*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> Gall, *Afghan Napoleon*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Gérard Chaliand, “The Bargain War in Afghanistan,” in *Guerrilla Strategies: An Historical Anthology from the Long March to Afghanistan*, edited by Gérard Chaliand, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 328-29.

proved successful at keeping the Soviets from overrunning their severely undermanned and undersupplied opponents during the early years of the war.

The failings of the Soviet military lay in the type of training provided to soldiers. Rather than preparing for a guerrilla war in mountainous terrain, the Soviet Union focused their attention and training on fighting a traditional war against NATO and European militaries on the predominantly flat and easily traversed European continent. Adaption to the style of war and enemy present in Afghanistan was not an anticipated need and proved to be a key detriment to Soviet operations. The ambush at the Mamur Hotel in the Logar Province of Afghanistan is an example of this vulnerability. Through the assistance of informants, Mohammad Akbar, another Mujahideen leader, and his small band of fighters tracked a sizeable column of Soviet and Afghan government troops traversing Highway 157, a main thoroughfare used to transport troops and supplies. Akbar divided the fifty-armed warriors at his disposal into three groups over a two-kilometer stretch. After they waited for the perfect opportunity, Akbar and his men attacked a column of one hundred vehicles carrying food, ammunition, and fuel to Soviet troops. “We let it pass and, as the end of the column reached the ruins, we started to attack at the end of the column. In those days, convoy escort was very weak and air support was insufficient. There was practically no resistance or reaction to our attack from the column.”<sup>24</sup> Nearly all of the convoy was destroyed in the ambush, while Akbar’s units suffered zero casualties. To further demonstrate their lack of adaption or understanding of the type of war in which they were

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<sup>24</sup> Ali Ahmad Jalali, and Lester W. Grau, *Afghan Guerrilla Warfare: In the Words of the Mujahideen Fighters*, (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Company, 2001) 5.

engaged, the Soviets were again ambushed in the same spot in September 1981 and July 1982. In the latter two ambushes, the Mujahideen only suffered seven confirmed casualties.<sup>25</sup>

This failure to adapt to guerrilla warfare plagued the Soviet military throughout the war and strengthened the Mujahideen position on both the literal and metaphorical battlefield. In *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, Lester W. Grau analyzes the failures of the Soviets in dealing with the tactics employed by the Mujahideen. An example of a disastrous defeat he assesses is an ambush of Soviet forces in Sherkhankhel in Spring 1982, in which a convoy of Soviet troops tasked with neutralizing a group of forty Mujahideen were ensnared by a barrage of gunfire. “A machine gun opened fire from a house 150 meters further north from the ambush site. The battalion column halted and the battalion commander called in artillery and helicopter support.”<sup>26</sup> The Soviets attempted to encircle the Mujahideen, but failed due to the unrelenting shelling. While this ambush caught the Soviets off guard, the Mujahideen also benefitted from their knowledge of the surrounding area.

A series of tunnels were constructed well before the war in order to divert water from rivers and lakes to the fertile farmlands. During the war, these tunnels, along with newly constructed ones, were utilized as routes for movement in and out of battle. In this example the Mujahideen escaped to safety after killing eight Soviets, including two officers. As explained in the breakdown of this event, “In spite of our measures to prepare for combat secretly, the enemy was able to determine the intention of Soviet tactical elements. Exploiting the arrogance of the

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<sup>25</sup> Jalali, and Grau, *Afghan Guerrilla Warfare*, 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2010), 3.

battalion commander, the enemy hit him with an ambush.”<sup>27</sup> This is both a notable example of Soviet forces failing to revise their course of action to combat the guerrilla warfare of the Mujahideen, as well as a compelling illustration of the dogmatic and obstinate leadership style that permeated throughout the Soviet military in Afghanistan and the government at home. Poor leadership, coupled with inexperienced, undertrained, overworked, and ill-equipped soldiers, compounded the mistakes and miscalculations that occurred over the course of the war. Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan suffered greatly from PTSD and personality changes due to the stressful environment through which they lived.

The theme of soldiers cracking under pressure due to inadequate leadership and training is evident in the accounts of those who were present in Afghanistan and their families. *Zinky Boys*, by Svetlana Alexievich, is a compilation of some of these first-hand accounts. An entry from an unnamed sergeant of an unidentified infantry platoon reveals the chilling and horrific effects of war. “I realized I was capable of killing. I had a gun in my hand. The first time we went into battle I noticed how some of the lads were in a state of shock. They fainted, or started vomiting when they realised they’d killed people or saw human brains or eyes being blow out. I could take it though.”<sup>28</sup> His main motivation was to survive and he succumbed to his willingness to kill anyone who posed a threat to his continued existence increased throughout his tour. He could neither know when or from where the next attack would come, nor who was a friend or who was a foe.

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<sup>27</sup> Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 71.

This mindset is further explored in the memoir of Artyom Borovik, a Russian journalist who was embedded with the Soviet military. The portrait painted by Borovik illustrates the grim reality of what Soviet troops physically, mentally, and emotionally dealt with during their time in Afghanistan. While passing through a small village, young children appeared, waved gas masks, and shouted warnings as the Soviets moved through the area. According to Borovik, the commander of the unit seemed dismissive of the children. “This is their way of warning us that Gayur has chemical mines in his arsenal.”<sup>29</sup> The commander cautioned that this was presumptively an example of the local rebel leaders paying the children to arouse fear and anxiety into the Soviets in an attempt to intimidate and make them second guess if they should proceed. Psychological warfare was a key tactic employed by the Mujahideen to embolden their perceived military capabilities. Introducing the idea that chemical weapons may be present and used in an ambush fermented doubt among the Soviets. While the odds that the Mujahideen arsenal included chemical weapons were low, if not nonexistent, it could not be outright dismissed.

According to Vladislav Tamarov, a Russian soldier who maintained a written and photographic record of his time in Afghanistan, the weaponry of the Mujahideen was not very advanced. “The Mujahadeen didn’t have aircraft or heavy artillery. Their ‘heaviest’ weapons were rocket launchers for ground-to-ground and ground-to-air Stingers, recoilless light mountain cannons, mortars, and large-caliber machine guns—DShKs.”<sup>30</sup> Tamarov’s account into the ways in which the war affected him mentally is present throughout his memoir. He makes it clear that

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<sup>29</sup> Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier’s Story*, (Berkley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 21.

combat permanently altered his mental state, just as it did on countless other Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan during the war. (additional Tamarov quote)

While the guerrilla tactics of the Mujahideen prevented the Soviets from maintaining a stranglehold over the vast and open countryside of Afghanistan, it is vital to understand their complexities and how they diverged from traditional guerrilla fighters. As mentioned earlier, the Mujahideen did not exist under a unified ideology, neither political nor religious, and they were not led by one central commander. Instead, they were a loose coalition of regional militias who often warred with each other due to the personal goals of their leaders which regularly caused flare-ups of infighting. As explained by Gérard Chaliand, a French expert on the subjects of unorthodox warfare and strategy:

There are more than half a dozen different factions within the resistance movement, which is based in Peshawar, the Pakistani city near the Afghan border. They have no general strategy, no coordination, no organization other than traditional ties to tribe, region and family. The resistance has scarcely any political or social program, and no vision of the future. Unlike virtually all of the guerrilla movements of Asia, Africa, or Latin America, the Afghan rebels have nothing new to show the visiting observer: no newly elected village committee, for example, no program for the integration of women into the struggle, no newly created people's stores or medical centers, no small workshops contributing to economic self-sufficiency or the sort one finds in guerrilla camps throughout the world. The Afghan rebels have undertaken no political experiments or social improvements.<sup>31</sup>

This is a complete anomaly of the history of successful guerrilla warfare campaigns, especially when compared to other examples from the twentieth century. The only prevailing commonality shared by the various factions of the Mujahideen was their distaste for the Soviet occupation. Some factions, like Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, fought in the name of fundamental Islamist

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<sup>31</sup> Chaliand, "The Bargain War in Afghanistan," 329.

theology, while others were adherents to more tolerant branches of Islam, like Massoud's Jamiat-e Islami. Religion was not the only dividing line between the diverse militias, as factions were composed of Pashtuns and others of Tajiks. Infighting and jockeying for power amongst the diverse groups and the rival leaders persisted throughout the course of the war and long after it. However, despite the ideological issues and personal disputes, the Mujahideen maintained a cohesive connection strong enough and long enough to defend their homeland against the Soviet advancement and ultimately force a withdrawal.

The military campaigns of the Mujahideen, especially those of Massoud, were successful due to the understanding of Afghan geography, as well as the bravery of many Mujahideen commanders. Jan Goodwin, an editor and journalist who traveled to Afghanistan and embedded herself within the Mujahideen, recounted the bravery of Said Mohammed, a twenty-four-year-old commander. "What Said Mohammed lacked in formal education, he made up for in bravery bordering on daredevilry and a pure hatred for the Soviets. He also was an instinctual tactician. There were very few military operations he conducted that didn't succeed."<sup>32</sup> Bravery, as well as understanding how important local customs were to the war effort was vital. While most guerilla warfare, especially during this period, featured elements of leftist political ideology, this was not the case in Afghanistan. Nearly all of the theories put forth by Che proved to be unimportant in the successes of the Mujahideen. There was no central organization responsible for removing local tribesmen from power and replacing them with new village leaders who aligned with the views of the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen neither included women in their military operations, nor did they create any official roles for them within the resistance movement, unlike what was

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<sup>32</sup> Jan Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987), 160



advocated by Che.<sup>33</sup> There was also a lack of utilization of the art of sabotage, and there was no need for propaganda campaigns to win the hearts and minds of populace, also recommended by Che, because they already enjoyed the full support of tribal Afghans.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the Mujahideen relied on the traditional tribal customs and their personal beliefs, to fight in what they considered a holy war to remove the Soviets from their homeland. Beyond this end goal, the question of what type of government would replace the PDPA and who would lead it did not have a generally accepted answer. Instead, they focused on the mission of driving the Soviets out for good.

As strong as the Mujahideen appeared in the examples presented from a multitude of eyewitnesses, the number of active fighters was consistently lower than could be inferred from their military successes. For the duration of the war, there were only a few thousand Mujahideen actively fighting in Afghanistan at a time. “From an estimated pool of eighty-five to one hundred thousand combatants, the majority at any given time were resting, hiding, feuding among themselves, or in transit [passing through the Durand Line] from bases in Pakistan.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the high costs, morale remained high among the Mujahideen due to the successful nature of their guerrilla campaigns. In his memoir of his time as an Afghan freedom fighter, Masood Khalili recounted this high morale in his account of the Battle of the Garrison in August 1986. “I shook my commander’s hand and congratulated him on his victory. As we were looking at the battlefield, filled with smoke from the guns and bombs, and at the men celebrating their victory,

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<sup>33</sup> Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1998), 92.

<sup>34</sup> Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 99 & 108.

<sup>35</sup> Milan Hauner, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: Patterns of Russian Imperialism*, (Philadelphia, PA: University Press of America, 1991), 104.

the commander, now in a very happy mood, smiled and said, ‘Thank God we have won the Battle of the Farkhar Garrison.’”<sup>36</sup> The unity and comradery that existed within the Mujahideen assisted them in overcoming the powerful Soviet military machine. With that said, guerrilla tactics and good spirits cannot win a war alone. The weapons, training, and supplies provided by the CIA and other governments greatly increased the chances of victory for the Mujahideen forces. By providing funding and weapons, foreign powers could influence the war as they saw fit. They also allowed their citizens to travel to Afghanistan to fight and support the Afghan warriors there. Some of those who made the pilgrimage to the mountains of the Hindu Kush went to actively fight the Soviets. Others went to offer their financial support and begin networking efforts with the international coalition of *jihadists*.

One of those who came armed with financial backing and a desire to expand his network was a Saudi national named Osama bin Laden. Born the son of a construction magnate, bin Laden held an affinity for Islam at an early age.<sup>37</sup> Born on March 10, 1957, bin Laden was shaped by the unrelenting hard work, perseverance, stubbornness, and religious faith that existed in his family structure.<sup>38</sup> Upon receiving news of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the wealth and stature of his family name provided him with the means and ability to immediately travel to Pakistan. According to Scheuer, he arrived without a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish beyond using his money to “help” Afghan Muslims repel the Soviets.<sup>39</sup> He did not enter Afghanistan until 1984 essentially as, according to Coll, a tourist. Upon his arrival, he

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<sup>36</sup> Masood Khalili, *Whispers of War: An Afghan Freedom Fighter’s Account of the Soviet Invasion*, translated by Mahmud Khalili, (London: Sage Publications, 2017), 181-182.

<sup>37</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 49.

immediately regretted his decision to listen to his friends and family and not enter sooner.<sup>40</sup>

While in Afghanistan, bin Laden was introduced to the idea of transnational *jihad* by Abdullah Azzam, a Muslim Brotherhood scholar and fundraiser for the Afghan war.<sup>41</sup> This proved to be a pivotal point in bin Laden's life on the journey to infamous terrorist mastermind. The theory of transnational *jihad* increased rapidly through the 1990s and blossomed into the seemingly never-ending War on Terror.

### **CIA Operations in the Afghan Region**

The leadership, tactical wherewithal, and passion of Massoud and other Mujahideen leaders demonstrated the tenacity and determination of the anti-Soviet forces. For Massoud and his forces, this was enough to agitate, disrupt, and drive back their enemies. For many of the other Mujahideen factions, foreign aid was a key component in their success. The original package presented to Pakistan by the U.S. included \$400 million in aid but was publicly rejected by the President of Pakistan Zia al-Haq as “peanuts.”<sup>42</sup> In January 1980, Brzezinski and a few others from the administration met with Zia in Pakistan to discuss U.S. aid in the war effort. The two sides agreed to Zia's terms that all aid to the Mujahideen must funnel through Pakistan, who would have full autonomy over all stages of the operation.

Three nonnegotiable conditions needed to be met in order for Pakistan to provide the aid supplied by Western and Middle Eastern nations. The first condition required complete silence and denial concerning the shipment of weapons and aid. The second mandated that all shipments

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<sup>40</sup> Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 255.

<sup>41</sup> Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, 256.

<sup>42</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 448.

to Pakistan must be sent via the fastest available method, which caused the U.S. to airlift supplies from facilities in Egypt. Finally, the air shipments were limited to two plane loads per week. These limitations, as well as the corruption that existed in federal and local governments, as well as the militaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan, hampered the entire process. As explained by James Adams, a British author and arms-trade specialist, “The mixture of Pakistani corruption and the Afghan aptitude for making money by any means produced an industry which had little to do with a holy war against the infidel Soviet invaders and a great deal to do with profiteering.”<sup>43</sup> This was seen in the shipment of Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles from Egypt. Upon arrival in Pakistan, around one-third of the weapons were appropriated by the Pakistani military, while the rest were shipped in sealed trucks or railcars to the Afghan-Pakistan border. Additional weapons were siphoned off at the border by the ISI. Of those that were handed over to one of the Pakistan-approved Mujahideen factions, a portion of the remaining AK-47s were sold on the illegal market or stolen by other Afghans.<sup>44</sup>

There are multiple issues that should have raised red flags within the CIA and caused a reevaluation of the agreed upon process of shipment and distribution, the first being the seizure of weapons by the Pakistan military and ISI before they reached Afghanistan. Rather than concentrating on providing the tools necessary to repel the Soviets, or at the very least slow them down, Pakistan focused on profiteering and replacing the older AK-47s stocked by the military. The second issue that should have caused alarm at the CIA was the dispersal of weapons to Mujahideen factions at the sole discretion of the ISI. This prevented leaders like Massoud from

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<sup>43</sup> John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 42.

<sup>44</sup> Cooley, *Unholy Wars*, 42-43.

sharing in the spoils and being even more effective against the Soviets. Finally, Pakistan's mandate that the CIA have no direct contact with the Mujahideen should have been challenged. Not being able to communicate or deal with the groups the CIA was supplying with billions of dollars in weapons, supplies, and cash prevented them from knowing where the aid ended up, but also how much of it arrived in the correct hands, the level of effectiveness provided, and which parties needed additional aid to continue their operations. As explained in later discussions on the Stinger missile systems and the years after the war, the CIA remaining in the dark on specifics proved to be disastrous in the long run. In the short-term, cracks and slipups appeared early in the official story, which risked collapsing the agreement in its infancy, as well as in the process alienating a key regional ally.

It did not take long for one of the nonnegotiable commitments to be broken on the American side. A March 1980 State Department cable detailed the diplomatic fallout after U.S. Congressman Matthew McHugh confirmed to a foreign journalist that the U.S. was in fact supplying weapons and aid to the Afghan Mujahideen through Pakistan at the approval of President Zia. "Zia is 'perturbed,' and GOP [Government of Pakistan] regards this story as 'very embarrassing,' in that not only is it not true but it breaks atmosphere of confidentiality."<sup>45</sup> A similar cable highlighted a February 17, 1980 article in the Urdu language newspaper *Daily Jang*, which quoted a "senior official" of the NSC confirming that President Carter approved the CIA to supply arms to the Mujahideen beginning in January 1980.<sup>46</sup> Both of publications

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<sup>45</sup> United States Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Sr., March 1, 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Cable Files – NLC-16-8-2-5-9, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Archives, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>46</sup> United States Embassy Islamabad to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, Sr., March 1, 1980, Zbigniew Brzezinski Cable Files – NLC-16-8-3-8-5, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Archives, Atlanta, GA

complicated the relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. Leaks from within the White House and from a sitting member of Congress tested the patience of Zia and his government. Over the course of the war, the U.S. and Pakistan continued to deny any official programs to supply the Mujahideen with weapons, but these two articles are early examples of how poorly the secret was kept.

In the opening days of the war, there were also concerns over the odds of success for the Afghans. In a January 2, 1980 memo from career U.S. Foreign Service officer, and future Ambassador to Iceland, Marshall Brement to Brzezinski, Brement analyzes the possible outcomes and timeline of the war. He dismisses the suggestion that Afghanistan is “the Soviet Vietnam” as “whistling in the dark” and provides a rationale for the seemingly tepid response by the U.S. to this point. Brement believed that the intended limited goals of the Soviets, including assassinating Amin, installing Karmal, and crushing the insurgency, were simple tasks that were accomplishable in a brief period of time. “However, unless General Pavlovski does not know his business (and I strongly doubt this), the Soviets should have the Afghan situation cleared up in a matter of months.”<sup>47</sup>

A January 9, 1980 memo from William Odom, Brzezinski’s military assistant and the assistant to Carter on national security affairs, to Brzezinski demonstrates a differing of opinion to the Brement memo. “The Soviets will either pacify Afghanistan quickly and leave a token force, or be forced into a war of attrition. Both (redacted) believe the latter is far more likely

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<sup>47</sup> Marshall Brement to Zbigniew Brzezinski, January 2, 1980, Staff Material – Defense/Security Files – NLC-31-204-1-7-2, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Archives, Atlanta, GA.

because about four million tribesmen live along the border with Pakistan.”<sup>48</sup> The unnamed source, who was a person of high regard within the Islamic world, argued to Odom that the Soviet invasion offered a strong possibility of replacing Israel as the focal point of Middle Eastern hostilities and could unite the Islamic states against communism. “No matter what the success of Soviet pacification, the front should never consider Afghanistan a lost cause.”<sup>49</sup> It is not surprising to see some doubt regarding the chances of the Mujahideen defeating the Soviets exist at the start of the war. Reports from before the Soviet invasion concluded that the lack of cooperation between the various rebel groups from the tribal regions limited their prospects of overthrowing the PDPA government.<sup>50</sup> These three documents provide a glimpse into the thought process that existed in Washington regarding Afghanistan. Doubt was high and hopes were limited, but that did not prevent the U.S. from providing aid and weapons to the Mujahideen.

Brzezinski fully understood the history of Afghans defending their homeland from foreign invaders and knew that providing weapons to them would at the very least keep the Soviets bogged down in the mountains and countryside of Central Asia for an extended period of time. As he explains in *Power and Principle*, his focus in January 1980 included a desire to ensure the Soviets paid a price for their invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> He also admits that there were political motives that influenced the White House’s decisions. “The President’s political stock

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<sup>48</sup> William Odom to Zbigniew Brzezinski, January 9, 1980, Staff Material – Office Files – NLC-17-45-1-15-7, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Archive, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>49</sup> Odom to Brzezinski, Staff Material – Office Files.

<sup>50</sup> “Afghanistan: Prospects for the Insurgents,” n.d., Staff Material – Europe, USSR, and East/West Files – NLC 23-61-2-3-4, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library Archive, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>51</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 434.

was low, and he was irritated by the Kennedy challenge and frustrated by our inability to break through on the Iranian hostage issue.”<sup>52</sup> These motives drove decision-making for the remainder of Carter’s presidency and also set the Reagan administration’s policies concerning Afghanistan. By attempting to show toughness in the face of a daunting election cycle, Carter allowed the anti-Soviet hawk who was Brzezinski to spread his wings and take on an even greater role concerning foreign policy. The President who brokered peace between Egypt and Israel just 15 months earlier was now committing the U.S. to spending hundreds of millions of dollars to supply weapons and cash to Pakistan, who in turn skimmed off the top before supplying what was left to their cherrypicked Mujahideen groups.

This process escalated exponentially during the Reagan years. Ronald Reagan was a hardened anti-communist and promoter of the ideals of freedom, willing to get his hands dirty when it came to fighting the Soviets. For him, providing weapons to the Mujahideen was an easy decision. During the Reagan portion of the war, warfare proved to be influential on society. The Iran-Contra affair lowered American’s trust in the government and the government’s trust in the CIA. “That year, 1983, the CIA was already in serious trouble with Congress. It had been caught building a Contra army to overthrow the Sandinistas and the Democratic majority in the House was in full revolt.”<sup>53</sup> Things became further complicated when a news article revealed “that the CIA had commingled money from the Iranian arms deal with Afghan funds in a secret Swiss bank account. Reporters were asking the obvious question: had the CIA diverted Afghan funds to the Contras?”<sup>54</sup> The CIA’s reputation was once again tarnished. In the end, the Contra scandal

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<sup>52</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 437.

<sup>53</sup> Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War*, 466.



became the sole focus of the nation. Crile notes that at this time, stories came out questioning the support for Afghan fundamentalists. Due to the focus on the Contra affair, the stories did not go anywhere, thus allowing the CIA to continue supplying weapons to the Mujahideen without any scrutiny from the government or the public.<sup>55</sup> Had this story not gripped the nation, there may have been more congressional oversight and questioning into to whom in Afghanistan the money and weapons were going.

By 1988, the Soviets concluded that they could not defeat the Mujahideen, at least not in the time period they settled upon.<sup>56</sup> Hauner argues that this should not be misconstrued as the Mujahideen lacking any weaknesses. “While their determination and faith in *jihad* were always the major sources of strength, the chief weakness of the *mujahidin* throughout were disunity and lack of coordination.”<sup>57</sup> This disunity reared its head after the withdrawal of the Soviets, which concluded in February 1989. Rather than forming a coalition government made up of representatives from each of the rival Mujahideen factions, each side turned on the other and fought a civil war for control of Kabul and the central government. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan was far from the end of conflict in the country and truly only represents the first phase of the horrors that plague Afghanistan to this day.

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<sup>55</sup> Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War*, 467.

<sup>56</sup> Hauner, *The Soviet War*, 104-105.

<sup>57</sup> Hauner, *The Soviet War*, 105.

## Chapter 5: The Turbulent Post-War Period

During the nine-month period of withdrawal, between May 15, 1988 and February 15, 1989, the fragmented and splintered Mujahideen factions began to capture their local portions of Afghanistan. The disjointedness that plagued the resistance forces throughout the war prevented these local victories from becoming national ones. Rather than consolidating their efforts to drive the doomed PDPA government led by Najibullah, the personal histories and egos maintained their obstructive influence over the Mujahideen leaders and their respective militias. For others, *jihad* ended with Soviet withdrawal, and their appetite to wage war was satiated. On the international level, cracks formed between previous allies. Pakistan saw an opportunity to gain a strategic partner in the region by planting a friendly Islamic regime in Kabul. On the other hand, the U.S. desired to replace Najibullah with a stable, moderate regime. Iran and Saudi Arabia used rival factions as proxies in their ongoing rivalry. At the same time, Najibullah and the Soviet Union negotiated with Mujahideen leaders to incorporate them into a transitional arrangement.<sup>1</sup> The cracks were formed and the power vacuum was turned on. Rather than creating a new, calm, balanced, and stable government, the destruction of the Afghan state that led to the rise of the Taliban commenced due to the contradicting goals of the foreign governments who funded the defeat of the Soviet Union.

After the final Soviet troop crossed the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge on February 15, 1989, many in U.S. government celebrated what they perceived as their victory over the USSR. William Webster, the newly appointed director of the CIA, hosted a champagne

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<sup>1</sup> Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 247.

party at headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Milton Bearden, the CIA station chief in Islamabad, sent a cable to Langley that simply read “WE WON.” In his last act of private theater, he taunted his counterparts at the KGB one last time.

His third-floor office in the CIA station lay in the direct line of sight of the KGB office in the Soviet embassy across barren scrub land. Bearden had made a point of always leaving the light on in his office, and at diplomatic receptions he would joke with his KGB counterparts about how hard he was working to bring them down. That night he switched off the light.<sup>2</sup>

The mindset concerning the future of Afghanistan in the early 1990s is best summed up by former CIA official Robert Gates. “It was a great victory. Afghanistan was at last free of the foreign invader. Now Afghans could resume fighting among themselves—and hardly anyone cared.”<sup>3</sup> In hindsight, taking a victory lap upon Soviet withdrawal was a terrible idea, but that was also apparent in the moment.

With U.S. attention and aid winding down and refocused elsewhere, what was left of Afghanistan was torn to shreds from within, and regions were split between warlords and on ethnic lines.<sup>4</sup> With the central enemy that married the Mujahideen together gone and international funding for the militias drying up, Najibullah attempted to reinvent himself as an Afghan nationalist and the most qualified protector of Afghanistan’s interests. He offered Mujahideen commanders leadership positions to run their own autonomous local militias, which attracted twenty percent to defect and join Najibullah’s government and a further forty percent to agree to ceasefires. In order to maintain this structure, Najibullah relied on continued funding from the Soviet Union. What neither side ever imagined was that the USSR would abruptly

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<sup>2</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 185.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 432-433.

<sup>4</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

vanish from the world stage, as it did at the end of 1991.<sup>5</sup> The sudden end of the Soviet Union switched the power vacuum up from low to medium intensity, and it caused Najibullah to agree to a transitional process that created a new government through the United Nations. “This caused a realignment scramble by all factions, mujahideen and Kabul regime forces alike. These new alliances were based largely on region and ethnicity, so that the radically socialist Khalqis joined Hekmatyar’s radical Islamist party to unite the Pashtuns.”<sup>6</sup> This was not the only example of strange bedfellows that emerged in this period and illustrated the lengths that those who stood to personally benefit from gaining control of the government were willing to go. The willingness to disregard their ideology and principles for the chance to lead the new government generated the violent and destructive Afghan Civil War.

The environment necessary for these sorts of shaky alliances to come to fruition can partially be blamed on U.S. aid drying up at a rapid pace. According to former CIA officer Charles Cogan in his 1993 article, time played a crucial role in all aspects of the Afghan-Soviet War. In this case, the partnership between the U.S. and the Mujahideen was only ever going to be limited in duration. “The long-range aims of a country in which Islamists were at least beginning to have a say would not be, could not be, wholly compatible with the aims of a Western nation. The primary goal of Islamism is to get rid of, or at least lessen, Western influence.”<sup>7</sup> On the opposite side of the coin, the main aim of the U.S. was to remove the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. With that goal completed, the incentives to remain involved were

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<sup>5</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 244-245.

<sup>6</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 248.

<sup>7</sup> Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 74.

limited. Cogan's argument regarding the incompatibility between the two sides is reasonable and aligns with the desired aims of the most hardened of Mujahideen factions.

Cogan supports the lack of incentives for the U.S. by acknowledging the desire to be involved in all world affairs, as well as by connecting foreign policy decisions during and after the Cold War to those made before World War II when the U.S. refused to involve itself in the growing fascist movement in Europe. "In another respect, it is atonement for the 'sin' of American isolationism of the 1930s, which, if it had persisted, might have led to the death of Western, and indeed, American democracy."<sup>8</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, Cogan shifts his stance on the ending of U.S. aid to Afghanistan in his 2008 article "Retrospective: Afghanistan: Partners in Time." He immediately states that it was a mistake for the U.S. to walk away from Afghanistan from 1992-2001 but claims there was not much that could have been done to maintain a relationship with the Afghans. At the same time, he maintains that the decision to covertly contest the Soviet invasion was a good one and helped accelerate the downfall of the USSR.<sup>9</sup>

While Cogan presents an evolved perspective in his later article, he continues to excuse away the decision to abandon the Mujahideen partners who relied on U.S. aid to fight for control of their country. As a former CIA official, it should not be a surprise that he excuses the U.S. decision to walk away from Afghanistan. This walk turned into a run in 1992 after thousands of armed Mujahideen fighters descended upon Kabul. Led by Massoud, who preemptively invaded the capital to prevent the Pakistan-backed factions from taking over, they raced to control different key positions and infrastructure. In some instances, single city blocks or government facilities

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<sup>8</sup> Cogan, "Partners in Time," 82.

<sup>9</sup> Cogan, "Retrospective," 153-154.

were divided between rival groups. Massoud told the international press, “The hurried takeover was triggered by his main rebel rival, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose guerrillas began infiltrating the capital in large numbers early today.”<sup>10</sup> Upon his arrival in Kabul, Massoud was urged by his supporters to lead a provisional government, but he declined out of fear of provoking ethnic conflict. Instead, he allowed the Pakistani-supported Pashtun factions to form the new government with the expectation that they would do what was best for the nation. “But they had no intention of seeking a consensus or presenting themselves for any electoral approval. This was their chance to seize power, and they snapped at the opportunity like hungry dogs.”<sup>11</sup> Disagreements abounded between the parties present at the Peshawar Accord, the attempt to establish an interim Afghan government, and some Mujahideen leaders, most notably Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, boycotted the process entirely. To appease Hekmatyar, he was offered the position of Prime Minister, but he rejected the overtures due to his bitter rival Massoud being named defense minister.<sup>12</sup>

From the announcement of the Peshawar Accord, Hekmatyar began his assault on Kabul. Between May and August 1992, Hekmatyar and his forces bombarded Kabul with rockets, which killed over 1,800 civilians and injured several thousand more. Food supplies in the capital quickly dried up, half a million people fled the city, and the UN withdrew all non-Afghan personnel.<sup>13</sup> For those who survived Hekmatyar’s onslaught, finding proper care proved challenging. “Hundreds of civilians lie in hospitals lacking electricity, water and basic

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<sup>10</sup> Steve Coll and William Branigin, “Afghanistan’s Capital Falls to Muslim Rebels,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, 249.

<sup>12</sup> Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 272.

<sup>13</sup> Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 273.

sterilization equipment. More arrive each day.”<sup>14</sup> The fight for control, and the rivalry between Hekmatyar and Massoud, continued over the next four years. During this period, crime dramatically increased in the capital, for which Massoud was blamed by Hekmatyar and his allies in Pakistan because it originated from Dostum’s militia that assisted Massoud in his seizure of Kabul.<sup>15</sup> In order to maintain order and in an attempt to create a stable government, he sought to isolate and neutralize Hekmatyar. To achieve this, he appealed to his former allies in MI6 for aid. Unfortunately for him, British intelligence no longer saw Afghanistan as a priority.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. also refused to intervene once more, which was seen as a major betrayal by Afghans who had previously worked with the CIA during the war and viewed the metaphorical washing of their hands as allowing Pakistan to have a free play in Afghanistan. “The US strategic absence allowed all the regional powers, including the newly independent CARs [Central Asian Republics], to prop up competing warlords, thereby intensifying the civil war and guaranteeing its prolongation.”<sup>17</sup> The initial attempts by the West to create an Afghan government sought to exclude the same Islamists who were supplied with foreign weapons and drove the Soviets out of the region. This in turn caused Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to increase their investment even more in order to prevent a pro-Western government from forming.<sup>18</sup> When this failed, the U.S. returned to the role of observer. According to Rashid, Washington’s policy toward Central Asia was stymied by the lack of any strategic framework existing. “The USA dealt with issues as they came up, in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion, rather

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<sup>14</sup> Steve Coll, “Afghanistan’s Fate: Healing or Disintegration?” *Washington Post*, May 3, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Grad, *Massoud*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> Gall, *Afghan Napoleon*, 193.

<sup>17</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 175-176.

<sup>18</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 84-85.

than applying a coherent, strategic vision to the region.”<sup>19</sup> This style of policy is reminiscent of the approach taken concerning Afghanistan between the end of World War II and the start of the Afghan-Soviet War. During this period, the U.S. went through phases of interest regarding Afghanistan. As discussed earlier, the level of aid and attention paid toward the Central Asian nation shifted often and was thoroughly inconsistent. The policy decisions made during the 1950s and 1960s created the environment for the rise of the PDPA and the revolt against their rule by non-communist Afghans. The policy decisions made after the Afghan-Soviet War created a similar environment for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to meddle further and promote groups that aligned with their interpretations of Islam.

The group who benefitted most from this was the Taliban, a collective of young Pashtun men who were educated in fundamentalist madrasas, religious schools, in Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet War. With the support of the ISI, they quickly and efficiently took control of Afghanistan one region at a time, beginning with Kandahar in 1994 after the murder and rape of a family by a local warlord outraged Mullah Omar, who called upon likeminded locals to retaliate against the perpetrators.<sup>20</sup> The Afghan Civil War caused the spread of warlords and self-proclaimed fiefdoms to sprout up across the nation. Kandahar was one of the most dangerous cities to travel to. In response to the looting, raping, and murdering that occurred, a group of ultra-conservative young Afghans set out to bring peace to their homeland. Their aims were to restore peace, disarm the population, enforce Sharia law, and defend the integrity and Islamic

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<sup>19</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 176.

<sup>20</sup> Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 25-26.



nature of Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> In order to do this, the Taliban took any means necessary, including launching brutal assaults against the warlords and other rival factions.

By October 1996, they drove out Massoud and the Northern Alliance and controlled the capital of Kabul. This caused more than a quarter of a million wealthy and educated Afghans to flee the city to northern provinces and neighboring Pakistan to escape the Taliban's takeover of the government.<sup>22</sup> Upon claiming power, they installed an ultraorthodox Islamist theocracy that reversed many of the civil rights gained by women, who were now forced to remain hidden from public view. The Taliban also welcomed back a former friend, terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden was recently deported from Sudan after the U.S. applied pressure to the Sudanese government to terminate their allowance of al Qaeda to operate out of their territory. He arrived in Afghanistan on May 18, 1996 and reconnected with his Mujahideen brethren.<sup>23</sup>

The intervention by the U.S. to exile bin Laden, his family, and his operations to the war-torn, barren, and mountainous lands of Afghanistan was not lost on the terrorist leader. In an August 1996 message, bin Laden ranted against his country of birth, Saudi Arabia, who rejected his return and canceled his visa after he criticized the royal family and their military alliance with the U.S., and issued a fatwa against both nations. "I say to our Muslim brothers across the world: your brothers in Saudi Arabia and Palestine are calling for your help and asking you to share with them in the *jihad* against the enemies of God, your enemies the Israelis and Americans."<sup>24</sup> Bin Laden's hatred for the U.S. and Saudi Arabia can be traced to the decision to station non-

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<sup>21</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth J. Cooper, "Taliban's Takeover of Kabul Spurs Educated Afghans to Flee," *Washington Post*, October 8, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Osama Bin Laden, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence, trans. James Howarth, (London: Verso, 2005), 30.

Muslim soldiers on the Arabian Peninsula during the Persian Gulf War. Many ultra-conservative Muslims, including bin Laden, held the belief that the Arabian Peninsula was sacred and non-Muslims should not be permitted to reside within it as this was an affront to Islam. The U.S. military began its residency in Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War against Saddam Hussein and Iraq in 1991. Bin Laden originally offered to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia with Afghan Mujahideen forces, but was rebuffed by the Saudi royal family, who received permission from Islamic religious leaders for the non-Muslim soldiers to operate there. This enraged bin Laden, as he believed that once the U.S. gained a foothold in Saudi Arabia, they would never leave.<sup>25</sup> It was not until 2003 that the U.S. handed over control of their last military base in the country.

Though his 1996 fatwa may not have made shockwaves across the U.S., the subsequent terrorist attacks did. Bin Laden was savvy enough to understand that the U.S. military was a formidable opponent that could only be defeated in specific scenarios and locations. In order to have the best shot possible, he would have to drag the U.S. into a prolonged land war in Afghanistan. On August 7, 1998, seven years to the day of Western forces entering Saudi Arabia, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were severely damaged in truck bombings conducted by al Qaeda. The response of the Clinton administration was to launch cruise missiles against suspected al Qaeda training camps and a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum.<sup>26</sup> On October 12, 2000, a boat laden with explosives cut across the harbor waters of Aden, Yemen, heading directly for the USS Cole, which had refueled in the port. As they approached the boat, the men on board detonated the explosives hidden on board and blew a hole into the side of the ship and

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<sup>25</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 118.

killed seventeen servicemen. Bin Laden once again expected the U.S. to be drawn into a war in Afghanistan, which he believed would unite the Islamic world to *jihad*, but the war did not come.<sup>27</sup>

By 2001, the Taliban controlled upwards of 90% of Afghanistan. Massoud and the Northern Alliance maintained their strongholds but had their backs up against the wall. After the USS Cole bombing, the CIA changed policy and approached Massoud regarding a partnership as he was seen “as the last chance for an Afghan solution to the bin Laden problem.”<sup>28</sup> Because of this, the Taliban requested bin Laden’s assistance in assassinating their chief rival. In order to limit the effectiveness of the Northern Alliance and disorient the surviving members, al Qaeda operatives planned the assassination attempt for late August-early September. On September 9, Massoud sat for an interview with two men who claimed to be foreign journalists. During the “interview,” they detonated a bomb hidden in their camera and killed the Tajik military genius.<sup>29</sup> Though it was originally planned for several weeks earlier, which would have provided the Taliban with enough time to destroy the leaderless Northern Alliance forces, the timing was still important and within the window of opportunity.<sup>30</sup> Two days later, nineteen members of an al Qaeda cell, who were sent to the U.S. to learn how to fly commercial airliners, crashed two planes into the World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon and another into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 shook much of the world to its core. It also provided bin Laden with exactly what he wanted: the U.S. invasion of

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<sup>27</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, 118-119.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 380-381.

<sup>29</sup> Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 219.

Afghanistan and a protracted, costly land war in the mountainous, barren, and inhospitable Central Asian nation.

## Chapter 6: Blowback

The term “blowback” was coined by the CIA during the Cold War. Originally intended for internal use, “it refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people.”<sup>1</sup> This term gained popularity in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and became a common part of the lexicon as the ramifications of previous policies bore fruit. According to Chalmers Johnson, a noted academic, actions that generate blowback typically remain secret from both the public and most of the government. This in turn prevents the victims of retaliatory strikes to understand why an attack against them occurred.<sup>2</sup> Those who witnessed the events of September 11 could not understand the context until many years later.

The attacks stunned the nation, and the U.S. was compelled to reenter Afghanistan after exiting a decade earlier. For those in power, and many of those who were not, vengeance dominated their minds. On the day after the attack, during a meeting of the National Security Council, President George W. Bush listened as his advisers discussed an attack and invasion of Afghanistan, including the removal of the Taliban. Rashid argues that there was enormous reluctance within the U.S. military to invade Afghanistan due to the past failings of Great Britain and the Soviets. The U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which was responsible for the Middle East region, did not possess a ready-made plan to invade the landlocked nation.<sup>3</sup> Entry points were limited due to poor relations with Afghanistan’s southern neighbors, Pakistan and

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<sup>1</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Blowback*, xi.

<sup>3</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 332.

Iran, as well as limited infrastructure and ties to Russia among the Central Asian neighbors in the north.<sup>4</sup>

According to Malkasian, rather than rush into a war on the other side of the world, Bush chose to offer the Taliban an ultimatum. “On September 12, he told his national security council that the Taliban must surrender or kick out the entire al-Qa‘eda organization if it did not want war with the United States.”<sup>5</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy, Richard Armitage, sought to administer additional pressure on them by requesting assistance and assurances from Pakistan that they would sever all ties with the renegade Kabul regime and allow the U.S. military to set up bases in Pakistan and fly through their airspace. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf agreed to these terms out of fear that the U.S. would invade Pakistan as well. Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban, refused to hand bin Laden over to the U.S. but offered to surrender him to a third country. This was unacceptable to the Bush White House, but attempts continued through the month of September via Robert Grenier, the CIA chief in Pakistan. When those failed the U.S. prepared for the war with the U.S. that bin Laden wanted so badly.<sup>6</sup>

The unpreparedness for war in Afghanistan was not isolated within CENTCOM. The CIA failed to maintain strong links with anti-Taliban militias during the preceding decade. The seat of CIA Director George Tenet continued to rise in temperature in the wake of the agency failure to identify the nineteen hijackers and notify the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). As the Pentagon did not possess a plan of invasion, Tenet presented his own in a gambit to make himself indispensable to the administration. The audacious plan called for teams of CIA and U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 61.

<sup>5</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 55-58.

Special Operations Forces to connect with Northern Alliance troops and launch a ground-based offensive from the northern reaches of Afghanistan, aided by U.S. air power controlling the skies.<sup>7</sup> With no other options available, Bush administration accepted this plan on September 15 and signed an order bestowing enormous powers upon the agency to conduct war in Afghanistan and make foreign policy decisions with the assistance of foreign intelligence agencies. Upwards of \$1 billion was allocated to the CIA for covert operations.<sup>8</sup>

In his autobiography Tenet insists that the CIA was ready for an operation in Afghanistan. “*We were ready to carry out all these actions immediately, because we had been preparing for this moment for years. We were ready because our plan allowed us to be.*”<sup>9</sup> This statement does not align with the available facts. In his 2004 testimony to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (9/11 Commission), Tenet contended that the CIA’s clandestine service was still five years away from being fully ready to fulfill its counterterrorism role.<sup>10</sup> The service diminished in size at the end of the Cold War and reached an all-time low in recruitment in 1995 when only twenty-five trainees became new officers. In 1998, Congress and the Clinton administration endorsed a long-range rebuilding program designed to restore the clandestine service to previous levels. At the time, it was said training, language study, and the real-world experience necessary would take five to seven years.<sup>11</sup> Based on the timeline of events, it is not possible for the CIA to have possessed a plan that was prepared years earlier as Tenet claimed.

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<sup>7</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 332.

<sup>8</sup> Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, (London: Harper Collins, 2007), 178.

<sup>10</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 90.

Furthermore, according to Rashid, though the CIA ultimately reversed course and opened dialogue with Massoud after the 1998 embassy bombings, they only offered him paltry amounts of funding and visited a handful of times in the decade leading to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of how intertwined the agency and Massoud were, his assassination on September 9 sowed a chaotic situation among the remaining Northern Alliance. Rashid further contends that the contacts Tenet claims existed in the Pashtun region were also false. “When the time came for the CIA to unleash anti-Taliban Pashtuns in October, the agency found it had none and fell back on Britain’s MI6 and ISI to provide them.”<sup>13</sup> Overall, the CIA’s contacts and partners within the anti-Taliban groups were either nonexistent or overinflated by Tenet and the agency in order to save face and project an image of control after their disastrous handling of al Qaeda in the lead-up to 9/11. The lies, exaggerations, and half-truths used by Tenet and the CIA to support their covert operations plan to begin the war were only the tip of the iceberg with regard to how the CIA and U.S. military conducted themselves over the twenty years of occupation of Afghanistan.

The war began on October 7, 2001 with an air campaign against Taliban and al Qaeda. This was supplemented by the ground forces of CIA, U.S. Special Operations Forces, members of the Northern Alliance, and other allied Afghan forces, collectively known as the United Front, who pushed the Taliban forces further south toward Kabul and Pakistan. In some major cities, like Herat and Kabul, the fed up and disgruntled youth joined the fight against the oppressive Taliban and liberated city centers before the United Front and coalition forces arrived.<sup>14</sup> By mid-November, the Taliban lost control over most of the country outside of their stronghold in

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<sup>12</sup> Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Neamatollah Nojumi, “The Rise and Fall of the Taliban,” in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, edited by Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 115.



Kandahar and, by December, appeared ready to surrender Kandahar to Hamid Karzai, a diplomat and Pashtun tribal leader who spent the previous decade in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> There is still not an accepted version of events concerning what occurred between Karzai and Mullah Omar. It is accepted that a meeting between Karzai and representatives of Mullah Omar took place and a deal was made with the Taliban in which they would lay down their arms in exchange for immunity. Whether this was agreed to and signed by Mullah Omar cannot be confirmed.<sup>16</sup> A consensus was reached the following day in which the Taliban would depart Kandahar and Mullah Omar would live under the care of Raees Baghrani, a tribal leader from northern Helmand province, whom Karzai trusted to maintain peace.<sup>17</sup>

The accounts begin to unravel here. According to some Karzai advisers and Taliban leaders, it was agreed that Kandahar would be turned over to Karzai, but an overarching peace deal was not reached. There is evidence to support this, including satellite phone calls between Mullah Omar and Karzai.<sup>18</sup> Any deal that may have been agreed upon or in the works was scuttled after U.S. special forces captured Kandahar Airfield on December 6. The U.S. also began to pressure Karzai to ignore Taliban overtures.<sup>19</sup> This was followed by threats from U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that all support for the Northern Alliance and Karzai would be withdrawn if immunity was given to the Taliban.<sup>20</sup> Other sources, including from former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef, challenge this version of events. He

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<sup>15</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Anand Gopal, "The Taliban in Kandahar," in *Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders between Terror, Politics, and Religion*, edited by Peter L. Bergen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>17</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Gopal, "The Taliban in Kandahar," 11.

<sup>20</sup> Matt Kelley, "U.S. Warns Anti-Taliban Groups Against Giving Taliban Leader Omar Amnesty," *Associated Press*, December 7, 2001.

contends that Mullah Omar was neither a party to any agreements with Karzai, nor did he authorize anyone to negotiate surrender on his behalf. “The members of the Taliban delegation were merely negotiating the peaceful turnover of Kandahar City and individual amnesty to return to their homes.”<sup>21</sup> Mullah Naqib, who was a party to the negotiations, corroborated this version of events and claimed that Mullah Omar decided to leave Kandahar on his own accord before the end of the second meeting.<sup>22</sup>

Though it cannot definitively be concluded that the conduct of Rumsfeld and the U.S. destroyed an opportunity to peacefully end Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the attitude that existed during this period was also present over the next twenty years concerning Afghanistan and its sovereignty. Bravado and the imperial desire to remain in control of world events, which has permeated U.S. foreign policy since the end of World War II and the implementation of the Truman Doctrine, were hallmarks of the War in Afghanistan. Rather than allowing Karzai to negotiate for the future of his country, the U.S. threatened to remove all aid to the anti-Taliban forces in an effort to cut off its nose to spite its face. The stated goals of the Bush administration were to remove the Taliban from power, capture or kill bin Laden, and dismantle al Qaeda. Withdrawing from Afghanistan before these tasks were accomplished runs counter to conventional logic. Remaining there after they were accomplished placed a major burden upon the shoulders of the citizens of Afghanistan, who were forced to endure another foreign invader occupying their land and influencing their government. For the Afghan people, it was yet another conflict in their nation that had little to do with them. As stated by Malkasian: “Twenty years of disorder and outside intervention contributed to the rise of terrorism. Afghans themselves,

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<sup>21</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue*, 46-47.

however, were not international terrorists. The September 11 plot may have been supervised from Afghanistan but it was not Afghan.”<sup>23</sup> The disorder that plagued Afghanistan for two decades is directly connected to U.S. foreign policy decisions.

Disregarding Afghanistan as unvaluable and a waste of resources in the 1950s permitted the partnership between the Afghans and Soviets to blossom. Afghan military officers and students trained in Moscow and brought the tenets of communism home with them. The dismissal of the advice and intelligence collected by MI6 analysts who pushed the U.S. to back Massoud early on in the Afghan-Soviet War sanctioned the most radical elements of the Mujahideen to rise in prominence through increases in arms, funding, and training. Turning off the gushing faucet of aid rather than decreasing it in phases after the Soviet withdrawal caused the CIA’s former partners to feel abandoned and turn to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for renewed financial support. This decision produced the environment necessary for the Taliban to sweep through the war-torn, splintered remnants of Afghanistan and be welcomed as liberators by many outside of Kabul. The agreement to maintain military installations on the Arabian Peninsula acted as a lightning rod for individuals like bin Laden, who used this affront to Islam as an opportunity to stir up anger and resentment against the West. Ignoring the policy recommendations of intelligence analysts and not taking stronger action against bin Laden during the 1990s allowed al Qaeda to grow in size and conduct multiple terrorist attacks against the U.S. and the West. The failure of the CIA to communicate efficiently with the FBI in the lead up to 9/11 allowed the attacks to occur unabated. Entry into a long and protracted war in Afghanistan, which lasted two decades, as well as the continued meddling in local government affairs and the

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<sup>23</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, 53.

murder of countless Afghans misidentified as enemies of the U.S. destroyed any goodwill earned during the early days of the invasion in which the Taliban was forced out of power and Afghanistan was declared “free.” While the Taliban was chased out by a coalition of the United Front and NATO forces, the U.S. remained stationed across the Central Asian nation as another foreign occupier.

Rather than learn from their past mistakes, as well as those of other nations, and approach Afghanistan from a different perspective, the U.S. played directly into the hands of bin Laden and his followers. In a September 24, 2001 statement, bin Laden mourned the deaths of Muslims in Pakistan who opposed the introduction of U.S. military forces in their country. He urged that they “be considered the first martyrs in the battle of Islam against the neo-Crusader-Jewish campaign led by Bush, the biggest Crusader, under the banner of the cross.”<sup>24</sup> He links the U.S. and Israel in an attempt to arouse anger among his followers and the rest of the Muslim world for *jihad* in Afghanistan. “Dear brothers, I bring you the good news that we are established on the path of *jihad* for God, following God’s Prophet, with the Afghan people, who are heroes and believers, and under the command of our Emir the proud *mujahid* Commander of the Faithful Mullah Muhammad Omar.”<sup>25</sup> On the day the U.S. began their assault on Afghanistan, bin Laden called for Muslims to *jihad* once more. “After this event [the 9/11 attacks], now that senior officials in the United States of America—starting with the head of global unbelief, Bush, and those with him—have spoken, every Muslim should rise up and defend his religion.”<sup>26</sup> These

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<sup>24</sup> Bin Laden, *Messages to the World*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Bin Laden, *Messages to the World*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Bin Laden, *Messages to the World*, 104-105.

statements from bin Laden, among many others, align with his vision of war with the U.S. in Afghanistan.

David Kilcullen, former Senior Advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq and an expert in guerrilla warfare, classifies this vision as a key component of globalized insurgency. “Under conditions of globalized insurgency, the world’s entire Muslim population, and the populations of most Western countries, are a target of enemy propaganda and hence a potential focus for information operations.”<sup>27</sup> This concurs with bin Laden’s three stated goals according to Scheuer. The first of which was to bankrupt the U.S. with a long and costly war; second, to spread the U.S. military and intelligence apparatuses as thinly as possible to limit flexibility; and third, to create as much political divisiveness as possible in the U.S., as well as sow dissent among their allies.<sup>28</sup> Kepel argues that the 9/11 attacks galvanized Muslims as an example of victory won by violence and aroused emotional sympathy and enthusiasm for *jihad*.<sup>29</sup> Knowing this, the words of bin Laden take on a new meaning and importance. It should have been clear to those in Washington that they were bated into a religious war. Scheuer contends that, regardless of the torrent of advice and information available, the U.S. waded into battle and failed miserably. Rather than be defeated, the Islamists grew in size and power due to the war in Afghanistan running in the best designed way to help the enemy win.<sup>30</sup> Though the goal of the Western coalition forces was to isolate and wipe out al Qaeda and its Afghan protectors while

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<sup>27</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big On*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>28</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, vii-viii.

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, trans. by Anthony F. Roberts. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, vii.

minimizing civilian losses, the goal for bin Laden and the Taliban was to rouse the Muslim world into solidarity through increased noncombatant casualties.<sup>31</sup>

Kepel asserts that the second act of bin Laden's plan reversed the roles of the major players, where the attacker becomes passive and attacked, while the original victim converts to the prime aggressor. Had the key figures and main perpetrators been targeted with precision and the civilian population sheltered from the ravages of war, the trap laid by bin Laden would have failed.<sup>32</sup> Though Bush requested civilian death, also known as "collateral damage," be limited during the planning stages of the war, this sentiment did not last long. On the opening day of war, upon the initial bombing of the Kandahar Airfield, the CIA believed they saw Mullah Omar flee his house and seek refuge in a mosque. A decision needed to be made over whether to launch Hellfire missiles from CIA-controlled Predator drones and risk angering their Afghan allies with an attack on a religious school in which there may have been children present.<sup>33</sup>

The decision fell to General Tommy Franks, the Commander in Chief of CENTCOM, who vetoed the request to fire upon the school. This did not sit well with the CIA, who appealed to Rumsfeld and Bush to overrule Franks, which took more than an hour to play out. In the meantime, it was agreed that firing a Hellfire missile at a car parked outside the mosque would serve as a psychological attack. Upon firing, the men in the mosque fled by car in different directions. According to Coll, Franks spoke with Rumsfeld about the collateral damage of launching a missile at a mosque. Rumsfeld then spoke with the president about it, who agreed that it was worthwhile if it meant Mullah Omar was killed. This was relayed back to Franks by

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<sup>31</sup> Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 72.

Rumsfeld. “Finally, on Frank’s order, American fighter-bombers deposited two bombs on the mosque under C.I.A. surveillance. In any event, Mullah Omar was not there.”<sup>34</sup> The U.S. destroyed a house of worship on a hunch that the leader of the Taliban was present. The CIA was never able to properly assert that he was there, only that they believed he was among the men in turbans who fled his house earlier in the day. This represents an early example of how the war played out over the next two decades. The true number of innocent civilians killed and incorrect buildings targeted by U.S. forces will never truly be known.

In December 2001, the U.S. failed to capture or kill bin Laden at the Battle of Tora Bora before he escaped into Pakistan, but the war in Afghanistan continued. Despite the fact that bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban were on the run, the U.S. remained, which further inflamed sentiments toward the U.S. across the Muslim world. The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 solidified the feeling of animosity.<sup>35</sup> Before the U.S. launched itself into a second war in the Middle East, Afghanistan was already going off course. In a March 28, 2002 interview on MSNBC, Rumsfeld asserted that negotiating with the Taliban was unnecessary. “The only thing you can do is to bomb them and try to kill them. And that’s what we did, and it worked. They’re gone. And the Afghan people are a lot better off.”<sup>36</sup> On that same day, Rumsfeld wrote brief confidential memo: “Please see me about having a weekly meeting on Afghanistan. I am getting concerned that it is drifting.”<sup>37</sup> The public statements of this period stand in stark contrast to the sentiments behind closed doors.

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<sup>34</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 74-75.

<sup>35</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, “Weekly Meeting on Afghanistan,” March, 28, 2002.

According to leaked documents from the SIGAR interviews, the stated goals and objectives of the war quickly veered off into directions that had little to nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. One unnamed former senior State Department official said, “If I were to write a book, its [message] would be: ‘America goes to war without knowing why it does.’”<sup>38</sup> This is a common refrain among those who were interviewed by the SIGAR and solidify that the U.S. continued to bungle operations in Afghanistan, which further inflamed the already tense and frayed partnerships with their allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gopal recounts a botched January 2002 night raid in which U.S. Green Berets launched a surprise attack on a schoolhouse in Khas Uruzgan, Afghanistan, which was purported to be the hiding place of senior al Qaeda members. Instead, it was the location of anti-Taliban Afghan government leaders. The schoolhouse’s temporary inhabitants, along with those in the police headquarters, were assaulted and apprehended by U.S. troops who loaded them onto helicopters. Upon their exit, the AC-130 gunships launched rockets at the compound. When the villagers approached the charred remains, they found a calling card was left behind. “Emblazoned with the symbol of an American flag, it bore a handwritten message: ‘Have a nice day. From Damage, Inc.’”<sup>39</sup> Twenty-one pro-American leaders and their employees were killed, twenty-six taken prisoner, and zero Taliban or al Qaeda members were among them. The people of Khas Uruzgan lost their city council, mayor’s office, and police department in one night and were naturally overcome with shock, grief, and rage.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living*, 122-123.

<sup>40</sup> Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living*, 124.



There are countless stories of similar nature to this. Poor intelligence, unclear goals, unfocused attention, and misrepresentation of the course of war doomed the U.S. to failure in Afghanistan. Just as the Soviets before them, the U.S. lost sight of the short-term nature of initial objectives and found itself in a protracted war with no end in sight. The knowledge of previous wars in Afghanistan was ignored. “In the face of this reality, U.S. government leaders, generals, media, and experts nonetheless have spoken as if our endeavors had brought forth a budding mini-America in Afghanistan.”<sup>41</sup> Rather than focus on creating a stable government that aligned with the local culture, the U.S. flexed its imperialistic muscle and crafted an Afghanistan in its own image. The continued failures in Afghanistan soiled the image of the world’s last remaining superpower on both domestic and international stages. According to Brzezinski, the opinion on U.S. involvement in foreign affairs was dire. “Yet today, America is perceived, both at home and abroad, as weakened, unwilling, and increasingly unable to act as the world’s politically, economically, and militarily most powerful country.”<sup>42</sup> What should have been a quick and decisive response to the worst terrorist attack in world history and a solid victory for the U.S. fell victim to the most classic of blunders: never get involved in a land war in Asia.

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 2004), 173.

<sup>42</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 217-218.

### Conclusion: Lessons Learned?

In June 1989, the U.S. Army published a report entitled *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan*. The purpose of the study was to derive lessons from the Soviets that may be applicable to the training of Army soldiers and units. The report defines the Afghan-Soviet War for the USSR as “a ‘Low Intensity Conflict,’ a ‘foreign internal defense’ against a ‘loosely organized insurgency.’”<sup>1</sup> In the summary of events, it is noted that the Soviets installed a new Afghan communist leader, Karmal, and sought to bolster the nation’s military and increase its capacity to control anti-government insurgency.

What was clearly perceived by the insurgents as a foreign invasion, however, further inflamed the situation. What had earlier been a disjointed ‘*Jihad*’ (Holy War) against the communist government in Kabul, now took on greater urgency and served as the strongest unifying factor for the insurgents.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than fighting themselves, the Afghan people now had “invading infidels” against which to unite. The report contains key learning experiences, such as not providing counterinsurgency forces with large targets, knowing the enemy’s tactics and routines, being aware of personal and group rivalries, and decentralizing planning and execution of low-level operations. A review of U.S. operations between 2001-2021 demonstrates that many of these lessons were not heeded.

Countless mistakes concerning Afghan relations and foreign policy occurred throughout the Cold War and continued after it. The events and outcome of the U.S.’ war in Afghanistan are connected to these mistakes. These include favoring the Islamist fundamentalists over Afghan nationalists, sponsoring foreign legions of “Arab Afghans” that hated the U.S. as much as the

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<sup>1</sup> United States Army, *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan*, June 1989.

<sup>2</sup> United States Army, *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan*.

USSR, helping spread the trafficking of narcotics to exploit Soviet military weaknesses, and escalating resistance campaigns into international *jihadist* movements.<sup>3</sup> All of these decisions created the current political environment the world experiences today. Those who made and approved of policy decisions such as bombing houses of worship, killing and arresting local allies, and training should be held accountable for their actions. Instead, these policies remain in effect and unmanned arial vehicles rain missiles down on both enemies and innocent civilians. The missiles do not discriminate: they kill anyone who is in their path regardless of if they are the intended target or if the intended target is even present.

U.S. policy in the twenty-first century, both foreign and domestic, is a result of the mistakes of the past and the overreaches that followed. The vagueness of the War on Terror that began in 2001 allowed the definition of terrorist to widen to include anyone who does not align with the ideals of American exceptionalism.<sup>4</sup> The introduction of the PATRIOT Act and the Authorized Use of Military Force of 2001 expanded the government's ability to spy on foreign and domestic targets, compile information like phone records and internet search histories, indefinitely detain suspected terrorists without trial, and indiscriminately bomb foreign targets. "In recent years, the United States has targeted more and more people with no apparent connection to al Qaeda, no apparent connection to the September 11 attacks, and increasingly with no apparent connection to the imminent threat to the United States."<sup>5</sup> Rather than learning the lesson from the blowback that occurred on 9/11, the U.S. escalated hostilities and further diminished its international appeal.

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<sup>3</sup> Scott, *The Road to 9/11*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Ackerman, *Reign of Terror*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 294.

Furthermore, the decision to arm anyone willing to fight a perceived enemy of the U.S. continues. While it is too early to say whether the policy to supply Ukraine with military aid will prove costly, the lack of oversight into where weapons end up mirrors a key issue faced during the Afghan-Soviet War. It is the job of future historians to dissect, examine, and analyze the short-term and long-term effects of the Russian war in Ukraine. Fortunately for them, they will have the perfect case study for comparison. Whether or not the neo-Nazi Azov battalion of the Ukrainian military takes advantage of the superior weapons provided to them *carte blanche*, it is necessary for more oversight into covert affairs and military aid to foreign groups. As explained by Scott, the extraconstitutional powers granted in the National Security Act of 1947 have increasingly escaped the intended checks and balances.<sup>6</sup> In order to restore trust in the government, both foreign and domestic, and limit future blowback, it is time to rein in the shadow government that exists and dominates U.S. policy.

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<sup>6</sup> Scott, *The CIA's Secret Powers*, 234.

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