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Prof. Gosse

Burying Another Body in the 'Graveyard of Empires;'

Or,

Jimmy Carter's Aggressive Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Introduction

President Carter is widely derided by many as a "dove" who let foreign powers walk all over the United States. At first glance, this view may seem accurate. Under Carter, the US economy faltered, Iranian radicals took over the American embassy in Tehran, Sandinista rebels took over Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. However, Carter's reaction to the latter event would surprise many: he immediately funneled immense amounts of military aid to rebel *mujahedeen*, threatened to boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, and shut down SALT II nuclear arms reduction talks. This paper shall explore and analyze the Carter administration's decision-making process in the wake of the Soviet invasion. Carter's harsh line, seemingly out of character for him, can be explained when one examines the military, political, and societal forces surrounding the situation. Fearing Soviet influence over the Persian Gulf and eager to win back American opinion of his foreign policy, Carter chose to react forcefully against the Russians. Carter's "hawkish" response to the invasion thus makes sense: the Carter administration was merely shifting in reaction to changes in the global and domestic environment.

The Carter Administration's Foreign Policy Before the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Carter came to the White House with the determination to make human rights considerations an integral part of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, Carter wanted to deescalate the Cold War: in June 1977, he gave a commencement speech at Notre Dame University saying that he was glad “we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.”¹ Bright-eyed and hopeful, Carter hoped to lead the US in a new, more peaceful direction governed by principles of détente with the Soviet Union.

With little international experience, Carter had to rely on the advice of his White House staff in order to implement this dream. To surround himself with an experienced command staff, Carter appointed the hardliner Zbigniew Brzezinski as National Security Advisor and the dovish Cyrus Vance as Secretary of State. Conflict between the two individuals and their competing ideologies would continue throughout Carter’s presidency: Brzezinski wanted to take a tough line against the Soviets and turn around America’s post-Vietnam decline in worldwide influence, while Cyrus Vance who wanted to continue détente. Of course, it must be noted that these differences go beyond mere personality. As an institution, the State Department generally prefers diplomacy and negotiations, while the National Security Council tend to prefer a more militant approach.² Regardless, the conflict

¹ Carter, Jimmy, “Human Rights and Foreign Policy,” *Teaching American History*, June 1977. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=727>.

² Political historian Steve Smith, in his analysis of the Carter administration, explains, “Role occupiers do become predisposed to think in certain, bureaucratic, ways, and for a variety of psychological reasons they tend to adopt mindsets compatible with those of their closest colleagues.” See Smith, “Policy preferences

between the two men was representative of broader ideological battles in the Carter administration, and would set the stage for future tensions to arise.

Carter enjoyed some early foreign policy successes, such as negotiating a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in the Camp David Accords. But many Americans ignored these gains, and instead looked at things like Carter's signing over of the Panama Canal to the Panamanians. Republicans attacked Carter for "being weak" and "giving it away," and three quarters of the American public opposed the negotiated settlement with Panama.³ Likewise, the loss of Nicaragua to leftist Sandinistas came as a blow to American aspirations in Latin America. Perhaps the worst crisis was the Iran hostage crisis, which began in November 1979. In this incident, Islamic students took over the American embassy and took sixty-six Americans hostage for over a year. The consensus was that Carter could not lead the nation effectively. With less than a year to the election, Carter faced an almost total lack of public approval for his foreign policy acts.

Overall, many Americans feared that the United States was losing the Cold War. Worse yet, states such as Saudi Arabia began to rethink their geopolitical alliance with the US.⁴ Carter came to power "at a time when the Soviet Union was launching a new series of challenges to the global balance of power" while "the US faced a general decline in super-power authority and post-Vietnam doubts about the

and bureaucratic position: the case of the American hostage rescue mission," *International Affairs*, 1985, p. 9.

³ Strong, Robert, "Jimmy Carter," *Miller Center at University of Virginia*, 2010. <http://millercenter.org/president/carter/essays/biography/5>.

⁴ Landsford, Tom, *A Bitter Harvest: US Foreign Policy and Afghanistan*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003, p. 113.

use of force.”⁵ A RAND Corporation report from 1981 was similarly pessimistic, complaining that in recent years the Soviets had achieved an asymmetrical advantage over the United States in military and geopolitical security arrangements.⁶ By late 1979 the US seemed in retreat on all international fronts.

The Soviet Intervention into Afghanistan

Russia was meanwhile making moves in multiple foreign arenas, particularly in Central Asia. The Soviet Union had long feared that the substantial Muslim population in places like Chechnya and Kazakhstan might be incited by radical Muslim ideology flowing up from places like Iran or Afghanistan. Moreover, sharing nearly 1,500 miles of frontier with the Soviet Union, Afghanistan represented a crucial border state that buttressed the Soviet Union’s position in Central Asia. Brezhnev feared the non-communist Afghan government could conceivably be “turned into an imperialist military bridgehead” that would allow Pakistani, Chinese, or even American military forces free reign within.⁷ Thus the Soviets rejoiced when a coup in April 1978 seemed to promise a truly communist government in Afghanistan under Hafizullah Amin, leader of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

But the situation was far from settled. The PDPA reached too far, too fast, and the vast majority of Afghans rejected the bold socialist projects it attempted to

⁵ Landsford, *A Bitter Harvest*, p. 200.

⁶ Gelman, Harry, *The Politburo’s Management of its America Problem*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1981.

⁷ Brezhnev, Leonid, in *Pravda*, January 13, 1980, p. 1, as cited in Hammond, *Red Flag*, p. 133.

enact.⁸ Soon, the ever-present resistance blossomed into a full-blown insurgency, and the Soviets feared the new regime would be toppled by Islamic fundamentalist *mujahedeen* (“strugglers,” coming from the root word “jihad”). As the Soviet leadership saw it, Afghanistan required an application of the “Brezhnev Doctrine:” if any client state that is currently communist is threatened or at risk of falling away from communism, the Soviet Union has the right to intervene.⁹ Afghanistan, having turned to communism under Amin, now seemed at risk of turning anti-Soviet or being overthrown by rebel elements.

With the situation deteriorating, and with small-scale attempts to fix it failing, the Soviet leadership decided that only military force could favorably resolve the situation in Kabul. On December 24, 1979, elements of the Soviet 40th Army entered into Afghanistan. Approximately 85,000 troops entered in the early weeks of the invasion.¹⁰ They made short work of the official Afghan army. But soon, irregular Afghan forces would begin to coalesce and harass the Soviets. Dr. Fukuyama points out that, like the Americans in Vietnam,

“Soviet operations reflect an apparently great sensitivity to casualties. The Soviets have relied on heavy preparatory fires with airstrikes and artillery and have used mechanized infantry columns to clear lines of

⁸ Ishiyama, John, “The Sickle and the Minaret: Communist Successor Parties in Yemen and Afghanistan after the Cold War,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)* Vol. 9, No. 1, Art. 2 (March 2005). <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue1/jv9no1a2.html>.

⁹ Hammond, Thomas T, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences*, Boulder: Westview, 1984, p. 133.

¹⁰ Allan, Pierre and Albert A. Stahel, “Tribal Guerilla Warfare Against a Colonial Power: Analyzing the War in Afghanistan,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24/7 (December 1983), p. 614.

communication. There has been very little use of dismounted infantry or airborne troops to clear ridges and take the high ground.”¹¹

Interestingly, these tactics were very similar to those used by French and Americans in Vietnam—a heavy reliance on firepower in order to overcome tactical disadvantages.¹²

Many observers seemed surprised that Russia would willingly choose to make a move eerily reminiscent of the US misadventure in Vietnam. But in fact, rather than being discouraged from interventions in Third World nations because of the US struggles in Southeast Asia, the Russians were encouraged. The Soviets had learned different lessons from the Vietnam War: in their perspective, the Soviets saw that aid, properly directed to support fledgling communists, could reverse a deteriorating situation. If anything, Vietnam proved to the Kremlin that “true” communism would prevail even against overwhelming odds.¹³ Given the unstable international situation, the Soviets saw a prime opportunity to forcefully spread communism and consolidate gains.¹⁴

Carter and his staff, on the other hand, saw red.

¹¹ Fukuyama, F. “The Future of the Soviet Role in Afghanistan.” *A Trip Report*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1980, p. 15. As cited in Allan and Stahel, “Tribal Guerilla Warfare,” p. 610.

¹² See Bradley, Mark Phillip, *Vietnam at War*, New York: Oxford University Press US, 2009.

¹³ Zimmerman, William and Robert Axelrod, “The ‘Lessons’ of Vietnam and Soviet Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 34 (1981), pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ Yetiv, S., “How the Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan Improved the US Strategic Position in the Persian Gulf,” *Asian Affairs* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), p. 77.

The Administration's Reaction

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan came as a shock to Carter. He infamously said that this event had taught him more about the Soviet Union than any other event¹⁵ (Conservatives jumped on this supposed naïveté: shouldn't he expect something like this to happen?). His staff echoed his anger. Interestingly, in the aftermath of the invasion the differences between Brzezinski and the State Department "largely disappeared."¹⁶ Vance and his associates were outraged, and even seemed to advocate stronger action than the National Security staff, a "reversal of their usual attitudes."¹⁷ Perhaps Cyrus Vance, like Carter, had been shaken so thoroughly by the Soviet invasion that he threw out his preference for a calm détente. In his memoirs, he writes, "Afghanistan was unquestionably a severe setback to the policy [of balanced, consistent détente] I advocated."¹⁸ Vance now pushed for harsher actions against the Soviet Union than he had previously, although his memoirs indicate *he* thinks he was being consistent.

The major fear for the administration was that Russia was making a move to control the Middle East. As Carter stated in his memoirs, written in 1982, "a successful take-over of Afghanistan would give the Soviets a deep penetration between Iran and Pakistan, and pose a threat to the rich oil fields of the Persian Gulf area and to the crucial waterways through which so much of the world's energy

¹⁵ Yetiv, "Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," p. 69.

¹⁶ Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan*, p. 121.

¹⁷ Carter, Jimmy, *Keeping the Faith*, New York: Bantam Books, 1982, p. 476.

¹⁸ Vance, Cyrus, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983, p. 394.

supplies had to pass.”¹⁹ Only 320 miles away, the Gulf shores were within easy striking distance of Soviet airbases in Afghanistan. In the years following the disastrous Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargo, the United States economy had suffered the dreaded “stagflation:” high inflation with high unemployment. The threat was still present: by 1979 nearly 40% of US oil originated from the Middle East.²⁰ With a greater understanding of how critical the Middle East was to American energy and economic needs, the Carter administration sought to ensure the Soviets could not pose a real threat to the region—and that required stopping the onslaught at Afghanistan.

In Carter’s mind, the Soviets, like the Iranian revolutionaries a month earlier, had gone way too far. “The Soviet Union, like Iran, had acted outrageously, and at the same time had made a tragic miscalculation. I was determined to lead the rest of the world in making it as costly as possible.”²¹ Carter feared the Russians would commit future crimes if they were not to be deterred in Afghanistan. Now, the question lay in how exactly to exert this pressure. Direct military action, while theoretically on the table, did not seem advisable to the Carter team. Instead they focused on a laundry list of options including worldwide condemnation, negative publicity, economic sanctions, and indirect military assistance to Afghan “freedom fighters.”

¹⁹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 472.

²⁰ Bhabani Sen Gupta, *The Afghan Syndrome: How to Live with Soviet Power*, New Delhi: Roopak Printers, 1982, p. 230.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

Economic and Diplomatic Responses

Many of the actions the Carter administration took against the Soviet Union in the wake of the invasion focused on diplomatic and economic sanctions. One particularly tough stance Carter took was the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.²² This aimed to hurt the Kremlin's pride, as it considered hosting the Olympics a huge honor and final recognition of the state's legitimacy in the international arena. Soviet propaganda made much of this "victory."²³ Thus Carter's move to forbid American athletes from going to the Games would rob the Soviets of a crucial source of legitimacy and show the world how serious America was in opposing Russian aggression. The US would indeed go on to boycott these Olympics, and, in retaliation, the Soviet Union would boycott the American 1984 Olympics in Atlanta.

Another difficult, but crucial, step Carter took was to place an embargo on sales of wheat to the Soviet Union. While a wheat embargo targeted one of the Soviets' most pressing needs, Carter's aides argued that such a move would devastate the economy for American farmers—crucial votes in the upcoming election cycle. A farmer himself, Carter was sympathetic. On January 4th, Carter proposed a grain embargo that would halt the sale of around seventeen million tons of wheat, but simultaneously initiated a buyout program where the US government

²² Bearden, Milton, "Afghanistan: The Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* 80/6 (November/December 2001), p. 20.

²³ From a Soviet manual entitled "Little Book for the Party Activist," as cited in Hammond, *Red Flag*, p. 123.

would buy the farmer's grain to keep the price stable.²⁴ While it is uncertain what impact the embargo truly had upon the Soviet Union, it signified another important move by the Carter administration to signal America's opposition to the Soviet Union's "imperialism" in Central Asia.

The Soviet invasion also wiped out any chance of Carter getting the SALT II arms reduction treaty passed through the Senate with a two-thirds majority. Contrary to the belief of many, however, Carter writes that "our failure to ratify the SALT II treaty" and secure agreements on nuclear arms control was "the most profound disappointment of my Presidency."²⁵ This statement makes clear that Carter's decision to give up on SALT II did not reflect anger against the Soviets, but rather a recognition of a domestic political reality that had turned against any cooperation with the Russians. However, given the importance that he had earlier attached to it, outsiders such as the Soviets most likely perceived his postponement of the SALT II treaty as an angry, reactionary choice. For example, Bhanbani Sen Gupta, an Indian writing in 1982, takes it for granted that killing the SALT II ratification was an intentional choice of Carter's.²⁶

Military Responses

Besides economic and diplomatic responses, the Carter administration also strove to piece together a strong, coherent military strategy. In his State of the Union

²⁴ Carter, Jimmy, "Budget Message to the Congress Transmitting the Fiscal Year 1981 Budget," January 28, 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32851>.

²⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 265.

²⁶ Bhanbani Sen Gupta, *The Afghan Syndrome*, p. 164.

Speech in January 1980, Carter elucidated what the press dubbed the “Carter Doctrine.” Carter proclaimed that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”²⁷ These words, reminiscent of the “Truman Doctrine,” had been drafted by Brzezinski, who wanted to make it clear to the Soviets that America was serious²⁸ (while Cyrus Vance, true to his usual preference, opposed the harsh language).²⁹ However, America did not have sufficient military capabilities to seriously wage a full-scale war in the Persian Gulf. A squadron of F-15s sent to the Middle East the next day as a show of force was exactly that—a show—because the F-15s were unarmed.³⁰

To help prove America’s resolve, Carter signed onto additional funding for the military, an almost 4.5% increase. Much of this went to the as yet unfunded “Rapid Deployment Force,” much lauded by Carter as the high-tech, mobile military force of the future.³¹ In another exhibition of America’s earnestness in protecting its interests in the Gulf states, in early 1980 Carter reinstated mandatory registration for the draft. In a statement on February 8, Carter said, “Our objective is plain: to deter Soviet aggression. A vigorous effort to improve our current capabilities will

²⁷ Carter, Jimmy, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” January 23, 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>.

²⁸ Brzezinski, Zbigniew, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1983, p. 444.

²⁹ Hayward, Steven, *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry*, Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, p. 165.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Yetiv, “Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” p. 71.

help achieve that goal.”³² Regardless of the actual military effectiveness of these efforts, the message was clear: the US means business in Central Asia.

Geopolitically, the US made realignments in its alliances to better orient itself against the new Soviet drive. In the Middle East, the US curried favor with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, and Oman, each of who were angered over the Soviets’ invasion of a Muslim nation as well as leery of spreading Soviet influence.³³ In Asia, and for similar reasons, the US made progress in its relations with China and Pakistan. In his memoirs, Brzezinski wrote that “in part as an element in our reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the State Department liberalized regulations for some thirty types of [military] support equipment” for China.³⁴ This further exacerbated Sino-Russian relations, already on the downswing since Nixon’s famous offer of US friendship earlier in the ‘70s.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Carter secretly initiated a secret CIA operation that would begin to fund and arm the *mujahedeen*. Bob Woodward, in his groundbreaking book *VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA*, details the initiation of the operation:

“Again it was Brzezinski who had pushed the hardest, believing the Soviets had overextended themselves. Afghanistan was their Vietnam, and Brzezinski wanted it boldly and ruthlessly exploited. Bleed them, he had said.”³⁵

³² Carter, Jimmy, "Selective Service Revitalization Statement on the Registration of Americans for the Draft," February 8, 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32906>.

³³ Yetiv, "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan," pp. 64-67.

³⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1983, p. 424.

³⁵ Woodward, Bob, *VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 78-9.

The operation involved shipping weapons through Egypt to Pakistan, and then into the hands of the Afghan resistance. The weapons would be made to look like Soviet ones, so that the Afghan rebels would appear merely to have stolen them from dead Russian soldiers.

While numerous reports soon made it out about weapons being sent to the mujahedeen resistance, the CIA's operation to funnel the weapons remained secret to outside observers. A *New York Times* search of the years up to Ronald Reagan's inauguration show that the only country that was actually suspected of arming Afghan rebels was China; American officials were still able to deny they were supporting the Afghans through armaments.³⁶ Even Drs. Allan and Stahel's analysis of the war, published a few years later in December 1983, stated that only a few arms had made it into mujahedeen hands—and these came via Egypt. Allan and Stahel assumed any coordinated effort by the US to introduce more advanced weaponry would prove impossible due to a lack of good transportation systems among the guerillas.³⁷ Obviously Carter's ploy had worked, and plausible deniability successfully maintained. It is unknown to what extent the Soviets were suspicious of American actions in Afghanistan, but they made no public accusations.

³⁶ Halloran, Richard, "Peking Reported to Offer More Guns to Afghan Rebels; U.S. Denies Arms Aid to Rebels; Chinese Ready to Intercede," *New York Times*, January 17, 1980.

³⁷ Allan and Stahel, "Tribal Guerilla Warfare," p. 615.

Interpretations of the Carter Administration's Actions

In the years following the invasion, some thought Carter's reaction too soft. "The American response has been totally inadequate" wrote Dr. Newell. "American reactions have been called "hard-line," but that characterization is applicable only to the rhetoric used."³⁸ (Of course, the Newells had no knowledge of the massive amounts of arms the Carter administration had secretly sent to Afghanistan.) Current US Defense Secretary Robert Gates argues that Carter actually did more to oppose and challenge the Soviets than most people believe. The issue, Gates believes, is that much of what Carter did was secretive and did not receive much public recognition. However, his strategy of "turning to CIA and covert action to counter the Soviets in the Third World would be continued and vastly expanded by Ronald Reagan," setting the stage for America to vigorously oppose the Soviets in the 1980s.³⁹

On the other hand, some influential political scientists including George Kennan thought that Carter's reactions to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were *too* strong and "lacked balance."⁴⁰ Prof. Alexander Dallin of Stanford argued that the Soviet's invasion was not part of some "'Master Plan' of world conquest. It was a target of opportunity...low in cost."⁴¹ These thinkers downplayed the importance of the invasion and thought that Carter's harsh stance was not worth the corresponding loss of détente.

³⁸ Newell, Nancy, and Richard Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 192.

³⁹ Gates, Robert, *From the Shadows*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 178.

⁴⁰ Bhanbani Sen Gupta, *The Afghan Syndrome*, p. 227.

⁴¹ Ibid.

A final interpretation viewed Carter as merely reacting to domestic pressures. After all, 1980 was an election year and Carter had been viciously attacked by Republicans for America's perceived defeats around the globe. Some analysts conclude that Carter was forced "to abandon much of his early reformist approach in an effort to salvage his dwindling domestic popularity."⁴² Pointing out that subtlety is a hard thing to sell to American voters, these analysts stress that Carter's turn to hawkish policies must be seen through the lens domestic politics. If viewed this way, Carter's plan to improve his popularity worked (temporarily): the New York Times reported that Carter's harsh line against the Soviets increased his poll numbers on foreign policy issues.⁴³ However, one cannot be sure that these were Carter's intentions; as noted above, Carter and his staff seemed truly angry at the Soviet's invasion and sought to strike back as hard as they could. It is not clear that domestic election concerns occupied center stage in Carter's mind; in fact, Carter even suspended campaigning for a while to focus more on foreign policies issues such as the hostage situation in Iran.⁴⁴ Thus it is impossible to conclude that the election was the most important factor in Carter's actions, but it almost certainly existed as one of the considerations.

⁴² Skidmore, David, "Carter and the Failure of Foreign Policy Reform," *Political Science Quarterly* 108/4 (Winter 1993-1994), p. 700.

⁴³ Clymer, Adam, "Poll Shows Carter Gaining Support On Afghan Moves, Slipping on Iran," *New York Times*, January 16, 1980.

⁴⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 474.

Conclusion

The Carter administration faced down the Soviet Union and came out on top. While the Soviets would not pull out of Afghanistan for years, Carter's policies halted their momentum and helped unleash international opprobrium against the Kremlin. Interestingly, it seems that the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan created a situation that would improve America's worldwide position and end a half-decade of decline. Carter could finally react forcefully against naked aggression with moral authority and the will of the world behind him. Moreover, Carter began fueling the mujahedeen insurgency, without which Afghanistan would not have been able to ultimately kick out the Russians. Carter's hawkish actions, while seemingly brash and out of character for him, can be seen as a logical reaction to extreme Soviet intransigence. Ultimately, his policies helped stem the tide of communist aggression—a successful note on which to end a presidency on if there ever was one.

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