**The Reagan Administration and Afghanistan**

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As the Cold War continued into the 1980’s, much of the violent conflict had come to an effective standstill. The United States was completely removed from its unsuccessful anti-communist campaigns in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union was experiencing numerous domestic issues in addition to seeing its relationship with China weakened as a result of the Detente. Closer to the Soviet Union’s borders in Central Asia, the threat of Islamic nationalism overtaking communism as the region’s majority-held ideology was becoming more real every day. In an attempt to stop the nationalist movement carried out by the Mujahideen rebels from taking over all of Afghanistan, the USSR sent soldiers to the Soviet-Afghan border, and eventually into Afghanistan itself.[[1]](#footnote-1) The primary objective of the invasion was not territorial conquest, but rather to contain the Afghan rebels and re-establish dominance in the region.[[2]](#footnote-2) To the Soviet Union, occupation of the region also meant significant control over the oil supplies and prices, which they could use to stabilize their economy while also increasing the power of its proxy communist parties and leftist movements in neighboring countries.[[3]](#footnote-3) Because of this, the Soviet Union deemed control of the Middle East its top priority during the late 1970’s. A priority the United States believed could be sabotaged with tremendous success. To thwart the Soviet Union, the United States would need to engage in the single largest covert operation in the history of CIA, which would entail scaling back and altering regulatory legislation, providing seemingly limitless funding to insiders in the Middle East who could directly lead the rebels in the absence of American leaders, and convincing the American people that aiding the Mujahideen was the best course of action for ending the Soviet-Afghan War.

As the conflict began escalating, the newly elected Reagan Administration saw the Soviet-Afghan War as a means to directly weaken the Soviet Union while indirectly asserting itself in Central Asia. By pandering to the new phenomenon of “born again” Christians in the United States with the introduction of righteous language to describe the US and the Soviet Union, President Ronald Reagan was able to brand the USSR as the “Evil Empire.” This redefined the Soviet Union as America’s primary enemy in both the political and moral world in a battle between good and evil.[[4]](#footnote-4) This religious terminology was used in favor over the “moderating language of detente” that had been more commonplace in the years immediately following the Vietnam War.[[5]](#footnote-5) In conjunction with this, President Reagan continually referred to the Mujahideen rebels as “freedom fighters” attempting to overthrow Third World “communist tyranny” implemented by the Soviet Union, convincing the American people that the rebels were both on their side, and needed as much support as possible to fight off the Evil Empire.[[6]](#footnote-6) This gave the Reagan Administration significant freedom in aiding the Afghan fighters that allowed it to claim that the Mujahideen share United States interests and were therefore allies, while simultaneously minimizing any public backlash against Afghan support. William Casey, the Director of the CIA at the time, even saw the Mujahideen “not merely as statecraft, but as an important front in a worldwide struggle between communist atheism and God’s community of believers.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This would help portray the Mujahideen as fighters against a common enemy in need of help, raising public favorability of increased support to the Afghan insurgents.

Although United States’ funding of rebel groups in the Middle East peaked during the Reagan Administration, aid to the Mujahideen began during the Carter Administration. In March 1979, convinced that the United States could harness the turmoil in the region to both constrain the USSR’s access to oil fields as well as hindering Soviet control tactics of the rebels, the CIA began to covertly back the Afghan Islamist Insurgents.[[8]](#footnote-8) Through the recommendation of Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s National Security Advisor, “non-lethal” covert support for the Mujahideen was approved. This included $500,000 in propaganda operations, radio equipment, medical supplies, and direct cash stipends in support of the Mujahideen; no weapons or firearms had been provided by the CIA. At the time, this appeared to the United States as enough to aid the rebels without directly appearing to be engaged in support tactics.[[9]](#footnote-9) This would change in the coming years as the conflict dragged on, and the Reagan Administration would go to more extreme measures to remove the USSR from Afghanistan.

Aid to the Mujahideen since the late 1970’s was provided largely outside of legal bounds in the United States. Enacted in response to the Angolan Civil War, the Clark Amendment prohibited the United States from providing covert military or paramilitary aid to either side in the conflict. Despite only prohibiting intervention in Angola, Dick Clark, the junior senator who drafted the Amendment, believed that these initiatives would end American “political and military interference in the internal affairs of other countries.”[[10]](#footnote-10) He believed that if “the United States intended to occupy a higher moral ground than its adversaries, it would have to affirm that in the foreign policy of democracy.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Although the Amendment was a huge success after it was initially passed, it was struck down in 1985, as covert aid to the Mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War began to increase in frequency and became more military-based. This showed that to the Reagan Administration, winning the Soviet-Afghan War and consequently gaining ground in the Cold War, was a goal that must be achieved no matter the cost at the expense of any potential foreign policy reform in conjunction with the antiwar movements remaining from the 1970s.

Though the Clark Amendment was repealed at the start of President Reagan’s second term, its policies had been largely ignored by the ‘Cold Warriors’ of the past decade. They were largely more concerned with embracing proxy wars and terrorism to advance American ideals during this time, and routinely sought out ways to bypass the Amendment, as well as any other pieces of legislation that placed restrictions on the executive powers of the government to intervene in foreign conflicts.[[12]](#footnote-12) Representative Charlie Wilson argued that “it would be indefensible to provide the freedom fighters with only enough aid to fight and die, but not enough to advance their cause of freedom.” Pressures also began mounting from the CIA to increase aid, who believed that the current provisions the United States was already sending were “just enough weaponry to ensure that many brave Afghan rebels died violently in battle, but not enough to help them win.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The increasing tension from the supporters of the Mujahideen was amplified by the increase leftover sums of allocated unspent treasury funds from the Pentagon, which could be used to support the Afghan insurgents according to the rebel-backing Congressmen. Members of Congress, such as Representative Wilson, believed that “unless US policy is redesigned to achieve a broader attack on Soviet vulnerabilities it cannot restore independence to Afghanistan.” He and others went on to advocate for increased support citing that “continuation of the current US program will allow the Soviets to wear down the Afghan resistance at a cost affordable and tolerable to themselves.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Because of the realization that current non-military aid approved by the Carter Administration proved to be insufficient to the current members of Congress and the CIA, both entities successfully pushed for a significant increase in monetary and military support to the Mujahideen in an effort to legitimately cripple the Soviet forces, instead of merely fuel the stalemate that had been in effect for the past several years.

Increasing aid to the Mujahideen was made significantly easier as US foreign policy evolved from ‘containment’ to ‘rollback’ during the transition from President Carter to President Reagan. Whereas containment policies supported by the Carter Administration were centered around a search for coexistence between all parties involved in any conflicts, the Reagan Administration was primarily concerned with payback: “everything must be done to turn the Afghan War into the Soviet’s Vietnam.” Both the Reagan Administration and the CIA determined that in conjunction with this switch in foreign policy, the ultimate goal of aiding the Afghan rebels was to “bleed the Soviet Union white”; “killing Russians” no matter the cost was all that mattered.[[15]](#footnote-15) To achieve this, the CIA was tasked with flooding the region with all kinds of weapons for the Mujahideen while ensuring the weapons were placed in the hands of the most radical Islamist recruits. Consequently, the CIA had artificially created the first jihad the Middle East had seen in over a century, all in the name of achieving political objectives for the United States. This ‘American Jihad’ was organized in a way to unite all the followers of Islam worldwide in a crusade against the Soviet Union. Although the American Jihad was primarily centered in Afghanistan, the CIA searched for volunteers throughout the globe to join the cause of the Mujahideen. This came as a result of the United States wanting to maintain a strong proxy presence in the region, while ensuring “the direct involvement of as few Americans as possible.”[[16]](#footnote-16) As a result, the three biggest outside recruiting areas for the jihad were Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria; all major allies of the United States in the region at this time.

To lead the recruiting process in the Middle East, the CIA looked for a prominent established individual from Saudi Arabia to lead the ‘crusade,’ such as a Saudi prince or other royal figure. When their initial efforts were unsuccessful, it settled for the son of an important Saudi family closely connected to the royal house. This individual was Osama bin Laden.[[17]](#footnote-17) Bin Laden was tasked with “[building] roads in the country who make easy the delivery of weapons to the [Mujahideen].” His work made him well liked among the Afghan insurgents who believed he was a “nice and generous person,” and gave him the connections he needed to form his own insurgency faction known as al-Qaeda. All of his movement took place outside CIA supervision, allowing him to move freely and create his own sets of alliances that he could recruit to his cause after the Soviet-Afghan War ended.[[18]](#footnote-18) This freedom from CIA control would allow him to supplant the objectives of the United States with his own ideals that he would use to rally the Mujahideen against the US after the conflict ended.

As the CIA began to support the Mujahideen, it became clear that there was no inherent strategy for arming and training the insurgents. Howard Hart, the man in charge of arming the rebels against the Soviets, was told to simply “go raise hell...Don’t fuck it up, just go out there and kill Soviets.” Taking this information, Hart used his resources to supply as many rifles and bullets as the Mujahideen needed, then “[sat] back in Islamabad and [watched].” This objective was specified in a Top-Secret executive order signed by President Reagan, which was the official ‘go-ahead’ given by the White House permitting the CIA to send weapons to the rebels.[[19]](#footnote-19) Even members of Congress who were approving the increases in aid that were 10 times larger than any US-supplied aid to other rebel groups such as in Nicaragua were largely left in the dark as to what all the money was to be used for: "There are continuing questions about where [the money] goes. What are the objectives and goals? We're not about to sign a blank check. We're talking about lots of money."[[20]](#footnote-20) As some doubted the overall objective of what increasing aid would accomplish for the United States, members of Congress were still very torn on what a ‘successful’ campaign in the Middle East would mean. Some believed that success would be exacting revenge on the Soviet Union for the losses the United States suffered in Vietnam. Others believed that success meant overthrowing the Soviet regimes in Afghanistan, a task which was deemed impossible by some in the government.[[21]](#footnote-21) Regardless, this marked the beginning of military aid to the Afghan insurgents that would continue for the rest of the conflict, aid that few in Congress believed would be effective, let alone knew at all what its true purpose was.

By 1985, CIA operatives including William Casey believed that they needed to increase their role in the Afghan conflict. Seeing a rise in support for his plan to grant the CIA near total control of US involvement with the Mujahideen, Casey and more conservative members of the Reagan Administration passed National Security Decision Directive 166 (NSDD 166), which created a rationale for the increases in funds for the US-Afghan aid programs. Michael Pillsbury, one of the congressional aides who supported NSDD 166, believed that the new policy would guarantee that “everybody gets to do what everybody wants to do,” in regard to aiding the Mujahideen. This entailed using satellite imaging to coordinate strategic attacks against the Soviet soldiers, in addition to allowing the Mujahideen to use advanced American technology to intercept Soviet radio transmissions.[[22]](#footnote-22) In addition to providing technological aid, NSDD 166 gave the CIA complete freedom to provide the Mujahideen with as much funding as they deemed fit. The United States provided the Afghan rebels with $470 million in 1986 alone, and upwards of $630 million at the end of the fiscal year in 1987. These funds, all matched by Saudi Arabia, made it possible for the rebels to destroy the Soviets with any means necessary, with minimal US supervision. To sustain minimal communication between the Mujahideen and the CIA operatives transferring the funds, the CIA established an informal banking network throughout the region that would allow the United States to safely deliver money transactions from thousands of miles away.[[23]](#footnote-23) But even though the government had begun allocating additional funds for the rebels, sustaining hundreds of millions of dollars to the Mujahideen would become increasingly difficult. To maintain these levels of funding, the CIA decided to turn to the Afghan drug lords who were already openly against the Soviet Union. Before the alliance between the Afghan drug lords and the CIA, opium and heroin were very scarce in the Middle East and were only bought and sold in regional black markets. But by the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, “the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands became the world’s leading producers of both opium and processed heroin,” creating a multi-billion dollar industry that would continue to fund the insurgency groups in the region that would come out of the conflict.[[24]](#footnote-24) With the foundation of this new industry, the Middle East could now develop into one of the largest drug-producing regions in the world, providing the funds necessary for insurgency groups years after the Soviet-Afghan War ended.

While many of the details of the CIA aid to the Mujahideen were kept secret from most outside of Washington D.C., the public still had a general idea of the fact that support was going to Afghan rebels to fight the Soviet Union. However, it was revealed in 1986 that the Reagan Administration had been illegally been exchanging arms with Iran for American hostages several months prior to the public’s knowledge, despite the presence of an active arms embargo between the United States and Iran. In his Presidential Address, Reagan’s first public acknowledgement of the scandal, he ensured the American people that necessary steps are being taken to ensure nothing like the Iran Contra scandal ever happens again. Despite claiming that the public “[deserves] the truth” about the scandal, the President devoted very little of his address to describing the details of the illegal exchanges, and instead opted to brush the scandal off as a mistake that can and will be corrected and prevented in the future.[[25]](#footnote-25) Although the Iran Contra pertains to illegal relations between the United States and Iran, it highlights the overarching issue of the Administration wanting to withhold vital information from the public at the time to preserve the image of the White House. The executive branch had been guilty of a complete disregard for legislative measures put in place and received little to no backlash from the other branches of government or the American public. On the contrary, his message was well received by the American people. Newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times appeared to congratulate the President for coming forward about the scandal, despite noting within the same article that “Reagan devoted a bare five sentences to the most controversial aspect of the Iran-contra scandal-the effort to divert profits from the Iranian arms sales to the rebels fighting the Marxist regime in Nicaragua.”[[26]](#footnote-26) As a result, many people in the United States simply accepted that everything was fixed and moved on. This same lackadaisical attitude was also shared by the CIA, who by the end of the Soviet-Afghan War believed there was nothing more for the United States to gain by continuing its involvement in the conflict.

As the conflict began to die down in the late 1980’s, many involved with the CIA’s operations began to see their role as obsolete, they believed staying after the conflict ended for the reconstruction efforts would be pointless, and opted for returning home and leaving Afghanistan as it was: “Did we really give a shit about the long-term future of [Afghanistan]?... We didn’t.”[[27]](#footnote-27) By April 1988, the United States and Soviet Union had begun drafting peace accords to both withdraw from the region. Absent from the peace talks were any representatives from the Mujahideen, who took offense to the accords and openly denounced them.[[28]](#footnote-28) This lack of presence in the negotiations laid the groundwork for the militarization of the Afghan rebels against the United States, a sentiment that would only be perpetuated in the coming years.

Many of the plights of the United States and its relations with the Middle East can be traced directly to the actions taken by the Reagan Administration during the Soviet-Afghan War. The CIA-backed arming of the Mujahideen gave rise to a trained and determined faction of radical Islamists who would use their skills to foster a new age of terrorism against all they deemed unholy in their jihad. In addition to this, the CIA unintentionally transformed the Middle East into “the world’s top heroin producer”[[29]](#footnote-29) in its efforts to finance the rebels. The same groups that the United States considered its allies and “the moral equivalent of [America’s] Founding Fathers” would use the training and weapons given to them during the Soviet-Afghan War to use terrorism against the United States itself, culminating in the attacks on September 11, 2001, and continuing throughout the 21st century. Because of the short-sighted policies of the Reagan Administration to defeat the USSR in Afghanistan with little planning for the aftermath, the Mujahideen, who would later become the terrorist groups of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and others, were able to concisely organize themselves against any other entities they deemed their enemies, specifically the Western World and the United States.

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