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British empires as they played their "great game" in the region. This historical circumstance, coupled with the country's forbidding mountainous terrain, not only made it difficult for imperialist countries to conquer Afghanistan (it did not undergo colonial rule), but also resulted in little economic development.

The country contains many different ethnic groups. The Pashtuns-from whom Afghanistan's traditional rulers have come-constitute 52 percent of the population. The Hazaras are 19 percent of the population. The Tajiks in the north constitute 21 percent; Uzbeks, also in the north, 5 percent. About 85 percent of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, and about 15 percent, among the Hazaras, are Shia Muslims.

Afghanistan survived as a medieval island in the modern world, characterized by backwardness and extreme poverty. In the postwar period, some changes began to occur as a result of foreign aid from the USSR and, to a lesser extent, the U.S., which were vying for influence during the Cold War. Power shifted toward the state, and an educated middle class began to emerge. But industry still barely existed.

In 1973, following a severe drought, King Zaher's cousin Daud overthrew Zaher's corrupt and repressive regime and declared a republic. But government corruption increased and promised modernization did not take place. Meanwhile, Daud began to collaborate more closely with the Shah of Iran. Lower-level officials and members of the middle class grew increasingly discontented. In April 1978, as Daud attempted to move against his opponents on the left, he was overthrown and killed by army officers sympathetic to the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

Following the coup, a broad ruling coalition was set up, controlled by the Khalq, one of the PDPA's two factions. Nur Mohammad Taraki, a well-known novelist, became president. Within a few months, however, the Khalq pushed Barbrak Karmal and other members of the rival Parcham faction out of the government. Karmal was made ambassador to Prague, and other Parchami were also given diplomatic posts. The new government lacked any social base outside Kabul, and its program of reforms soon provoked a popular backlash. The Kabul regime was completely isolated from the mass of the population in the countryside:

[They] had neither survey information nor local leaders with knowledge of actual conditions in the countryside. In short, it would have been virtually impossible for them to devise a successful land-reform program. As it was, their reforms were implemented by blundering and often brutal officials from the city who dropped into the countryside by parachute.

Rebellion and resistance started to spread around the country. The resistance was spontaneous, but soon came to be led by an alliance of conservative Islamic groups who referred to themselves as "majahideen" (holy warriors). By the spring of 1979, rebellion had spread to most of the country's 29 provinces. On March 24, a garrison of soldiers in Herat killed a group of Soviet advisers (and their families) who had ordered Afghan troops to fire on antigovernment demonstrators. From this point, the regime was no longer merely isolated from peasants in the countryside, but divided by open hostility from an overwhelming majority of all the people. The regime had no choice now but to crush much of the population.... [Prime Minister Hafizullah] Amin's secret police and a repressive civilian police force went into action across Afghanistan, and army troops were sent into the countryside to subdue "feudal" villagers.

Government repression was severe. "Mass arrests were commonly followed by torture and execution without trial. Police terror was common in the city as well as the countryside, where virtually all social groups joined in the rebellion." The rebels' tactics were equally brutal. The Washington Post reported that the mujahideen liked to "torture victims by first cutting off their noses, ears, and genitals, then removing one slice of skin after another."

As the situation got out of control, the Soviets advised Taraki to dismiss Amin, reunite with Parcham, and adopt a policy of "democratic nationalism." But Amin got wind of the plan and arrested Taraki in September, assassinating him soon afterward. Amin was now in the position of publicly accusing the Russians of plotting to overthrow the Afghan government while being totally dependent on Soviet military and economic support.

In December, hard-liners in Moscow decided that Amin had to go. They believed that he could be removed by a dramatic show of force and quietly replaced by Karmal. On December 27, a force of 5,000 Soviet troops advanced on Kabul, but Amin refused to leave office quietly and fought back. On December 28, " [a]fter twelve hours of bitter combat with Soviet forces at the presidential palace, Amin was killed, along with 2,000 loyal members of his armed forces." Having killed the man whom they claimed had invited them into the country, the Russians proclaimed Karmal to be president and flew him back from Moscow. Within a few days, the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan had reached 80,000. The figure later climbed to more than 100,000. What was to be nearly a decade of Russian occupation had begun.

### **The CIA's anticommunist jihad**

President Jimmy Carter immediately declared that the invasion jeopardized vital U.S. interests, because the Persian Gulf area was "now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan. But the Carter administration's public outrage at Russian intervention in Afghanistan was doubly duplicitous. Not only was it used as an excuse for a program of increased military expenditure that had in fact already begun, but the U.S. had in fact been aiding the mujahideen for at least the previous six months, with precisely the hope of provoking a Soviet response. Former CIA director Robert Gates later admitted in his memoirs that aid to the rebels began in June 1979. In a candid 1998 interview, Zbigniew Brezinski, Carter's national security adviser, confirmed that U.S. aid to the rebels began before the invasion:

According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan [in] December 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.... We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would....

That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap.... The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War."

The Carter administration was well aware that in backing the mujahideen it was supporting forces with reactionary social goals, but this was outweighed by its own geopolitical interests. In August 1979, a classified State Department report bluntly asserted that "the United States' larger interest...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." That same month, in a stunning display of hypocrisy, State Department spokesperson Hodding Carter piously announced that the U.S. "expect[s] the principle of nonintervention to be respected by all parties in the area, including the Soviet Union."

The Russian invasion in December was the signal for U.S. support to the Afghan rebels to increase dramatically.

Three weeks after Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul, Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, was in Beijing arranging for a weapons transfer from the Chinese to the CIA-backed Afghani troops mustered in Pakistan. The Chinese, who were generously compensated for the deal, agreed and even consented to send military advisers. Brown worked out a similar arrangement with Egypt to buy \$15 million worth of weapons. "The U.S. contacted me," [then-Egyptian president] Anwar Sadat recalled shortly before his assassination [in 1981]. "They told me, 'Please open your stores for us so that we can give the Afghans the armaments they need to fight.' And I gave them the armaments. The transport of arms to the Afghans started from Cairo on U.S. planes."

By February 1980, the Washington Post reported that the mujahideen was receiving arms coming from the U.S. government.

The objective of the intervention, as spelled out by Brezinski, was to trap the Soviets in a long and costly war designed to drain their resources, just as Vietnam had bled the United States. The high level of civilian casualties that this would certainly entail was considered but set aside. According to one senior official, "The question here was whether it was morally acceptable that, in order to keep the Soviets off balance, which was the reason for the operation, it was permissible to use other lives for our geopolitical interests." Carter's CIA director Stansfield Turner answered the question: "I decided I could live with that." According to Representative Charles Wilson, a Texas Democrat,

There were 58,000 dead in Vietnam and we owe the Russians one.... I have a slight obsession with it, because of Vietnam. I thought the Soviets ought to get a dose of it.... I've been of the opinion that this money was better spent to hurt our adversaries than other money in the Defense Department budget.

The mujahideen consisted of at least seven factions, who often fought amongst themselves in their battle for territory and control of the opium trade. To hurt the Russians, the U.S. deliberately chose to give the most support to the most extreme groups. A disproportionate share of U.S. arms went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, "a particularly fanatical fundamentalist and woman-hater." According to journalist Tim Weiner, "[Hekmatyar's] followers first gained attention by throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil. CIA and State Department officials I have spoken with call him 'scary,' 'vicious,' 'a fascist,' 'definite dictatorship material.'"

There was, though, a kind of method in the madness: Brezinski hoped not just to drive the Russians out of Afghanistan, but to ferment unrest within the Soviet Union itself. His plan, says author Dilip Hiro, was "to export a composite ideology of nationalism and Islam to the Muslim-majority Central Asian states and Soviet Republics with a view to destroying the Soviet order." Looking back in 1998, Brezinski had no regrets. "What was more important in the world view of history?... A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"

With the support of Pakistan's military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, the U.S. began recruiting and training both mujahideen fighters from the 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and large numbers of mercenaries from other Islamic countries. Estimates of how much money the U.S. government channeled to the Afghan rebels over the next decade vary, but most sources put the figure between \$3 billion and \$6 billion, or more. Whatever the exact amount, this was "the largest covert action program since World War II" - much bigger, for example, than Washington's intervention in Central America at the same time, which received considerably more publicity. According to one report:

The CIA became the grand coordinator: purchasing or arranging the manufacture of Soviet-style weapons from Egypt, China, Poland, Israel and elsewhere, or supplying their own; arranging for military training by Americans, Egyptians, Chinese and Iranians; hitting up Middle-Eastern countries for donations, notably Saudi Arabia which gave many hundreds of millions of dollars in aid each year, totaling probably more than a billion; pressuring and bribing Pakistan-with whom recent American

relations had been very poor-to rent out its country as a military staging area and sanctuary; putting the Pakistani Director of Military Operations, Brigadier Mian Mohammad Afzal, onto the CIA payroll to ensure Pakistani cooperation.

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, he found the Democratic-controlled Congress eager to increase spending on the Afghan war. A congressional staffer told a reporter, "It was a windfall [for the new administration]. They'd faced so much opposition to covert action in Central America and here comes the Congress helping and throwing money at them, putting money their way and they say, 'Who are we to say no?'"

Aid to the mujahideen, who Reagan praised as "freedom fighters," increased, but initially Afghanistan was not a priority:

In the first years after the Reagan administration inherited the Carter program, the covert Afghan war "tended to be handled out of [CIA director William] Casey's back pocket," recalled Ronald Spiers, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, the base of the Afghan rebels. Mainly from China's government, the CIA purchased assault rifles, grenade launchers, mines and SA-7 light anti-aircraft weapons, and then arranged for shipment to Pakistan.... The amounts were significant-10,000 tons of arms and ammunition in 1983, according to [Pakistani General Mohammed] Yousaf-but a fraction of what they would be in just a few years.

In March 1985, the Reagan administration issued National Security Decision Directive 166,29 a secret plan to escalate covert action in Afghanistan dramatically:

Abandoning a policy of simple harassment of Soviet occupiers, the Reagan team decided secretly to let loose on the Afghan battlefield an array of U.S. high technology and military expertise in an effort to hit and demoralize Soviet commanders and soldiers....

Beginning in 1985, the CIA supplied mujahideen rebels with extensive satellite reconnaissance data of Soviet targets on the Afghan battlefield, plans for military operations based on the satellite intelligence, intercepts of Soviet communications, secret communications networks for the rebels, delayed timing devices for tons of C-4 plastic explosives for urban sabotage, and sophisticated guerrilla attacks, long-range sniper rifles, a targeting device for mortars that was linked to a U.S. Navy satellite, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and other equipment.

Between 1986 and 1989, the mujahideen were also provided with more than 1,000 state-of-the-art, shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

By 1987, the annual supply of arms had reached 65,000 tons, and a "ceaseless stream" of CIA and Pentagon officials were

visiting Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) headquarters in Rawalpindi and helping to plan mujahideen operations:

At any one time during the Afghan fighting season, as many as 11 ISI teams trained and supplied by the CIA accompanied mujahideen across the border to supervise attacks, according to Yousaf and Western sources. The teams attacked airports, railroads, fuel depots, electricity pylons, bridges and roads....

CIA operations officers helped Pakistani trainers establish schools for the mujahideen in secure

**communications, guerrilla warfare, urban sabotage and heavy weapons.**

**Although the CIA claimed that the purpose was to attack military targets, mujahideen trained in these techniques, and using chemical and electronic-delay bomb timers supplied by the U.S., carried out numerous car bombings and assassination attacks in Kabul itself.**

### **Bin Laden and the Arab-Afghans**

**As well as training and recruiting Afghan nationals to fight the Soviets, the CIA permitted its ISI allies to recruit Muslim extremists from around the world. Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid reports:**

**Between 1982 and 1992, some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 43 Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East would pass their baptism under fire with the Afghan mujahideen. Tens of thousands more foreign Muslim radicals came to study in the hundreds of new madrassas [religious schools] that Zia's military government began to fund in Pakistan and along the Afghan border. Eventually more than 100,000 Muslim radicals were to have direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan and be influenced by the jihad [against the USSR].**

**In camps near Peshawar and in Afghanistan, these radicals met each other for the first time and studied trained and fought together. It was the first opportunity for most of them to learn about Islamic movements in other countries, and they forged tactical and ideological links that would serve them well in the future. The camps became virtual universities for future Islamic radicalism.**

**One of the first non-Afghan volunteers to join the ranks of the mujahideen was Osama bin Laden, a civil engineer and businessman from a wealthy construction family in Saudi Arabia, with close ties to members of the Saudi royal family. Bin Laden recruited 4,000 volunteers from his own country and developed close relations with the most radical mujahideen leaders. He also worked closely with the CIA, raising money from private Saudi citizens. By 1984, he was running the Maktab al-Khidamar, an organization set up by the ISI to funnel "money, arms, and fighters from the outside world in the Afghan war."**

**Since September 11, CIA officials have been claiming they had no direct link to bin Laden. These denials lack credibility. Earlier this year, the trial of defendants accused of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing in Kenya disclosed that the CIA shipped high-powered sniper rifles directly to bin Laden's operation in 1989. Even the Tennessee-based manufacturer of the rifles confirmed this. According to the Boston Globe,**

**Some military analysts and specialists on the weapons trade say the CIA has spent years covering its tracks on its early ties to the Afghan forces.... Despite the CIA's denials, these experts say it was inevitable that the military training in guerrilla tactics and the vast reservoir of money and arms that the CIA provided in Afghanistan would have ended up helping bin Laden and his forces during the 1980s.**

**"In 1988, with U.S. knowledge, bin Laden created Al Qaeda (The Base): a conglomerate of quasi independent Islamic terrorist cells spread across at least 26 countries," writes Indian journalist Rahul Bhedi. "Washington turned a blind eye to Al-Qaeda, confident that it would not directly impinge on the U.S." After the Soviet withdrawal, however, bin Laden and thousands of other volunteers returned to their own countries:**

**Their heightened political consciousness made them realize that countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt were just as much client regimes of the United States as the Najibullah regime [in Afghanistan] has been of Moscow.**

**In their home countries they built a formidable constituency-popularly known as "Afghanis"-who combined strong ideological convictions with the guerrilla skills they had acquired in Pakistan and Afghanistan under CIA supervision.**

**Over the past 10 years, the "Afghani" network has been linked to terrorist attacks not only on U.S. targets, but also in the Philippines, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, France, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and elsewhere. "This is an insane instance of the chickens coming home to roost," one U.S. diplomat in Pakistan told the Los Angeles Times. "You can't plug billions of dollars into an anti-Communist jihad, accept participation from all over the world and ignore the consequences. But we did.**

### **Romancing the Taliban**

**As the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan in early 1989, American policymakers celebrated with champagne, while the country itself collapsed into virtual anarchy. Almost a quarter of the population was living in refugee camps and most of the country was in ruins. Different factions of the mujahideen struggled for power in the countryside, while the government of Muhammed Najibullah, the last Soviet-installed president controlled Kabul. Eventually, in April 1992, Kabul fell to some of the mujahideen factions and Burhannudin Rabbani was de dared president, but civil war continued unabated. Hekmatyar in particular was dissatisfied with the new distribution 0 power. With his huge stock of U.S.-supplied weapons, h began an artillery and rocket assault on Kabul that lasted for almost three years, even after he was appointed prime minister in 1993. "The barrage...killed more than 10,000 Afghans [drove] hundreds of thousands into squalid refugee camps, created political chaos, and blocked millions of exiles from returning." The rest of the country disintegrated into isolated fiefdoms dominated by local warlords.**

**In 1994, a new group, the Taliban (Pashtun for "students"), emerged on the scene. Its members came from madrassas set up by the Pakistani government along the border and funded by the U.S., Britain, and the Saudis, where they had received theological indoctrination and military training. Thousands of young men-refugees and orphans from the war in Afghanistan-became the foot soldiers of this movement:**

**These boys were from a generation who had never seen their country at peace-an Afghanistan not at war with invaders and itself. They had no memories of their tribes, their elders, their neighbors nor the complex ethnic mix of peoples that made up their villages and their homeland. These boys were what the war had thrown up like the sea's surrender on the beach of history ...**

**They were literally the orphans of war, the rootless and restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning. Untrained for anything, even the traditional occupations of their forefathers such as farming, herding or the making of handicrafts, they were what Karl Marx would have termed Afghanistan's lumpen proletariat.**

With the aid of the Pakistani army, the Taliban swept across most of the exhausted country promising a restoration of order and finally capturing Kabul in September 1996. The Taliban imposed an ultra-sectarian version of Islam, closely related to Wahhabism, the ruling creed in Saudi Arabia. Women have been denied education, health care, and the right to work. They must cover themselves completely when in public. Minorities have been brutally repressed. Even singing and dancing in public are forbidden.

The Taliban's brand of extreme Islam had no historical roots in Afghanistan. The roots of the Taliban's success lay in 20 years of "jihad" against the Russians and further devastation wrought by years of internal fighting between the warlord factions. Initially, villagers-especially the majority Pashtuns in the south who shared the Taliban's ethnicity-welcomed them as a force that might end the warfare and bring some order and peace to Afghanistan. Their lack of a social base within Afghanistan made them appear untainted by the factional warfare, and their moral purism made them appear above compromise. Before launching their war to conquer power, they first won some public support by appearing as the avenger against the warlords' raping of women and boys. Of course, they could not have risen so far and so fast without the financial and military backing of Pakistan.

The U.S. government was well aware of the Taliban's reactionary program, yet it chose to back their rise to power in the mid-1990s. The creation of the Taliban was "actively encouraged by the ISI and the CIA," according to Selig Harrison, an expert on U.S. relations with Asia. "The United States encouraged Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to support the Taliban, certainly right up to their advance on Kabul," adds respected journalist Ahmed Rashid. When the Taliban took power, State Department spokesperson Glyn Davies said that he saw "nothing objectionable" in the Taliban's plans to impose strict Islamic law, and Senator Hank Brown, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia, welcomed the new regime: "The good part of what has happened is that one of the factions at last seems capable of developing a new government in Afghanistan." "The Taliban will probably develop like the Saudis. There will be Aramco [the consortium of oil companies that controlled Saudi oil], pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that," said another U.S. diplomat in 1997.

The reference to oil and pipelines explains everything. Since the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991, U.S. oil companies and their friends in the State Department have been salivating at the prospect of gaining access to the huge oil and natural gas reserves in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea and in Central Asia. These have been estimated as worth \$4 trillion. The American Petroleum Institute calls the Caspian region "the area of greatest resource potential outside of the Middle East." And while he was still CEO of Halliburton, the world's biggest oil services company, Vice President Dick Cheney told other industry executives, "I can't think of a time when we've had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian." The struggle to control these stupendous resources has given rise to what Rashid has dubbed the "new Great Game," pitting shifting alliances of governments and oil and gas consortia against one another.

Afghanistan itself has no known oil or gas reserves, but it is an attractive route for pipelines leading to Pakistan, India, and the Arabian Sea. In the mid-1990s, a consortium led by the California-based Unocal Corporation proposed a \$4.5 billion oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. But this would require a stable central government in Afghanistan itself. Thus began several years in which U.S. policy in the region centered on "romancing the Taliban." According to one report,

In the months before the Taliban took power, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for South Asia Robin Raphel waged an intense round of shuttle diplomacy between the powers with possible stakes in the [Unocal] project.



**"Robin Raphel was the face of the Unocal pipeline," said an official of the former Afghan government who was present at some of the meetings with her....**

**In addition to tapping new sources of energy, the [project] also suited a major U.S. strategic aim in the region: isolating its nemesis Iran and stifling a frequently mooted rival pipeline project backed by Teheran, experts said.**

**But Washington's initial enthusiasm for the Taliban's seizure of power provoked a hostile reaction from human rights and women's organizations in the United States. The Clinton administration quickly decided to take a more cautious public approach. Plans to send the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan on a visit to Kabul were canceled, and the State Department decided not to recognize the new regime immediately. Nevertheless, Unocal executive vice president Chris Taggart continued to maintain, "If the Taliban leads to stability and international recognition then it's positive."**

**Tacit U.S. support for the Taliban continued until 1998, when Washington blamed Osama bin Laden for the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and retaliated by launching cruise missiles at bin Laden's alleged training camps in Afghanistan. The Taliban's refusal to extradite bin Laden- not its atrocious human rights record- led to UN-imposed sanctions on the regime the following year. "Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright used to say that she cared about the women suffering under the Taliban, but after the Taliban took over the U.S. accepted very few refugees," points out journalist Laura Flanders. "In '96 and '97 no Afghan refugees were admitted to the United States; in '98, only 88, in '99, some 360."**

**Whatever the U.S. government's current rhetoric about the repressive nature of the Taliban regime, its long history of intervention in the region has been motivated not by concern for democracy or human rights, but by the narrow economic and political interests of the U.S. ruling class. It has been prepared to aid and support the most retrograde elements if it thought a temporary advantage would be the result. Now Washington has launched a war against its former allies based on a strategic calculation that the Taliban can no longer be relied upon to provide a stable, U.S.-friendly government that can serve its strategic interests. No matter what the outcome, the war is certain to lay the grounds for more "blowback" in the future.**

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**Central Asia watch**



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