
1979: Covert War in Afghanistan

Context

In 1973, the Afghan monarchy was overthrown. The new government, led by Mohammad Daoud – one of the king’s cousins – was supported by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and other leftist parties and organizations.

The U.S. and Iran pressured Daoud to sever ties with the U.S.S.R. The U.S. offered \$2 billion in aid and urged Afghanistan to join the Regional Cooperation for Development, which included Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, America’s main client states in the region.

The Daoud regime began moving steadily into the U.S. orbit. They killed a PDP leader, arresting many others and purged hundreds of their sympathizers from government positions. In April 1978, the PDP, aided by military supporters, revolted against Daoud and took power. The stated goal of this “April revolution” was to drag Afghanistan out of feudal existence. Life expectancy was about 40, infant mortality was about 25%, sanitation was primitive, there was widespread malnutrition and illiteracy was more than 90%.

In William Blum’s classic summary of the CIA’s covert wars, *Killing Hope*, he outlines some of the revolutionary government’s social and economic programs:

“The new government under President Taraki declared a commitment to Islam within a secular state, and to non-alignment in foreign affairs. It said the coup was not foreign inspired and that they were not Communists but rather nationalists and revolutionaries. They pushed radical reforms, they talked about class struggle, they used anti-imperialist rhetoric, they supported Cuba, they signed a friendship treaty and other cooperative agreements with the Soviets and they increased the number of Soviet civilian and military advisers in Afghanistan.... In May 1979, British political scientist Fred Halliday said ‘probably more has changed in the countryside over the last year than in the two centuries since the state was established.’”⁶⁷

The most significant of these changes included the cancellation of peasant’s debts to landlords, the building of hundreds of schools and medical clinics, the outlawing of child marriage and the marital exchange of women for



Zbigniew Brzezinski
National Security Advisor
(1977-1981)



Jimmy Carter
U.S. President
(1977-1981)

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money or commodities, the legalization of trade unions and women’s education.

This new government was not, of course, acceptable to the U.S., which allied itself with large landowners, tribal chiefs, Afghan businessmen and royalty. Within two months, the new government was under attack by conservative Islamist guerrillas (*mujahideen*).

Pretext Incident

In his memoirs, former CIA director Robert Gates (1991-1993) said that the U.S. provoked the December 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan by giving military assistance to the *mujahideen*. Gates recalls a meeting, nine months earlier, on March 30, 1979, when Under Secretary of Defense

Walter Slocombe said “there was value in keeping the Afghan insurgency going, ‘sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire.’”⁶⁸

In 1998, this U.S. effort to entrap the Soviets in the Afghan civil war, was confirmed by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Advisor (1977-1981). Brzezinski bragged that by covertly arming and financing the *mujahideen*, the U.S. deliberately drew the Soviets into the war: “According to the official version of history, the CIA assistance to the Mujahideen began during 1980, i.e. after the Soviet army had invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. But the reality, kept secret until now, is very different: it was July 3, 1979 when President Carter signed the first directive on the clandestine assistance to opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. On that day, I wrote a note to the President in which I explained that in my opinion this aid would bring about a military intervention by the Soviets.... We did not push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.”⁶⁹

In March 1979, Afghan President Taraki visited Moscow to request Soviet help to fight the *mujahideen*. The Soviets did promise some military aid, but they would not commit ground troops. As Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin told Taraki: “The entry of our troops into Afghanistan would outrage the international community, triggering a string of extremely negative consequences. Our common enemies are just waiting for the moment when Soviet troops appear in Afghanistan. This will give them the excuse they need to

send armed bands into the country.”⁷⁰

Blum notes that “prior to the Soviet invasion, the CIA had been beaming radio propaganda into Afghanistan and cultivating alliances with exiled Afghan guerrilla leaders by donating medicine and communications equipment. U.S. foreign service officers had been meeting with Mujahideen leaders to determine their needs at least as early as April 1979. And, in July, President Carter had signed a ‘finding’ to aid the rebels covertly, which led to the U.S. providing them with cash, weapons, equipment and supplies, and engaging in propaganda and other psychological operations in Afghanistan on their behalf.”⁷¹

Follow Up

The U.S. government and media, painted the *mujahideen* as “freedom fighters” and the Soviets simply as invaders of a defenseless country. Blum describes the propaganda offensive: “The Carter administration jumped on the issue of the Soviet ‘invasion’ and launched a campaign of righteous indignation, imposing what Carter called ‘penalties’ – from halting the delivery of grain to the Soviet Union to keeping the U.S. team out of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. On this seemingly clear-cut, anti-communist issue, the U.S. public and media easily fell in line with the president. The *Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 7, 1980) called for a ‘military’ reaction, the establishment of U.S. bases in the Middle East, ‘reinstatement of draft registration,’ development of a new missile and giving the CIA more leeway.”⁷²

After the Soviets were drawn into the Afghan trap, the U.S. rapidly escalated their support for the *mujahideen*. It is widely considered to have been “the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA.”⁷³ After the Soviets sent in their troops, the CIA poured billions of dollars into arming a dozen *mujahideen* factions throughout the 1980s.

The CIA’s Afghan war was very similar to its covert war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Both sets of contras (or *counter*-revolutionaries) used terror tactics to attack literacy programs, schools, health clinics, co-ops and other social and economic programs of the government. Both contras were also heavily involved in the drug trade. The anti-Sandinista contras financed much of their terror by moving cocaine into the U.S., while the Afghan contras grew opium for heroine production and trade. “There’s no doubt about it. The rebels keep their sales going through

Nine months before the Soviets sent troops to Afghanistan, Walter Slocombe [Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs] said there was value in keeping the Afghan insurgency going, thereby “sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire.”



the sale of opium.” David Melocik, Drug Enforcement Agency Congressional Affairs liaison. Dr. David Musto of the White House Strategy Council on Drug Abuse warned: “We were going into Afghanistan to support the opium growers in their rebellion against the Soviets.”⁷⁴

Real Reasons

The main goal of the CIA’s covert war against Afghanistan was to “‘bleed’ the Soviet Union, just as the U.S. had been bled in Vietnam.”⁷⁵ As Brzezinski said: “For almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a

conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.”⁷⁶

When asked if he regretted arming the *mujahideen*, Brzezinski said: “Regret what? This secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of luring the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, in substance: ‘We now have the opportunity to give the U.S. SR its war of Vietnam.’ In fact, Moscow had to conduct an unbearable war for almost ten years, a conflict which led to the demoralization and finally the break up of the Soviet empire.”

Interviewer: “Do you regret supporting Islamic fundamentalism, having given weapons and advice to... terrorists?”

Brzezinski: “What is most important from the point of view of the history of the world? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few excited Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and end of the cold war?”⁷⁷

Besides being an effort to destroy the Soviet Union, the Afghan war was also waged in order to send a threatening message to other Third World countries. In August 1979, three months before the Soviet intervention, a classified State Department Report stated: “the United States’s larger interests... would be served by the demise of the Taraki-Amin regime, despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan... the overthrow of the D.R.A. [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] would show the rest of the world, particularly the Third World, that the Soviets’ view of the socialist course of history as being inevitable is not accurate.”⁷⁸

Footnotes

67. William Blum, “Afghanistan 1979-1992: America’s Jihad,” *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (1995, revised 2001).
68. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents & How They Won the Cold War* (1997)
69. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 15, 1998. Translated by Ian Stobie <middleeastdialogue.org/200111t/editorial.html>
70. Blum.

71. Blum.
72. Blum.
73. Fred Halliday, *New Republic*, March 25, 1996.
74. “Dealing in Death,” *Wakeup* <www.wakeupmag.co.uk/articles/ciadrugsafghan.htm>
75. Mark Zapezauer, CIA’s Greatest Hits. <www.thirdworldtraveler.com/cia%20hits/afghanistan_ciahits.html>
76. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, ibid. Trans. Ian Stobie.
77. *Le Nouvel Observateur*.
78. Blum.