

# Response to H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 966

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## *There Really Was An "Afghan Trap"*<sup>1</sup>

An apology is owed to this community of scholars for airing my differences belatedly with what was published in *H-Diplo* two years ago.<sup>2</sup> Yet the issue has lost none of its intrinsic importance. It concerns the "Afghan trap". The issue is: what exactly was it that precipitated the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 precisely when it did?

Two articles, one by Conner Tobin and a review by Todd Greentree from *Diplomatic History* and *H-Diplo* respectively, highlight this turning point in the Cold War for the Soviet Union and the world order. The issue also flashes an intriguing sidelight onto the policies of the Carter White House and the concealed contrivances of his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in particular.

The issue matters. If, indeed, Brzezinski the statesman did lure Soviet troops into Afghanistan, however proud of his achievement he may have been, his personal responsibility for the "blowback" could be seen as damaging for his posthumous reputation. The attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 was carried out by the very group that the CIA nurtured, armed and trained to fight the Russians: the Islamist al-Qaeda under the leadership of the Saudi Osama bin Laden. Furthermore, only on 30 August 2021, two decades later, did the United States finally withdraw from its failed attempt to oust Bin Laden's Taliban allies from Afghanistan at the massive cost of over \$2 trillion and enormous damage to American credibility in the eyes of its allies.<sup>3</sup>

Before we turn to the evidence adduced for the Afghan trap, however, let us review the course of events, including aspects neglected by Tobin and Greentree, in order to understand why the Soviet decision to invade was not taken much earlier and was finally made only in indecent haste. The story begins with the seizure of power on 27 April 1978 by radicals in Afghanistan, "a backward feudal country", as the Russians saw it, "with an extremely primitive economy and limited internal resources."<sup>4</sup> The revolutionaries identified themselves as Communists but were from the outset divided between the more

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Marc Trachtenberg for his assistance with this essay.

<sup>2</sup> H-Diplo Article Review 966 of Conner Tobin, "The Myth of the 'Afghan Trap': Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978-1979." <https://hdiplo.org/to/AR966>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

<sup>4</sup> Soviet Politburo minutes, 12 April 1979: *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg (1978-1991)* (Zurich: Hochschulverlag, 1995) doc. 6.

moderate element that accepted Soviet advice to proceed carefully in their revolution without entirely alienating committed followers of Islam and those who were bent on the most rapid fundamental reforms implemented with brute force against any opposition. They failed to bring onside those elements of society – the “intelligentsia, employees, the petite bourgeoisie, the lower ranks of the clergy” – that could be expected to sympathise with the revolution.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they despised Islam as an anachronism that merely served the interests of the exploiting classes. In this they found encouragement from some Soviet representatives in Kabul.<sup>6</sup>

These events took place against the backdrop of a growing insurgency in neighbouring Iran against the dictatorship of the Shah, for which the US and British secret intelligence services were entirely unprepared. It mattered a great deal, as Iran provided a critical staging post for US intelligence gathering from the Soviet Union, which was vital to monitoring observance of the Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT I) treaty signed on 27 May 1972 and to the SALT II agreement due to be signed on 18 June 1979 through tracing the telemetry - TELINT - of Russian ballistic missiles by the National Security Agency. One has to be in line of sight to intercept high frequency signals. The Americans had more than one monitoring station in Iran, but the base known as “Tacksman II” gave the Americans the closest ground level access to what was going on at the Tyuratam (Baikonur) missile test range in Soviet Kazakhstan.

After the Shah fled Iran on 17 January 1979, he was replaced by a fiercely anti-American régime under an Islamic fundamentalist, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who flew in from Paris on 1 February. Three weeks later telemetry operations from Tacksman I and II ended as personnel were speedily evacuated. The entire site, including the massive Precision Tracking Antenna System and a newly installed supplementary installation, was abandoned.<sup>7</sup> The United States thereby lost its most reliable means of monitoring SALT I and, most importantly, the forthcoming SALT II agreements. As the official history notes with characteristic understatement, this closure “caused serious concerns...”<sup>8</sup> It came as an alarming reminder that dependence on major ground facilities abroad could prove hazardous at the very moment that their functioning was at its most vital for national security.<sup>9</sup> A major review hurriedly took place, involving the intelligence community, the White House, and the respective committees in both Houses of Congress.

The stakes were high. Without assured monitoring, the ratification of the forthcoming arms control treaty with the Soviet Union could be thrown into jeopardy as tension with Moscow over its military intervention in southern and eastern Africa alongside Cuba fuelled fierce antipathy on the Hill. The Russians had already knowingly breached the ABM treaty of 1972 with the installation of a phased array radar in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia; so the outlook was scarcely propitious.<sup>10</sup> Moreover the Soviet deployment of counter-force SS-20 intermediate range ballistic missiles targeting US forward-based systems in Western Europe led to NATO’s dual-track decision in November, which threatened the stationing of Ground Launched Cruise and Pershing II counter-force missiles if the Russians did not abandon their new deployments. The revolution in Nicaragua on 19 July 1979 by Cuban trained rebels, though not a priority for Brzezinski, added fuel to the flames.

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<sup>5</sup> Soviet Politburo minutes, 12 April 1979, doc. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Lt. General V. Bogdanov, *Afganskaya voina: Vospominaniya* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 2005), 28. The memoirs are based on the archives.

<sup>7</sup> United States Cryptologic History, Special Series, Vol. 9. *The Foreign Missile and Space TELEMETRY Collection Story - The First 50 Years. Part Two. The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s* (Center for Cryptologic History: NSA 2005), 37. See also the *Washington Post*, 1 March 1979.

<sup>8</sup> United States Cryptologic History, 15.

<sup>9</sup> United States Cryptologic History, 50.

<sup>10</sup> A. Savel’yev and N. Detinov, *The Big Five. Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (Westport: Praeger, 1995).

Campaigning on these issues in a colourful flood of publicity, the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan pulled out all the stops against SALT II. It was a perfect storm that boded ill for Carter's re-election prospects on 4 November 1980.

Not surprisingly, US interest in Afghanistan – hitherto not great – grew considerably; not least as a potential substitute host for its invaluable facilities in Iran. And from July 1979, as noted by Tobin, the Americans surreptitiously began supplying arms to the anti-communist rebels in Afghanistan. But they did this in the full knowledge, as the National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Arnold Horelick, noted, that the Russians were largely advisers in Kabul; no Soviet combat role in the country was visible.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that the new Afghan régime had been agitating for the arrival of fighting services, the Politburo resolutely refused to send them; even to suppress the mutiny by the 17th infantry division in Herat, an ancient imperial capital and a significant stronghold bordering Iran and Turkmenistan, in the face of repeated special pleading by Nur Muhammad Taraki.

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On 20 March, Chairman of the Council of Ministers Alexei Kosygin bluntly explained Soviet thinking behind the decision to Taraki in Moscow. Were Soviet forces to go into Afghanistan, “our forces would be fighting not only the external aggressor but also a part of your population. And the people will not forgive such a thing.” This was, he said, the major lesson of the Vietnam war:

I would like to raise the example of Vietnam. The Vietnamese people survived a terrible war with the USA...but nobody could accuse the Vietnamese of using foreign troops...We believe that in your country you have sufficient forces to hold out against the onslaught of the counter-revolution.<sup>12</sup>

As if to confirm Moscow's judgement, Herat was retaken by the Afghan army on 24 March. In late May, however, with the rebels gaining on the régime, Taraki pressed the Kremlin once again, on this occasion for more direct assistance in the form of troop transports and helicopters piloted by Soviet personnel. Kosygin was as direct as ever: “Taking this course, we are profoundly convinced, would bring with it serious complications not only on the domestic but also the international level that would undoubtedly be used by hostile forces above all to the detriment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and to the reinforcement of the achievements of the April revolution.”<sup>13</sup> Thereafter the Afghan leaders made repeated requests, every month from April through to December, for a Soviet troop commitment, to no avail.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the uprising in Iran took the Americans and the British entirely by surprise, the KGB, which had been shunned by the Shah, had to obtain its information straight from the bazaar, which was infinitely better informed than the Iranian security services.<sup>15</sup> The revolution, after all, had emerged from the countryside, not the affluent urban population who owed so much to the Shah's policies of modernisation. The Russians therefore stood at some advantage as against the Americans,

<sup>11</sup> Conner Tobin, “The Myth of the ‘Afghan Trap’: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978-1979.” *Diplomatic History* 44:2 (April 2020): 237-264, at 250.

<sup>12</sup> Conversational record, 20 March 1979: *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, doc. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Instructions to the Soviet ambassador in Kabul, 24 May 1979: *ibid.*, doc. 8.

<sup>14</sup> These are itemised by Major-General Lyakhovskii, *Tragediya i doblest' Afgana* (Moscow: GPI Iskona, 1995), 78-92.

<sup>15</sup> The late Robert Jervis wrote a postmortem on events for CIA from their archives and later published his findings as one key element of *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). Also, for the British equivalent:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20120102075301/http://centralcontent.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/pdf1/iran-document-british-policy-on-iran>.

who were soon hounded out of Tehran. This was most certainly seen in Washington as an alarming prospect. The need to create havoc in neighbouring Afghanistan suddenly seemed ever more vital.

Given the burgeoning strength of the Islamist rebellion backed by neighbouring Pakistan and subsidised by the Americans, the régime in Kabul pressed Moscow with ever greater urgency to provide effective military reinforcements to carry out the heavy duty policing they themselves were evidently incapable of doing. But the Russians were not just hesitant. As we have seen, far from already being “in” Afghanistan, as Tobin suggests, the Politburo was trying to keep its distance while offering aid only in equipment and advice.<sup>16</sup> And, what is more, the Americans were well aware of these self-imposed limitations. This aspect, US secret intelligence, is never discussed by Tobin, and knowledge of its operations makes all the difference.

Since 1948, the Americans had been unable to break into high level ciphers with which the Soviet régime communicated. What changed everything for Ann Z. Caracristi and her group of cryptologists was the Cray-1A super computer which the National Security Agency (NSA) bought in 1977. The first had gone to the national weather service; the third went to Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Britain. Converted to the job of breaking into Soviet systems, the Cray 1-A, followed by the IBM 3033 in 1980, enabled access to the acute anxieties which beset the Russians in Afghanistan and a good deal else. It was doubtless due primarily to this extraordinary achievement that Caracristi became the first female Deputy Director of the NSA that very year. The best Moscow had was the Kartsev-M10, which had been designed for early warning against nuclear attack. Its maximum number of processing cycles was 5.3 as against 27.6 for the Cray.<sup>17</sup> The Russians and their reactions to events were now an open book to the few in the US Government with privileged access.<sup>18</sup> When Soviet forces came into Afghanistan, the NSA official history notes with customary understatement, “This time there was no ‘intelligence failure’ ...After years of struggle, it was now possible to predict with some clarity and speed the intentions of the major antagonist.”<sup>19</sup>

On 14 September Defence Minister and Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin launched a coup d’état to supplant Nur Muhammad Taraki as President. This was enough to unsettle the Russians, not least because Brezhnev had a soft spot for Taraki and Amin proceeded to liquidate hundreds of his rivals within the régime and substitute for them members of his family and close confidants. Suspicions were inevitably reinforced by what was on file. During the Afghan party leadership elections of 1978, information had been adduced that during his time studying at Columbia University Amin, who headed the Afghan student society, had taken money from CIA. Amin had not denied it, but claimed that he was playing them

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<sup>16</sup> Tobin, “The Myth...,” 249.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors. A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 235 and 245.

<sup>18</sup> Of course I had no idea of this at the time. But in the course of an extended job interview for The Johns Hopkins University SAIS that took me from one office to another from 27 February to 2 March 1984, I was, to everyone’s amazement, unexpectedly called in to see Carter’s Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, who was then running the SAIS Foreign Policy Institute on the top floor. To my astonishment, he immediately opened up about the Soviet Union and detailed a sequence of events running up to the invasion of 1979 which alerted me to the fact that he must have been reading the traffic at that time. The fact that Soviet ciphers had been broken was already known to Moscow by then, as the British traitor employed at GCHQ, Geoffrey Prime, revealed the secret to the Russians in 1980: Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors*, 245. This earned GCHQ the open contempt of Odom, who had to manage the fall-out as head of the NSA under Reagan.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 326.

along. The stenographic account of these proceedings was retained at the Soviet Central Committee's International Department.<sup>20</sup> Moscow invariably took the view that there was no smoke without fire.

What followed the coup against Taraki also seemed to indicate that Amin was sufficiently opportunistic to sell the revolution down the river if a deal could be had. In a memorandum to the Politburo on 31 December 1979, the Afghan committee who made the decision to invade Afghanistan, KGB chief Yuri Andropov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Defence Minister Dmitrii Ustinov, and head of inter-party relations Boris Ponomarev (Kosygin was ill) recalled: "attempts were made to establish contacts with the Americans within the parameters approved by Amin of a 'balanced course'. H. Amin put it into practice by conducting confidential meetings with the US chargé d'affaires in Kabul...H. Amin tried to strengthen his position by means of finding a compromise with the heads of the domestic counter-revolution. Through trusted figures he made contact with the leaders of the right-wing in the Islamic opposition..."<sup>21</sup>

Then a Major-General, Lt. General Vladimir Bogdanov, who directed operations for the southern military districts neighbouring Afghanistan, can testify to this:

"In October-November 1979 information began to appear from the KGB according to which H. Amin was looking for a means of getting close to Pakistan and Iran and looking into the possibility of reorienting policy towards the USA and China. From Kabul information came in also via military intelligence that between H. Amin and Zia-ul-Haq [President of Pakistan] agreement had been reached that at the end of December 1979 Amin would receive a personal representative of the head of the Pakistani administration."<sup>22</sup>

Soviet leaders faced the dire prospect of risking ultimate control of the situation in Kabul while Amin remained in charge. Although an underground opposition to Amin existed in Afghanistan, the committee came to the fateful conclusion that his opponents were insufficiently strong to seize power without an overwhelming Russian presence.

Amin had, indeed, approached Bruce Amstutz, the American chargé d'affaires, on 15 October, just at the end of his tour of duty: "he made clear to me," Amstutz wrote, "that he is open to see any designated USG mission chief." Indeed he was. On 27 October Amstutz's replacement, Archer Blood, had a forty minute conversation with Amin.<sup>23</sup> "He...went on, with considerable eloquence, to stress his personal commitment to improving U.S.-Afghan relations, expressing his affection for the U.S. acquired during his residence in our country."<sup>24</sup> Amin also facilitated the operations of the American cultural centre in Kabul and "on the instructions of H. Amin the security service ceased work against the embassy of the United States."<sup>25</sup> Knowing of Soviet anxieties because he could read the traffic, all Brzezinski had to do was to make sure that the Russians intercepted communications that further compromised Amin to the extent that it would prompt Moscow to reverse its standing opposition to large scale military intervention and overthrow him.

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<sup>20</sup> Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya i doblest'*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> TsK KPSS, "K sobytiyam v Afganistane 27-28 dekabrya 1979 g.": *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, doc. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Bogdanov, *Afganskaya voyna*, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/afghanistan-russia-programs/2019-01-29/soviet-invasion-afghanistan-1979-not-trumps-terrorists-nor-zbigs-warm-water-ports>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d78>.

<sup>25</sup> TsK KPSS, "K sobytiyam v Afganistane, 27-28 dekabrya 1979 g.": *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, doc. 14.

At breakfast with the British ambassador that morning - after the Amstutz meeting had taken place - Brzezinski was in good spirits. The time difference between Kabul and Washington DC is eight and a half hours. Brzezinski “gave a hint of their [American] preparedness to do something to make life difficult for the Russians in Afghanistan.”<sup>26</sup> On 8 December Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko and Suslov debate intervention. The decision to intervene - “Towards the Situation in ‘A’” - was finally taken in great secrecy by the dominant figures in the Soviet leadership spearheaded by Defence Minister Ustinov on 12 December.<sup>27</sup> The “limited contingent” of Soviet forces began crossing into Afghanistan on 24 December. Amin was assassinated in the presidential palace by *spetsnaz* troops three days later.

Tobin appears not to have discovered this when he swept the US national archives to collect whatever data he was permitted to see and concluded that “a Soviet military intervention was neither sought nor desired by the Carter administration...”<sup>28</sup> The extensive American archival sources Tobin relied upon are not, however, the sum total of what exists; they never are, certainly after only thirty years.<sup>29</sup> Even so, Tobin challenged the substance of an interview given by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski which appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* of January 1998. Here Brzezinski confessed that “We did not push the Russians into intervening, but we did knowingly increase the chances that they would do so.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, the Americans were never in a position to “push” the Russians in, but they fortuitously found themselves in a very good position to suck them in. The only question is by what means they were able to do so. Whatever Brzezinski said subsequently, and he certainly seems to have obfuscated and prevaricated, his interlocutor, Vincent Jauvert, firmly insists that it was accurately reported verbatim.<sup>31</sup> Yet Greentree, reviewing Tobin’s findings, agrees with Tobin’s conclusions after relying on even fewer sources in English than Tobin did for in article. These questionable findings have revived the debate as to whether the Russians were lured into invading Afghanistan on 25 December 1979.

Critically, neither Tobin nor Greentree reads Russian. And on an issue such as this, knowledge of the language makes all the difference to knowing what evidence exists. Moreover, before re-opening the debate, Tobin circumvented my own findings; and Greentree, although attentive enough on that score to comment, was dismissive of what he found. It is, however, problematic for either to assert the absence of evidence because neither knows what precisely exists in Russian sources; quite apart from the elementary fallacy they both make in assuming that the apparent absence of evidence is clear evidence of absence.

International relations is by nature interactive. Would it not seem presumptuous if a Russian wrote on relations with the United States without knowledge of English? Yet Anglo-American insularity has long been a serious problem in researching the history of international relations on both sides of the Atlantic. And if anything it has been getting worse since the end of the Soviet Union and the establishment of US hegemony over the world order; a phenomenon anticipated in the insular prediction of “the end of history” by the American political scientist, Francis Fukuyama.<sup>32</sup> Rudyard Kipling famously

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente*, doc. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Tobin, “The Myth...,” 240.

<sup>29</sup> At the Carter presidential archives the files in red are still closed, and include Odom’s name files: [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/findingaids/Records\\_of\\_the\\_Office\\_of\\_the\\_National\\_Security\\_Advisor\\_update\\_9-22-2021.pdf](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/findingaids/Records_of_the_Office_of_the_National_Security_Advisor_update_9-22-2021.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, 325.

<sup>31</sup> Justin Vaïsse, Zbigniew Brzezinski. *America’s Grand Strategist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 308.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989), 3–18.

quipped in his poem *The English Flag* (1891): “What should they know of England who only England know?”<sup>33</sup> One might transpose this to include the United States.

In writing of these events I quote verbatim Brzezinski’s reaction to news of the Soviet intervention as told by William (“Bill”) Odom, a dedicated Russianist who was just as anti-Soviet as his boss, and later, under Reagan, rose to head the National Security Agency (NSA).<sup>34</sup> “When news of the invasion came in, Brzezinski shot a clenched fist in the air triumphantly: ‘They have taken the bait.’” Odom was at the time of the Afghan decisions military adviser to Brzezinski. “This dramatic assertion is not otherwise substantiated,” Greentree writes, whereas he freely quotes and cites former CIA director Robert Gates approvingly throughout without requiring further substantiation.

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Does the absence of further substantiation render it untrue? Is there really a question of my honesty or that of Odom, who told his story after dinner in college at a debriefing session on the Cold War one evening in Cambridge? It was 18 November 2002. Moreover, we have two witnesses, not just one: myself plus Arne Westad, now at Yale, who still remembers the conversation “very clearly.”<sup>35</sup> It was, after all, an unforeseen moment one never forgets. Having improvidently let the cat out of the bag, Odom froze in place and asked that it not be repeated anywhere (I therefore published it only after he had died.) Are readers to believe that both of us misheard? If not, then the focus of attention must be where it should rightly rest, confronting the absence of evidence among those US documents since declassified instead of dismissing testimony because it is not there in the documents available.

Indeed, whereas Greentree believes Gates in his memoir, he does not believe Odom, or his witnesses. Yet, whereas Odom was speaking spontaneously off the record, Gates’s account required review by the Agency’s Publications Review Board.<sup>36</sup> The only other primary source on the matter that Greentree refers to is the series *Foreign Relations of the United States*. This has a long and troubled track record of failing to reveal all the most important documents relevant to the subject at hand; the most notorious of which was the omission of CIA from the volume on Iran in 1953.<sup>37</sup> Additional volumes have had to be ordered to fill in the intelligence gaps on both Iran and Guatemala (1954). And when Condoleezza Rice came to office under President Bush the restrictions became more rather than less stringent and not just at the Department of Energy.<sup>38</sup>

Murky secrets, like mushrooms, are confined to the dark for good reason. Any historian of international relations worth his salt should know that the seamier side of foreign policy is from time to time deliberately not documented; particularly when

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<sup>33</sup> [https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems\\_englishflag.htm](https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_englishflag.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, 326

<sup>35</sup> Westad to Haslam, 9 February 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 4.

<sup>37</sup> For a summing up: Betty Glad and Jonathan Smith, “The Role of the Historical Advisory Committee, 1990-94 in the Declassification of U.S. Foreign Policy Documents and Related Issues”: *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29:2 (June 1996): 185-192.

<sup>38</sup> At the meeting of the Advisory Committee on Historical Diplomatic Documentation on 22-23 July 2002 “Marvin Russell (NARA) confirmed rumors that DOE reviewers at NARA have reclassified as RD/FRD (restricted data/formerly restricted data) declassified documents published in *Foreign Relations* volumes. Schulzinger said the public must know about this, and asked Susser to mention it at the Committee meeting in September, to put the issue on the record.” <https://history.state.gov/about/hac/july-2002>. At the meeting on 13-14 September 2010, “Herschler opened the session by identifying some of the volumes with outstanding CIA issues. One recent CIA response had resulted in a recent joint CIA-HO meeting. Herschler discussed some specific volumes and then mentioned that there was still the problem of the CIA withholding previously declassified information.” <https://history.state.gov/about/hac/september-2010>.



relating to secret intelligence, as the Afghan trap was. Work on the Nixon administration and the fall of Salvador Allende in Chile drummed that into me some years ago and subsequent work on the history of Soviet secret intelligence only underscored the lesson.<sup>39</sup> The plots to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro are another noted example. And what does the CIA Inspector General's Report say? "Because of the extreme sensitivity of the operations being discussed or attempted, as a matter of principle no official records were kept of planning, of approvals, or of implementation."<sup>40</sup> One might have thought that a further source for Afghanistan would be the copies made from KGB archives by the defector Vasilii Mitrokhin. That may indeed be the case. But Arne Westad was not the only one to notice that nothing about US operations appears in what was published under Mitrokhin's name at the Cold War International History Archive.<sup>41</sup> This should not surprise us in that all the volumes in the Mitrokhin collection related to the United States at the archives in Churchill College, Cambridge, remain classified.<sup>42</sup> This is a telling reminder that information is power and that even what was secret in 1979 is still considered important enough to remain top secret.

What of motive? Odom had no interest in lying about Brzezinski, to whom he was invariably loyal. Later he promised to secure a meeting with him as a follow-up on a visit to Washington DC, but somehow it never came to pass. At least one very prominent historian, Marc Trachtenberg, believes that Brzezinski may well have been acting without the president's consent.<sup>43</sup>

But you do not have to take my word for it; or, indeed, that of Westad. The chief of the Near East and South Asian division at CIA was out of the loop. He knew nothing of Brzezinski's actions at the time. But Charles ("Chuck") Cogan encountered Brzezinski some years later at a reception following the memorial service for Samuel Huntington at the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard on 22 April 2009. Otherwise an admirer, Cogan introduced himself to Brzezinski and expressed his objection to his interview with *Nouvel Observateur*. Brzezinski refused to back down from his statement on the Afghan trap and retorted that "you may have had your own perception from the Agency, but we had a different perception from the White House."<sup>44</sup>

There is also a good deal of evidence at the receiving end, from within Russia itself. Vyacheslav Dashichev, who had retired as a colonel in military intelligence, was a man of rigid integrity whose father was physically broken in an isolation cell for nearly a decade under Stalin and who was sacked from the ranks of the General Staff for defending historians who held Stalin responsible for the disaster of June 1941. At the time of the Afghan invasion he headed the international relations department at the Institute for the Economics of the World Socialist System. It was subordinated to the Party Central Committee, having been set up by Yuri Andropov when responsible for Moscow's relations with the Soviet bloc in the early sixties. The Institute was a closed institution. Its employees had full security clearance, with one placed in each embassy across the bloc reporting in directly to Dashichev and to the Foreign Ministry simultaneously. It became an alternative world under the fading General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and a key source of the new thinking under Mikhail Gorbachev, including the proposals for German reunification: not unlike novelist Isaac Asimov's New Foundation, hidden away at the

<sup>39</sup> *The Nixon Administration and the Death of Allende's Chile: A Case of Assisted Suicide* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> "Secret-Eyes Only. Memorandum, 25 April 1967", declassified in 1994 and reprinted in *CIA Targets Fidel* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1996) p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Christian Ostermann and Arne Westad, Introduction, Vasilii Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/WP40-english.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbours. A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), xvi.

<sup>43</sup> E-mail from Trachtenberg to Haslam, 3 May 2022.

<sup>44</sup> "The Brzezinski 'Afghan Trap' Thesis is Authentic: Interview with Charles Cogan," February 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNJsxSkWiI0>.



other end of the universe (given the curvature of space, at its very centre of the foundation) awaiting to replace the collapse of the old Foundation, then a fading empire.

On 15 January 1980 Dashichev had a long memorandum sent to the Politburo courtesy of his boss, Oleg Bogomolov, explaining why the invasion of Afghanistan was a catastrophic mistake. Having despatched it, Dashichev learned that the General Staff (in which he had previously worked and where he still found support) took the same view. He soon discovered why. In his memoirs Dashichev tells us on the basis of retrospective information that Brzezinski had “put together a very devious [cowardly] plan. False information about the USA’s apparent plans to land troops in Afghanistan was sent through secret channels that reached the Soviet government. This served as the justification for the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU to take the decision to pre-empt the American landings.”<sup>45</sup>

We also have another witness. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko’s son, the Africanist Anatoly, pressed his father about the decision to invade. Andrei told him that Brezhnev’s concern was “lest the Amin group might conspire with the USA...”<sup>46</sup> These findings concur with the recollections of General Makhmut Gareev, who was at the time deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Soviet General Staff. The decision to go in, he said, was made “in haste.” With the murder of Taraki, he continued, Amin had “begun to seek out a way of forming an alliance with the Americans.”<sup>47</sup> The memoirs of General Valentin Varennikov, at the time of the invasion Commander-in-Chief of Land Forces, never a man to mince words, go much further. Having told the story, now well known, of Kosygin’s repeated opposition to military intervention on the grounds that it would create a Soviet “Vietnam war,” Varennikov goes on to state: “Washington through CIA did everything to provoke such an intervention...At the final stage, literally before the very intervention of the forces, disseminating complex disinformation and by that means finally nudging the USSR into taking this compromising step...”<sup>48</sup> It certainly appeared to work. The Americans “were more interested in the entry of our forces than we were,” Varennikov noted. “We set ourselves the task of stabilising the situation; they prepared a trap.”<sup>49</sup>

Was this, indeed, not the Afghan trap?

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<sup>45</sup> V. Dashichev, *Ot Stalina do Putina. Vospominaniya i razmysleniya o proshlom, nastoyashchem i budushchem* (Moscow: Novy Khronograf, 2015), 119

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Igor’ Belaev, “Tak my voshli v Afganistan”, *L. I. Brezhnev, Materialy k biografii*, ed. Yuri Aksyutin (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991) p. 309.

<sup>47</sup> M. Gareev, *Moya poslednyaya voina (Afganistan bez sovetskikh voisk)* (Moscow: Insan, 1996), 40.

<sup>48</sup> General V. Varennikov, *Nepovtorimoe*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel’, 2001) Part VII, 64.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbours*, 246.