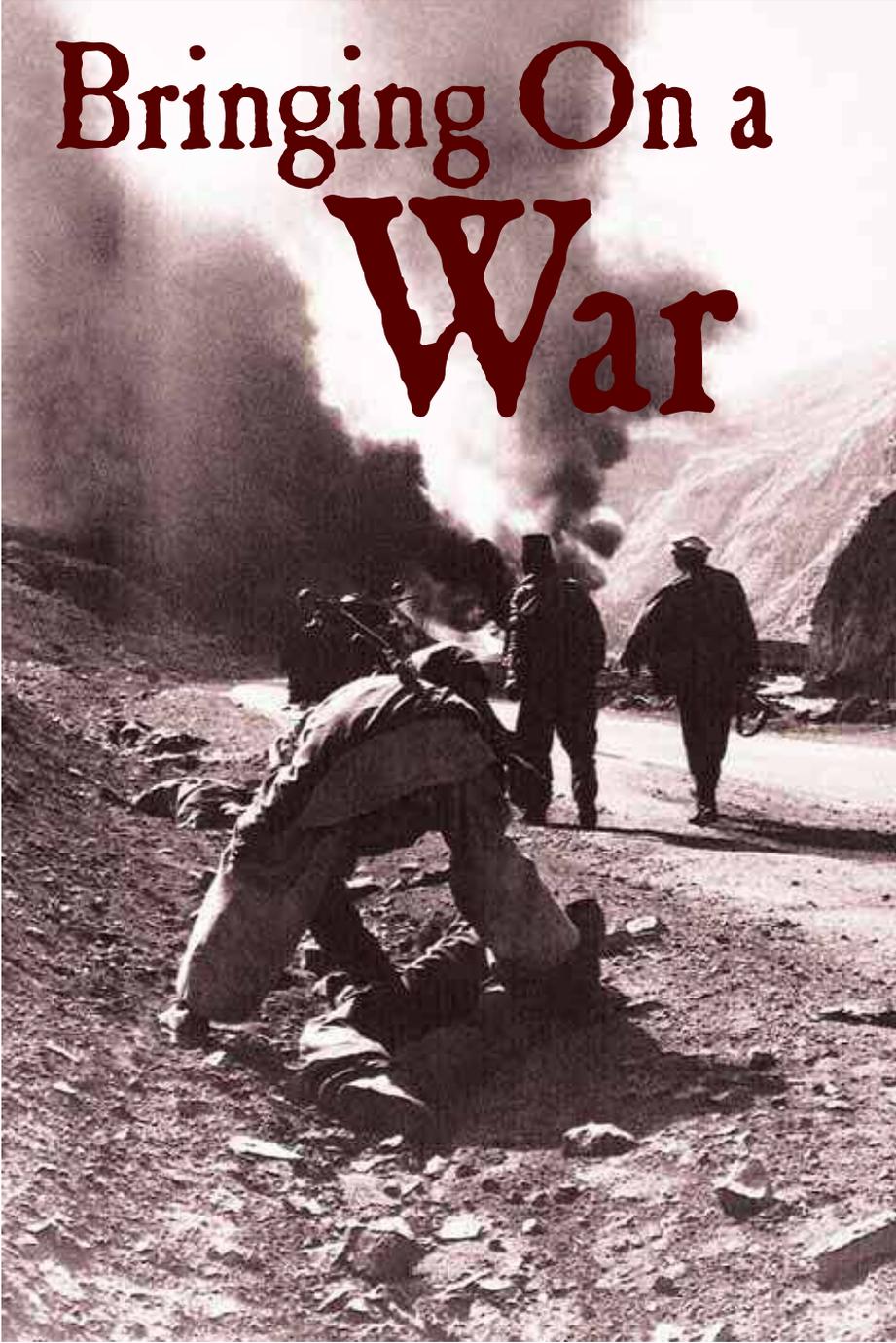


Bringing On a War



How a “secret operation” in Afghanistan by President Jimmy Carter led to America’s longest war.

by Jack Kenny

On Christmas Eve of 1979, Soviet transport planes, carrying tanks and trucks as well as thousands of troops, began descending on the airport in the Afghan capital of Kabul, while helicopters brought in

several thousand commandos, including shock troops from the KGB’s “Special Ops” unit. On December 27, commandos stormed the presidential palace, killing both President Hafizullah Amin and a guest. Within hours, the Soviets had control of the airport, the radio station, and other key points throughout the city.

As armored divisions of troops moved, the invaders seized control of all the major Afghan towns.

In Washington, a seemingly shocked Jimmy Carter, already hamstrung by the Iran hostage crisis that would plague the final year of his presidency, announced a number of measures in response to the invasion. They included a ban on the sale of high technology or other strategic items to the Soviet Union, “severely curtailed” fishing privileges for the Soviets in U.S. waters, and the cancelled sale of 17 million tons of grain to the Russian empire. As an added gesture of defiance, the president ordered a boycott of the 1980 summer Olympics in Moscow, using his authority under the Export Administration Act to prohibit transactions related to the Moscow games. At a White House meeting with members of the U.S. Olympics Committee, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stressed the seriousness of the Afghan incursion, saying that the Soviets had established a “strategic wedge” and that its bombers could now reach the Straits of Hormuz, a strategic point in the transportation of U.S. oil supplies. He spoke of evidence suggesting the Soviets were using chemical weapons and establishing permanent bases in Afghanistan.

In his January 4 speech to the nation, President Carter invoked a slightly revised and updated version of the “domino theory” President Eisenhower had used a quarter of a century earlier to describe the communist threat in Indochina. According to Carter,

A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies.

The United States wants all nations in the region to be free and to be independent. If the Soviets are encouraged in this invasion by eventual success, and if they maintain their dominance over Afghanistan and then extend their control to adjacent countries, the stable, strategic, and peaceful balance of the entire world will be changed. This would threaten the security of all nations including, of course, the United States, our allies, and our friends.

More telling, however, is what Carter claimed to have learned from the Soviet invasion. The same president who a few years earlier had spoken dismissively of an “inordinate fear of communism” was now telling ABC News: “This action of the Soviets has made a more dramatic change in my own opinion of what the Soviets’ ultimate goals are than anything they’ve done in the previous time I’ve been in office.”

Carter’s critics on the Right wondered why it took the invasion of Afghanistan to enlighten the president on the Soviets’ goals when there was by then a 60-year track record of conquest, mass murder, and suppression of freedom by the Soviets since they had come to power in Russia in 1917. But if Carter were truly surprised by the invasion of Afghanistan, he probably should have read his own directive or paid closer attention to memos from his national security advisor. In a 1998 interview with *Le Nouvel*

Observateur, Brzezinski corrected “the official version of history,” the Carter version. Brzezinski not only indicated that Carter was not surprised, but that CIA aid to the Mujahedeen opposition fighters (the name means soldiers of God) began before the Soviet invasion even happened.

“The reality, kept secret until now, is completely different: on 3 July 1979 President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the Soviet regime in Kabul,” Brzezinski said. “And on the same day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained that in my opinion this aid would lead to a Soviet military intervention.” Not that he was

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President Jimmy Carter meets with U.S. Olympic athletes on March 21, 1980 to explain his reasons for imposing a boycott on the summer games in Moscow.

trying to warn the president away from that likely outcome. On the contrary, as he made clear in the interview, he welcomed such a development.

“The secret operation was an excellent idea,” Brzezinski boasted. “It drew the Russians into the Afghan trap.... On the day that Soviets crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, saying, in essence, ‘We have now the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War.’” Brzezinski, a leading light in the foreign policy establishment who is a member of the internationalist-minded Council on Foreign Relations and a founding member of the Trilateral Commission, described

his grand strategy for drawing the Soviets into the same type of quagmire created by a previous administration of the “brightest and the best.” The Soviets would be stuck in a long and ruinous war in that “graveyard of empires” that buried dreams of its would-be conquerors from

Alexander the Great to Great Britain and Czarist Russia.

The Afghan Monarchy

Though widely regarded as little more than a land of forbidding mountain ranges and feudal warlords, Afghanistan in the middle of the last century was making significant strides toward Western-style modernization. During the 1950s and ’60s, wrote Alan Taylor in *The Atlantic*, there was “a brief, relatively peaceful era, when modern buildings were constructed in Kabul alongside older traditional mud structures, when burqas became optional for a time, and the country appeared to be on a path toward a more open, prosperous society.” As a neutral nation in a strategic location, Afghanistan received economic aid and development assistance from both sides in the Cold War. “The Russians built an airport for Kabul, the Americans one for Kandahar,” wrote journalist Anthony Paul. “The Russians raised a massive grain elevator in Kabul, the Americans

filled it with wheat. The Russians built the 66-mile Salang Highway through the Hindu Kush, the Americans countered with aid for the national airline.”

In 1964, Afghanistan’s King Zahir Shah instituted political reforms that included the establishment of a legislative body, with a third of the members appointed by the king, another third elected by the people, and the remainder selected by provincial assemblies. Zahir would be the nation’s last king, however, as he was deposed in 1973 in a bloodless coup led by his cousin and brother-in-law General Sardar Mohammad Daoud, who declared Afghanistan a republic and himself its president. As the nation’s prime minister in the 1950s, Daoud had urged closer ties with the Soviet Union, but as president he came to resent Moscow’s hand in Afghanistan’s internal politics.

Following a state visit to Moscow, where he told Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev that Afghanistan would remain independent, Daoud pursued closer relationships with the West and with the oil-rich countries of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

He signed a bilateral military treaty with Egypt, another country that had distanced itself from Moscow. The agreement resulted in Egyptian armed forces training the Afghan military and police.

Meanwhile, Daoud pursued a campaign against Afghan communists. The killing of a communist leader in early April 1978 was followed later that month by a coup carried out by members of the communist and pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Daoud and most of his family were assassinated, though the president's death went unannounced at the time. The new communist government declared, in a bit of irony, that the president had "resigned for health reasons."

The Communist Reign of Terror

The PDPA instituted reforms, including voting rights and education for women and the banning of forced marriages. But at the same time, it outlawed religious customs and traditions and declared mosques off limits. Large parts of the population, particularly in rural areas, were in open revolt, especially in the countryside where the laws of the new regime were seen as a direct attack on Islam. By spring 1979, rebellion had spread to 16 of the nation's 28 provinces, including some urban areas. Nearly half of the Afghan army would either desert or join the insurrection.

Intelligence police and military services arrested tens of thousands, and an estimated 14,000 to 27,000 Afghans were executed in the infamous Pul-e-Charkhi prison, east of Kabul. As the arrests and executions continued, the rebellion increased, with Afghan soldiers defecting to support the insurrection. In December 1978, the communist government signed an agreement with the Soviet Union to allow military support for the Afghan regime if the insurrection were supported by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

"From the Shadows"

In his 1996 memoir *From the Shadows*, CIA veteran Robert Gates wrote that the Carter administration began considering the possibility of covert action to help the Afghan insurgents at the beginning of 1979. Gates, who would later become CIA director and still later secretary of defense, said the authorization Carter signed in July of that year was for propaganda and "other psychological operations in Afghanistan," including radio access to the Afghan population through third-country facilities. Further assistance would come in the form of either cash or nonmilitary supplies to be given either directly or through another country. The effort began as a small-scale

activity, "somewhat more than half a million dollars." By the end of August, the Pakistani intelligence service began pressing the United States for arms and equipment to support the insurgency. The administration began considering "enhancement options." Gates wrote that that would include "funds for the Pakistanis to purchase lethal military equipment for the insurgents, and providing a like amount of lethal equipment ourselves for the Pakistanis to deliver to the insurgents."

Meanwhile, the casualties in the war between the government and the insurgents included U.S. Ambassador Adolph "Spike" Dubs, who was kidnapped by Islamic radicals, then killed when Afghan security forces, advised by the Soviet KGB, staged an apparent rescue effort. In March, a popular uprising, aided by a mutiny of army troops, captured the town of Herat, killing an uncertain number of Soviet agriculture and infrastructure advisors. The Kabul regime appealed to its Soviet allies for help, but Moscow at that time chose not to intervene. Government forces, with the help of an aerial bombardment, retook the town a week later in a battle that left 25,000 of the inhabitants dead.

Turmoil within the government itself continued as the popular uprisings grew. In September, Hafizullah Amin overthrew President Nur Muhammad Taraki, who was killed. Determined to crush the opposition, the new president declared, "The Afghans recognize only crude force." Amin Saikal, professor of Arab and Islamic studies, wrote, "As his powers grew, so apparently did his craving for personal dictatorship ... and his vision of the revolutionary process based on terror."

The Soviets finally decided neither Amin nor anyone else inside the revolving door of Afghanistan's presidential palace had enough "crude force" to destroy the insurgency that threatened the survival of their client state. Fearful of the growing rebellion, and aware of its support from the CIA and other outside forces, the Soviets moved in. After killing Amin on their Christmas Eve arrival in Kabul, they replaced him with Babrak Karmal. The new government was under the thumb of the Soviets, who had "advisors" in every



The communist choice: Afghan security guards stand outside the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison in December 2004. An estimated 14,000 to 27,000 prisoners were executed at the prison during the reign of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

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ministry. A KGB-style national intelligence service was established and quickly became known for its arbitrary detentions, harsh interrogations, and torture, with summary trials and executions to follow. The Soviet occupation swelled the ranks of the Mujahedeen, even as the bombing and killing of civilians reduced the overall population. By the early 1980s, more than five million refugees were living outside the country.

Aiding the Resistance

In addition to the public measures he announced, Carter quietly signed a presidential finding authorizing the CIA to organize aid and military support to the Afghan resistance. The CIA began ramping up the shipment of weapons, mainly through the Pakistan pipeline. After the

invasion, Brzezinski wrote to Carter: “This will require a review of our policy toward Pakistan, more guarantees to it, more arms and, alas, a decision that our security policy toward Pakistan cannot be dictated by our [nuclear] non-proliferation policy.”

In other words, the United States would not oppose Pakistan’s development of nuclear weapons as long as the Zia regime there, under President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, continued to support the Mujahedeen battle against the Soviets next door in Afghanistan.

“During the 1980’s the agency would deliver several hundred thousand tons of weapons and ordnance to Pakistan for distribution to the Afghan fighters,” wrote Milton Bearden, a former CIA field officer in Afghanistan. The agency kept a low profile to maintain “plausible deniability.” With the exception of British Enfield rifles, the weapons supplied to the Mujahedeen were made in Warsaw Pact countries to conceal U.S. involvement. “An additional advantage of using Soviet bloc weapons,” wrote Bearden, “was that the mujahideen could use any ammunition they could capture from

army garrisons of the puppet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan — or buy, with American dollars, from corrupt DRA quartermasters or even Red Army supply officers.”

As the Soviet occupation grew to a 120,000-man force, the ranks of the Mujahedeen swelled to 250,000 full- or part-time fighters. The coalition of countries supporting them grew to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China, along with the United States, Great Britain, and Pakistan. The Saudi royal family, having come to power as the head of a Wahhabi fundamentalist movement, backed the Afghan insurgency, a popular cause with their countrymen, wrote Steve Coll, author of *Ghost Wars: the Secret History of the CIA*.

“Middle-class pious Saudis,” wrote Coll, “embraced the Afghan cause much as American churchgoers might respond to an African famine or a Turkish earthquake.” As money and weapons from the CIA found their way to the Afghan resistance, Saudi Arabia matched the U.S. payments, dollar for dollar, wrote Chalmers Johnson in *Dismantling the Empire*. “They also bypassed Pakistan’s [Inter-Services Intelligence], sending funds directly to forces they favored,” Johnson wrote, “including the one led by their own pious millionaire, Osama bin Laden.” Private Saudi and Arab contributions to the Islamist armies, said the CIA’s Bearden, went up to \$25 million a month.

Stingers to the Rescue

While the fighting was taking its toll on the occupying army, the insurgents and the civilian population were suffering far greater losses. By the mid-’80s, there were a million dead Afghans, 1.5 million wounded, and a total of six million refugees, both within and outside the country. The Mujahedeen were suffering mounting casualties from heavily armored attack helicopters, prompting the Reagan administration to authorize the shipment of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. In what Bearden calls a “lucky shot,” a 107-mm rocket landed in a government supply dump, setting off secondary explosions that destroyed “tens of thousands of tons of ordnance.” The first Stinger ambush of the war brought down three Soviet he-



The two sides: Soviet troops take Afghanistan fighters prisoner in Vardak in 1987.



AP Images

The Islamic choice: Pakistani Taliban pose for a picture after claiming “credit” for the attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan. More than 140 were killed, most of them children.

licopters. “Within days,” wrote Bearden, the setbacks for the Soviet forces were snowballing, with one or two aircraft per day falling from the skies at the end of the Stingers’ telltale white plumes.”

In his February 1986 speech to the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev described Afghanistan as a “bleeding wound,” saying he would like to withdraw Soviet forces “in the nearest future.” At the same time, U.S. intelligence received reports that Gorbachev gave his generals one year to bring the Afghans under control, using any force necessary. His replacement, three months earlier, of Babrak Karmal with the brutal secret-police chief Mohammed Najibullah stiffened the Mujahedeen resistance.

On April 14, 1988, the Soviet Union signed the Geneva Accords, setting a deadline for the withdrawal of all Soviet forces from Afghanistan by February 15, 1989. The agreement marked the end, in theory, of all outside military support to either side in the continuing war between the Mujahedeen and the communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA).

The Soviets listed their human losses from the war at 13,310 dead, 35,478 wounded, and 311 missing. For the Afghans, the casualties were in the millions. According to Kirill Koktysh of the Moscow Institute of International Relations,

the war wiped out half of Afghanistan’s agriculture and 70 percent of its paved roads. Some 5,000 of the country’s 15,000 villages were destroyed or ruined from damage to roads and wells.

In April 1992, the Mujahedeen took Kabul, killed Najibullah, and declared what passed for victory. Ethnic and tribal warfare soon broke out again, however, and out of the chaos a new faction of militant Islam called the Taliban (from a Pashto word meaning “students”) arose and gained control over East Afghanistan. In 1996, they captured Kabul and made Afghanistan a home base and training ground for bin Laden and his al-Qaeda followers. The Taliban remained in power until overthrown by U.S. forces in 2001 after the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Though U.S. combat units have been withdrawn, more than 10,000 American troops remain in Afghanistan and are likely to be there for another decade or longer. The weapons we supplied the Mujahedeen were turned on Americans, killing 4,493 and wounding 32,021 in the longest war in U.S. history, costing somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1 trillion.

The “secret operation” for drawing the Soviets into a ruinous war in Afghanistan turned out to be a costly one for the United States as well. ■