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**Conner Tobin. "The Myth of the 'Afghan Trap': Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978-1979."**

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## *I. The Myth*

There are several reasons for paying attention to Connor Tobin's article "The Myth of the "Afghan Trap" published in the April 2020 issue of *Diplomatic History*.<sup>1</sup> The history of foreign intervention in Afghanistan is exceedingly well-documented, but there is more to say.<sup>2</sup> I will summarize what the article accomplishes, specifically in pinpointing the origin of a widely recognized watershed of the Cold War, and then will comment on the less-evident geopolitical and strategic consequences that continue to shape the world we live in today.

Tobin performs a valuable service of traditional diplomatic history by exhaustively examining leadership decision-making surrounding a major consequential event. His first purpose is to dismantle the notion that President Jimmy Carter, at the urging of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, aided the Afghan Mujahedin intentionally to lure the Soviet Union into invading Afghanistan in December 1979. Why does this matter? If this were true, Tobin notes, then the Carter administration would have been complicit in 'blowback' for having helped incubate the Islamic terrorists who attacked the United States on 9/11 (237-8). More importantly, an entirely different set of implications emerges from determining what actually took place. These bear directly on Carter's presidential legacy as well as on the strategic behavior of the United States during the Cold War and beyond.

After surveying the extent to which the "Afghan Trap" hypothesis has crept *prima facie* into the historiography, Tobin identifies what David Hackett Fisher would label a fallacy of factual verification.<sup>3</sup> The allegation is derived from a slim number of disputable sources. Most often cited is an interview with Brzezinski that appeared in the French magazine *Le*

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<sup>1</sup> Conner Tobin, "The Myth of the "Afghan Trap": Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978-1979," *Diplomatic History* 44:2 (April 2020): 237-64, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhz065>.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Mitchell, "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66-88.

<sup>3</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper, 1970), 40-43.

*Nouvel Observateur* in 1998, and which resurfaced to great attention after September 11, 2001.<sup>4</sup> In the offending passage, Brzezinski is quoted as saying:

According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahiddin began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. But the reality, closely 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* [emphasis added in the translation].<sup>5</sup>

Alas, the interview lacks precision in translation and retranslation and is excised with multiple ellipses. Brzezinski denied he ever made this prediction, and there is no additional record that he ever did so (239). Another recycled version comes from British historian Jonathan Haslam, who cites an undated informal conversation in which NSC Military Assistant Lieutenant General William Odom allegedly told him that on hearing the Soviets had entered Kabul, Brzezinski shot his fist into the air and exclaimed triumphantly “They have taken the bait!”<sup>6</sup> This dramatic assertion is also not otherwise substantiated.

Tobin assembles a wealth of evidence to build a contrasting picture of Carter administration attention to Afghanistan, beginning with the violent April 1978 Communist revolution that set the Soviets down their fateful path to intervention. Among his authoritative primary sources are the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume on Afghanistan released in 2018 and *From the Shadows*, the first of three forthrightly accurate memoirs by former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Robert Gates, who was on loan from the CIA to the NSC and had a front-row seat while serving as Brzezinski’s executive assistant.<sup>7</sup> Tobin concludes, “In sum, a Soviet intervention was neither sought nor desired by the Carter administration, and the small covert program initiated in the summer of 1979 is insufficient to charge Carter and Brzezinski with actively attempting to ensnare Moscow in the ‘Afghan Trap’” (240).

## II. The Reality

The record of official deliberations is what we would expect – complex, often profoundly ambivalent, riven with personal and institutional rivalries, not necessarily logical or consistent, and subject to cognitive bias – particularly regarding Soviet intentions. Brzezinski is the central figure. First among the Cold Warriors, he pushed hardest for confrontation with Moscow; yet he often hedged, for example, keeping communications open in confidential meetings with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin (259).<sup>8</sup> The State Department, with Secretary Cyrus Vance playing dove to Brzezinski’s hawk, consistently tried to put the brakes on anything that might upset cooperation with the Soviets. The final trauma in Vietnam, not yet five years past, left officials afflicted, craving vengeance but risk averse. During a March 1979 NSC Special

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent Jauver, “Les Révélations d’un Ancien Conseiller de Carter: ‘Oui, la CIA est entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes...’” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15 January 1998, 76.

<sup>5</sup> David N. Gibbs and William Blum (trans.), “Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Retrospect,” *International Politics* 37:2, 2000, 241-242.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 326.

<sup>7</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII. Afghanistan, ed. David Zierler (Washington, D.C., 2018); Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

Coordination Committee (SCC) consideration of covert action, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe was the first on record to speculate, “Would it be worth sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire?” (245-46).<sup>9</sup>

Carter administration decision-making on Afghanistan proved dilatory and contingent, in retrospect an American analogue to the Soviet Union’s own “creeping intervention,” as Brzezinski termed it.<sup>10</sup> Tobin adds new insight, for example, documenting how the 1978 Communist revolution prompted early operational musing as Afghan counter-revolutionaries, their Pakistani patrons, and the Saudis all began appealing to U.S. representatives for support (240-41). The administration remained in “wait and see” mode until two events in early 1979 led to somber reappraisal: the Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran and upset that regional balance in January, followed by the assassination of U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs in Kabul on February 14 during a botched KGB-supervised attempt to rescue him from terrorist kidnappers (242-43).<sup>11</sup> Tasked with preparing covert action proposals, the gunshy CIA dutifully presented options that ranged from a minor propaganda program to a full-blown operation to overthrow the Afghan regime. Cautious not to provoke the Soviets, months passed before the President signed two findings for small political action and information programs, funded at a meagre U.S.\$695,000. As the situation in Afghanistan became more fraught and Soviet involvement deepened, Pakistani and Saudi appeals to arm the Afghan insurgents grew insistent. After extensive debate, Carter approved more nonlethal aid on November 7. From the beginning, the administration determined it would provide the Mujahedin with weapons only should the Soviets enter Afghanistan overtly in force (249-51). A substantial stream of reporting and analysis kept the U.S. government well-informed as the intervention crept forward. Intelligence assessments were conservative and did not predict the precise date, but there was no intelligence failure. This is another often-repeated Afghanistan canard.<sup>12</sup>

The record of decision-making inside the Kremlin is thorough (261-62).<sup>13</sup> The leadership itself dithered for months until shortly before issuing the order to send in troops, over objections from several senior Politburo members, as well as strong forewarnings from senior military commanders and the Ambassador in Kabul. The Soviets were preoccupied with halting a deadly feud within the Afghan Communist Party, which had split into two factions, and planned to stabilize the internal situation as quickly as possible, with Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 as their template. Concerns about American interference featured but did not drive the decision. In Washington, Ambassador Dobrynin, superpower

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<sup>9</sup> Gates, *From the Shadows*, 144-146.

<sup>10</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 426.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of State, *The Kidnapping and Death of Ambassador Dubs*, Summary of Report of Investigation, February 5, 1980; Oral History: Political Officer Bruce Flatin, *The Assassination of Ambassador Spike Dubs — Kabul, 1979*, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, <https://adst.org/2013/01/the-assassination-of-ambassador-spike-dubs-kabul-1979/>; Peter Tomsen, *Wars of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 125-126.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Anchor, 2007), 365-67; Department of State/Bureau of Intelligence and Research, *Intelligence Summary: Deteriorating Afghan Situation Brings in Soviet Troops*, 4 December 1979, National Security Digital Archives (NSDA); Douglas MacEachin, “Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community’s Record,” CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 28 June 2008; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 143-49; Odd Arne Westad, “Concerning the situation in ‘A’: New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 8/9, Winter 1996-1997, 32-35.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Lyakhovskiy, “Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan,” Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan, March 17-19, 1979, *CWIHP Bulletin*, 8/9, Winter 1996-1997, 136-45.

psychotherapist since the 1961 Cuban Missile Crisis, was at pains to explain this to Brzezinski, who overestimated his own ability to influence calculations in Moscow (254-55, 260).<sup>14</sup>

Even though the Soviet entry into Afghanistan was no surprise, the United States reacted with shock. No one was more affected than President Carter. He had begun his term vowing a more benign foreign policy and devaluing superpower competition. However, by the third year of his term and facing reelection, Afghanistan piled onto Cuban-backed revolutions in Central America and Africa, and the Iran hostage crisis made him appear literally a prisoner of events, while the Soviets swaggered that, “the world was going our way.”<sup>15</sup> The full National Security Council met on December 28, just three days after the Soviet intervention. Heeding the President’s admonition only to stop “one major step short of war,” it hastily approved nearly 40 punitive measures, “tossing everything moveable onto the sacrificial bonfire of sanctions,” as Cold War historian Raymond Garthoff memorably put it.<sup>16</sup> In what many at the time took to be a dubious over-reaction, Carter went as far as to claim, “Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War.”<sup>17</sup> Eventually, most of the sanctions were lifted or merely faded out. The one enduring exception was lethal aid for the Mujahedin program, now named Operation Cyclone, which the President authorized the same day (252).<sup>18</sup>

### III. The Consequences

The turnaround on Cold War policy vindicated Brzezinski, who had pressed for toughness with the Soviets from the first days of the Carter administration. His sympathetic biographer Justin Vaisse, who also refutes the Afghan trap thesis, cites a personal interview in which Brzezinski stated, “We didn’t really trap them, but we knew what we were doing...”<sup>19</sup> So, what exactly was Brzezinski doing and why?

The answer is conspicuous and leads to consideration of the much larger consequences. Tobin joins those who portray Brzezinski as a pragmatic, rational actor while downplaying his passionate hatred of Communism and the Soviet Union (263). True, he professed Carter’s liberal internationalism, was hyper-logical, a deliberate planner, and a sophisticated geostrategist. At the same time, his upbringing as the son of a Polish diplomat who had suffered both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin before fleeing to Canada, his rivalry with fellow academic and predecessor in the White House Henry

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<sup>14</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 442; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 353, 427-28, 434-36; NSC Note, Policy Review Committee Meeting, 4 January 1980, NSDA.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew, Christopher and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Tarnoff) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), U.S. Soviet Relations and Afghanistan, 31 December 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union, Doc. 249; Brzezinski Memorandum for the Secretary of State, Presidential Decisions on Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, 2 January 1980, NSDA; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1985), 956-961.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Walsh, “If Carter Only Made Things ‘Perfectly Clear,’” *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1980; Melvyn P. Leffler, “From the Truman Doctrine to the Carter Doctrine: Lessons and Dilemmas of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 7:4 (October 1983): 245-266.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Riedel, *What We Won* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2014), 103; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 146; Morton Kondracke, “Kennedy, Take Two,” *The New Republic*, 8 February 1980; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 328; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 597.

<sup>19</sup> Justin Vaisse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America’s Grand Strategist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 307-11.

Kissinger, and his role as the outstanding Cold War hard liner among Carter's divided foreign policy team are all material and matters of record.<sup>20</sup>

Brzezinski may have engaged in statesmanship, but he was a hawk who avidly sought opportunities and advocated proposals "to bleed the Soviets."<sup>21</sup> By the third decade of the Cold War, after painful limited wars in Korea and Vietnam had made U.S. combat troops anathema, those opportunities presented themselves through indirect intervention in revolutionary civil wars on the geopolitical periphery. In terms of policy and strategy, the Carter administration embarked on cost-imposing as an element of the grand strategy of containment and long-term competition, turning Soviet occupation of peripheral Afghanistan into a war within the global Cold War (262-63).<sup>22</sup> Conducted through Pakistan, and in collaboration with other aligned nations – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, Great Britain – support for Mujahedin proxies made it possible to do as much damage as possible at low cost and low risk of escalation, even though the covert action did not stay covert for long. It was both expedient and extrinsic, meaning, the U.S. had no interest in Afghanistan itself, while the aims and interests of other protagonists were subordinate to their utility as military instruments. Or more graphically, as a senior CIA officer in Pakistan enthused, "I was the first Chief of Station ever sent abroad with this wonderful order: 'Go kill Soviet soldiers.' Imagine! I loved it."<sup>23</sup> Like the Cold War itself, covert action in Afghanistan was open-ended. As a State Department report issued in April 1980 accurately forecast, "Given the determination of the resistance forces, this portends a long, bloody struggle."<sup>24</sup>

Turning to the first set of consequences, Tobin balances recent interpretations that emphasize the liberal legacy of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy with his later embrace of realpolitik (262).<sup>25</sup> Despite his often contradicted inclinations, in the end, Carter upheld the continuity of seven presidents, from Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan, each of whom adhered to strategies of containment throughout the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> It was Carter, not Ronald Reagan who initiated Operation cyclone, first called the Mujahedin "freedom fighters," and laid the foundation for supporting anti-Communist insurgencies that came to be labeled "the Reagan Doctrine."<sup>27</sup> Although Brzezinski did not set an "Afghan Trap" for the Soviets, Afghanistan

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Gati (ed.), *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2013); Betty Glad, *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 202-7, 211-12; Westad, *Global Cold War*, 248-249; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 142-143; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2005), 346-348.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (Orig. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911; Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1988), 96; Thomas Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes*, 384.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, Special Report 70, April 1980, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970's* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Douglas Brinkley, "The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The 'Hands on Legacy' of Our Thirty-Ninth President," *Diplomatic History* 20:4 (October 1996): 505-29; Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon, 2008); David F. Schmitz and Vanesa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28:1 (January 2004): 113-143; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 572.

<sup>26</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.

<sup>27</sup> Constantine Menges, *Democratic Revolutionary Insurgency as an Alternative Strategy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1968); Charles Krauthammer, "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time Magazine*, 1 April 1985.

trapped them nonetheless. By the mid-1980s, as Congressman Charlie Wilson lavished funds on the Mujahedin, their aim escalated from imposing costs to expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan. New Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, as if fulfilling Brzezinski's wish, in 1986 declared Afghanistan "a bleeding wound."<sup>28</sup> The Soviet Union's final exit from quagmire in February 1989 exposed the bankruptcy of the Communist Party and contributed, albeit unquantifiably, to the collapse of the Soviet system and the end of the Cold War.

Afghanistan also served a grander strategic purpose: the recovery of American military power from the cycle of decline that followed defeat in Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> Jimmy Carter began this transformation, although the political benefits would accrue to Ronald Reagan. In February 1977, just weeks after Carter's inauguration, Brzezinski commissioned a series of policy studies in the form of Presidential Review Memorandums. The most important of them was PRM 10, a Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review.<sup>30</sup> The study was the diametric opposite of the new President's proclaimed desire to downplay East-West confrontation. Carried out under direction of Lieutenant General Odom and Samuel Huntington, whom Brzezinski had recruited from Harvard to be NSC Coordinator for Security Planning, it laid the foundation for reviving the defense budget and restoring U.S. military predominance lost to perceived advances of the Soviet Union.

Since World War II, the United States had maintained a military presence in the Middle East that centered on securing Saudi Arabia and its oil fields.<sup>31</sup> An expansive Persian Gulf Security Framework had been one of PRM 10's principal recommendations, but internal opposition stymied action. Exasperated, Brzezinski pressed the case. In December 1978 he began speaking publicly of an "arc of crisis" that stretched across the greater Middle East; the revolution in Iran one month later added urgency to the argument.<sup>32</sup>

Afghanistan galvanized action. On December 26, not 48 hours after the Soviet troops crossed the border, Brzezinski sent the President a three-page memorandum titled, "Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan."<sup>33</sup> Contrary to the misleading *Nouvel Observateur* article with its "Afghan Trap" fallacy, this widely cited memo is a rare case of a single historical document that serves as a key, not only to foundational decision-making on Afghanistan, but on a wide horizon of consequences that endure to the present day. In it, Brzezinski asserted, "If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan, and if Pakistan acquiesces, the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled." Given the

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<sup>28</sup> MemCon between M. S. Gorbachev and Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of DRA B. Karmal, 14 March 1985, NSDA; "Text of Gorbachev Statement Setting Forth Soviet Position on Afghan War," *New York Times*, 9 February 1988; Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Riedel, *What We Won*, ix-xii.

<sup>29</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals: Address to the Nation," (The Crisis of Confidence Speech), 15 July 1979, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3402>; Robert W. Tucker, "America in Decline: The Foreign Policy of 'Maturity'", *Foreign Affairs*, 58:3 (America and the World 1979): 449-84; Samuel P. Huntington, "The U.S. - Decline or Renewal?" *Foreign Affairs*, 67:2 (Winter 1988): 76-96.

<sup>30</sup> PRM 10 - Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review, 18 February 1977, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm10.pdf>; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 52, 177-178.

<sup>31</sup> William A. Eddy, *F.D.R. Meets Ibn Saud* (New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1954); Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 379-387.

<sup>32</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, U.S. Foreign Policy: A World Review Address to the Foreign Policy Association, Washington, D.C., 20 December 1978, White House Press Release; "Iran: The Crescent of Crisis," *Time Magazine*, 15 January 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Brzezinski Memorandum for the President, Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan, 26 December 1979, NSDA.

instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan's alignment with the West, such a claim, along with the accompanying implication that Moscow had its eye on Persian Gulf oil, was at best remote conjecture. On the contrary, the CIA assessed:

It is highly unlikely that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan constitutes the preplanned first step of a highly articulated grand design for the rapid establishment of hegemonic control over all of Southwest Asia.<sup>34</sup>

Brzezinski's thinking, however, was different:

The issue was not what might have been Brezhnev's subjective motives in going into Afghanistan but the objective consequences of a Soviet military presence so much closer to the Persian Gulf.<sup>35</sup>

His view prevailed. The President, in his somber televised address to the nation on January 4, 1980, charged the Soviets with military aggression comparable to their occupation of Eastern Europe.<sup>36</sup> In his State of the Union address on January 23, he unveiled the Carter Doctrine, which declared:

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.<sup>37</sup>

Over the next two decades, and in spite of continuing internal resistance, the Persian Gulf Security Framework evolved into the most significant permanent United States military commitment since World War II and the early Cold War, alongside the alliances in Europe and East Asia. With the formation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in March 1980, the force posture in the Middle East began to grow by orders of magnitude. Its successor, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), has fought multiple wars since its creation in 1983, and has conducted continuous combat operations since 2001. Currently, the U.S. has dozens of bases and other facilities, and deploys over 50,000 U.S. Armed Forces with major Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps warfighting assets across the greater Middle East and in its adjacent waters.<sup>38</sup>

The founding aims of the Carter Doctrine were to stabilize the region and deter conflict, while containing the Soviet Union. Today, the so-called 'endless wars' that began in 2001, the costly errors in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the end of reliance on Persian Gulf oil, have led many to question whether the U.S. military presence in the Middle East remains a source of stability and continues to serve its strategic purpose.<sup>39</sup> While origins in 1979 cannot answer that question, the roots of

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<sup>34</sup> Memorandum for the President from DCIA Turner, Soviet Union and Southwest Asia, 15 January 1980, NSDA; CIA, Intelligence Appraisal: Indications of Continued Disintegration in Afghanistan, 20mJanuary 1980.

<sup>35</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 428-430.

<sup>36</sup> Jimmy Carter, Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 4 January 1980, The Miller Center, UCSB, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgYcAo22f\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgYcAo22f_E).

<sup>37</sup> Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, 23 January 1980.

<sup>38</sup> PD/NSC-63: Persian Gulf Security Framework, 15 January 1981, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region, Arabian Peninsula; William E. Odom, "The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:2 (Spring 2006): 52-82; Robert J. Schneller Jr., *Anchor of Resolve: A History of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 2007); Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command before the House Armed Services Committee, 20 March 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/>.

<sup>39</sup> Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 83:5 (September-October 2004): 34-74; Todd Greentree, "Strategic Failure in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, November 2019, 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1684232>;

today's disorder are evident in a line that leads from Brzezinski's December 26 memo. Four of the six recommendations in the section headed "What is to be Done?" were concerned with support for the Afghan Mujahedin. President Carter approved all of them and the Reagan administration carried them out with increasing enthusiasm and resources. They included:

- 1) Providing open-ended aid to the Mujahedin without regard for the aims and characteristics of the insurgents themselves;
- 2) Empowering Pakistan to channel that aid exclusively among the seven most extreme Islamist Mujahedin groups;
- 3) Concerting with Islamic countries, principally Saudi Arabia, which matched CIA funding dollar-for-dollar and independently ran a parallel program to support Islamic jihad in Afghanistan;
- 4) Granting substantial economic, security, and political support to Pakistan, including waivers of non-proliferation sanctions and suspension of investigations into trafficking nuclear weapons components and technology.

Two other events intertwined with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and these U.S. decisions to make 1979 such a fateful year – the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the seizure by Sunni extremists of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest site in Islam.<sup>40</sup> This intertwining had profound unintended consequences. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, inadequate effort to prepare for war termination resulted in anarchy and civil war among the Mujahedin factions when they defeated the Moscow-backed regime and the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991. With Pakistan's support, the Taliban emerged from the most extreme Islamists among the Mujahedin to seize power in 1996 and form the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The reason the Saudis supported jihad in Afghanistan was not so much to help the Americans fight Communism as it was to keep jihadis away from Mecca and to compete with Iran for leadership of the Islamic world. Among these "Afghan Arabs" were Osama Bin Laden and the other al-Qaeda members who organized the 2001 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States from Afghanistan, where they were guests of the Taliban. Following the U.S.-led overthrow of the Islamic Emirate and beginning of the Global War on Terror, the Taliban, with continuing support from Pakistan, launched a protracted insurgency that resulted in quagmire for the United States, NATO, and other coalition partners in Afghanistan. Finally, between 1980 and 1990, when non-proliferation waivers were in effect, Pakistan obtained the nuclear bomb and early steps in proliferation to Iraq, Libya, Iran, and North Korea took place.<sup>41</sup>

Many, including the direct participants, have subsequently recognized that following the lodestar of killing Soviet soldiers while failing to pay attention to the implications of political Islam and weaponizing jihad was a major strategic lapse that directly contributed to the spread of terrorism and protracted warfare from Afghanistan to the Middle East and beyond.<sup>42</sup> Afghanistan in 1979 came to denote the beginning of the final decade of the Cold War. But it was a paradoxical watershed, because as the United States began its resurgence from presumed weakness, the Soviet intervention proved to be "the

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Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); National Security Archive, The United States and Pakistan's Quest for the Bomb, Special Collection: Key Documents on Nuclear Policy Issues, 1945-1990, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb333/>.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Amin Saikal, "Islamism, the Iranian Revolution, and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 112-134; Riedel, *What We Won*, 150-153.



terminal excess of a declining empire.”<sup>43</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, along with his fellow Cold Warriors, wanted the Soviet Union to suffer its Vietnam, but, as Tobin demonstrates, they did not intentionally set an ‘Afghan Trap.’ Nor were they clairvoyant. Certainly, they could not have foreseen the second Afghan Trap, one the United States would set for itself.

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<sup>43</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 349; Vladislav Zubok, “Soviet Foreign Policy from Détente to Gorbachev, 1975–1985,” *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 3, 89–111; Hal Brands, *Marking the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 34–38, 67.