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Further Reflections On The Afghan Debacle

Was U.S. support for the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union a mistake?

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For most Americans, Afghanistan became an issue in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attack. A few Americans might think back further, to Washington's backing for Islamic insurgents against the Soviet Union. Virtually no one—other than a few CIA retirees, perhaps, and conspiracy-tinged political activists—likely remember U.S. support for Afghan rebels *before* Moscow's intervention. Consider what that seemingly modest step has wrought.

One of the defining characteristics of U.S. foreign policy is a focus on intentions, always good, rather than consequences, usually bad. Washington solons determine policy in the here and now, with little thought to the future. The bipartisan war lobby bombs, invades, and occupies a country, wins a publicity boost, and then moves on. So many enemies to crush, so little time.

The phenomenon harkens back to the challenge posed by Jesus' brother James: "If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:16) If Washington says to another people "be liberated," but leaves only geopolitical wreckage behind, what good is it?

Consider the last two decades. The George W. Bush administration intervened in Afghanistan, only to quickly lose interest in Central Asia. The next military misadventure was Iraq, which spawned its own ugly sequel, the battle against the resultant Islamic State. The Obama administration continued the Bush wars but also wanted its own. This desire yielded Libya, which is desperately hoping to finally emerge from the conflict a decade later; tragically poor Yemen, approaching its seventh year of killing; and Syria, which the U.S., having failed to oust President Bashar al-Assad, continues to illegally occupy in the vain hope of completing this unauthorized mission.

Among this gaggle of disastrous interventions, one stands out for its spectacular bust: Afghanistan. It took just 11 days between the U.S. surrender of the first provincial capital and the Taliban occupation of the national capital. The Afghan president fled even before U.S. troops had left. Most Americans saw this as a 20-year tragedy, yielding thousands of dead American

and allied personnel, expenditures exceeding \$2 trillion, and deaths of tens of thousands of Afghans. To do so much at such high cost and achieve so little—the Taliban is more powerful and in stronger control of more of the country today than when U.S. forces first arrived—brings the tragedy into American homes.

Yet the U.S.-Afghan saga did not begin in September 2001. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. The Carter administration provided aid to Afghan insurgents, many Islamic fundamentalists, known as the Mujahideen. After Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, that support expanded, winning Democratic as well as Republican votes. In 1986 the administration began distributing Stinger antiaircraft missiles to the insurgents. Soviet losses in people and equipment accelerated, undermining support in Moscow for the mission. On February 15, 1989, the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan.

That was seen as a great victory for America, perhaps the critical event in forcing the collapse of the Soviet Union. Washington celebrated. The foreign policy establishment turned its efforts to implementing a foreign policy appropriate for a unipower, hyperpower, essential nation, and everything else they conceived America to be. Presidents of both parties followed Woodrow Wilson in his fantasy of running the world, declaring that “what we say goes”!

This period lasted barely a decade. In 1996, Islamic terrorists bombed Saudi Arabia's Khobar Tower housing complex, which was hosting American personnel. Two years later came the destruction of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In 2000 the USS Cole was attacked while in port in Aden, Yemen.

A year later came the most decisive terrorist event: 9/11. It dramatically changed the world for the U.S., inaugurating a new, and seemingly unending conflict: The War on Terrorism.

It has not gone well. Candidate George W. Bush ran for president advocating a “humble” foreign policy. However, after 9/11 he took the U.S. in a dramatically arrogant and triumphalist direction, blaming hatred of freedom, rather than of American foreign policy, for the attack. Two decades later, the conflagration had spread across Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, with outbursts elsewhere in Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Thousands of presumed terrorists, tens of thousands of Islamic insurgents, who mostly threatened regional powers rather than America, and hundreds of thousands of civilians had died. Although Al Qaeda is a shell of its original self, today there are more terrorist groups, many murderously effective, operating in more countries, many dangerously less stable, than on September 10, 2001.

Today, the American public is tired of endless wars. Which is why Presidents Trump and Biden promised to end these conflicts. Yet at the center of a global miasma remains the U.S. military: planes and drones operating from afar, special operations forces intermittently entering, and the Army and Marine Corps regularly intervening. And that seems unlikely to change so long as militarized Islamic radicalism dominates headlines.

All of which is a consequence of the not-much-noted decision 42 Julys ago to begin arming Islamic fundamentalists against a modernizing but pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Looking back, it

is worth asking: Was this a mistake, not just a small one, but a massive, tragic, overwhelming one?

President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, strongly defended the policy. The latter noted that the Carter administration did not push the Soviet Union into war, "but we knowingly increased the probability that they would" intervene. He believed that U.S. policy acted as a trap, giving Moscow its "Vietnam." In 1998, before the onset of the GWOT, he rejected the suggestion that U.S. policy was an error. He stated: "For almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war that was unsustainable for the regime, a conflict that bought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire."

He presumed that the Afghan misadventure brought down the USSR, and, apparently, that nothing else would have. When pressed, he responded: "What is more important in world history? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some agitated Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"

Put that way, no one can deny Washington made the right decision. Yet the events during the 23 years following his death suggest a different conclusion.

First, there are more than "some agitated Muslims" and "the Taliban." Religious persecution against non-Muslims—Christians, Yazidis, Baha'is, and others—is pervasive and generally rising throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Non-Muslim faiths are being driven from the Middle East, where many of them originated and predated Islam.

Aggressive, international, violent Islamism also has expanded greatly. Indeed, in Afghanistan the Taliban are now seen as moderate and responsible "extremists," a necessary bulwark against the true radicals who make up the Islamic State-Khorasan Province and other groups. The cost to the U.S. and rest of the world of fostering, subsidizing, and enraging violent Islamist extremism has been, and will continue to be, enormous.

Second, the Soviet Union was headed for history's trash bin for reasons unrelated to the Afghan war. Some 15,000 Soviet military personnel died and 35,000 were wounded, higher than America's death toll, but nothing compared to Moscow's losses in World War II. Although popular antagonism toward the Soviet role was more evident as Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost took effect, economic failure and nationalist sentiments would have hollowed out support for the Soviet Communist Party even had the regime not intervened in Afghanistan.

Indeed, it is possible that the absence of quasi-war between the U.S. and USSR—in which American arms were responsible for many of the casualties suffered by the Red Army—would have reduced international tensions between Moscow and Washington and moderated policies in Moscow after the death of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in 1982. The following year, tensions were so high that the Soviets perceived the annual allied Able Archer training exercise as a possible harbinger to an allied attack. The U.S., and the world, likely would have been safer had Washington not been effectively shooting down Soviet aircraft in a conflict bordering the USSR.

Of course, Brzezinski might still be right. However, as the U.S. stumbles into the third decade of a bitter transnational religious conflict that has ripped apart some states and threatened the citizens of other nations, including America, it is worth reflecting on foreign intervention's inevitable blowback. We continue to live with the results of an initially modest U.S. intervention in faraway Afghanistan in a civil war which concerned Americans little. And the consequences are by no means over.

What matters today is not the historical judgment that we pronounce on the Reagan Doctrine, if it deserves that name, since support for the Mujahideen began in the Carter administration. What is more important is recognizing that Americans should more carefully consider the possible impacts of their actions on countries and regions around the world.

In 1998, a serious policymaker could dismiss the impact of "some agitated Muslims." After 9/11, no American would do so. Thinking more carefully and clearly today about foreign interventions would make it less likely that coming generations will look back and ask whether the results of our decisions, compared to the alternatives, were "more important in world history."

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