Notes on the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan

John Prados

The new war against terrorism has taken up where the United States left off some years ago in its campaign against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Events of the initial campaign of the terror war, which concluded with the fall of the Tora Bora cave complex in December 2001, as well as developments that can be anticipated in the larger conflict, can be illuminated by reference to the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) efforts in the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s. These notes attempt to touch on key elements of that experience that should be borne in mind today, including the purposefulness of United States programs, the problems inherent in hurried efforts, the crosscutting impacts of local politics and customs, the nature of modern military operations, and the tendency of the solutions of the moment to spawn later difficulties.  

The CIA operation of the 1980s began as a spoiling operation. In April 1978, during the Carter administration, Afghan Communists overthrew a left-leaning but moderate dictatorship that had itself resulted from a coup against the Afghan monarch. Not satisfied with the slow progress in turning the nation toward socialism, the factions of the Communist party then began to fight each other. Meanwhile, within weeks of the so-called April revolution, Muslim fundamentalists and tribal groupings with no love for the Communists began a resistance movement. The CIA program sought to augment that resistance.

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan long predated both the April revolution and the antimonarchist coup of 1973. Beginning in 1955, the Russians had furnished both economic and military aid in amounts totaling $2.5 billion by 1979, and the Soviet Union had become Afghanistan's leading trading partner. At the time of the April revolution there were already a thousand Russian technical experts and military advisers in the country.  

Much as the political machinations of local clients had deepened the American stake in South Vietnam, the Communist coups in Kabul com-

John Prados is an experienced observer of intelligence activities. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and is a senior analyst with the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C. He is indebted to colleagues at the International Center for Advanced Studies of New York University for discussions that helped clarify many of the points presented here.

1 For a detailed review of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operation in Afghanistan, see John Prados, Presidents' Secret Wars, completely revised edition (forthcoming).

2 Amin Saikal, The Afghanistan Conflict: Gorbachev's Options (Canberra, 1986), 9, 19.
mitted the Soviet Union more deeply in Afghanistan. Washington perceived an opportunity to turn the Afghan commitment into a running sore for Moscow.

While some sources claim the American effort began very early, more concrete evidence of U.S. feelers to the Muslim guerrillas emerges only from early 1979, about the time of the kidnapping and murder of the American ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs. President Jimmy Carter's National Security Council (NSC) considered options for a CIA operation in March and April, and the president approved a proposal forwarded by Zbigniew Brzezinski that July. A decision to expand the project followed a meeting of the NSC Special Coordinating Committee on December 17, 1979. Thus the inception of the CIA project in Afghanistan preceded the Soviet intervention, with three motorized and airborne divisions and other units, that came on December 25, 1979.

These facts make it clear that U.S. covert operations in Afghanistan were not a direct response to a particular Soviet maneuver. Nor was the Soviet intervention a response to the CIA operation, except in the sense that Afghan Muslim guerrilla activity endured and could not be quelled by the Afghan Communist government. Equally, if not more, important motivations for the 1979 Soviet invasion were the internecine quarrels among Communist party factions and uprisings in Afghan armed forces units. Many Western countries, including the United States, nevertheless perceived the invasion as a Soviet thrust toward the Persian Gulf. Carter answered by declaring what became known as the Carter Doctrine: Any attempt by any major power to seize control of the Persian Gulf would be opposed by the United States by any means necessary, including the use of force. Carter also greatly increased the impetus for the CIA's Afghan project. The Soviet intervention had the effect of transforming a spoiling operation into a crash program. Similarly, the current war on terrorism, already in progress, was transformed into a crash program by the events of September 11, 2001. In the earlier Afghan war, President Ronald Reagan and his CIA director, William J. Casey, maintained the urgency added in 1980. In the current case there is no indication that CIA activities have slowed down since September.

The character of the Reagan administration secret war remained constant. Rather than placing Central Intelligence Agency officers in the field to organize, train, and lead the guerrillas, the Americans dealt through their local allies, Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. The United States had little choice. There was minimal CIA presence in Afghanistan proper, what there was remained entirely confined to the capital, Kabul, and the United States had no means of funneling arms and equipment into the country through Kabul. Working from the outside meant enlisting local allies, most prominently the Pakistanis. ISI representatives had good arguments as to why they ought to take the lead. Muslim guerrillas in Afghanistan

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3 Two former Soviet military officers wrote that soon after the 1973 coup a resistance training center reportedly funded by the United States opened in Attoka, Pakistan, an initiative of the Muslim fundamentalist Gulbud-din Hekmatyar. See Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretsky, The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam (Novato, 1993), 53.

had already forged links with Pakistan, the ISI had been cooperating with them before the advent of the CIA project, and consequently Pakistani officials knew the players and had networks in place. In addition, the inevitable Russian propaganda line would be that the guerrillas were fronting for American imperialism, and ISI leaders argued that to have CIA officers actively involved in-country would confirm Soviet claims. As a result, the secret war was run through Pakistan, where even with an enlarged CIA station, a huge budget (the largest for any CIA covert program to date), and a major rebel army, the project remained among the smaller ones in terms of the agency’s organizational effort.

For different reasons, in the new war on terror the United States will again have to act through local allies. Already, in the first (Afghanistan) campaign of that war, in 2001–2002, the United States has been obliged to make bilateral arrangements, including some with Pakistan, in order to effect the actions deemed necessary. As Pakistan and the ISI did during the 1980s, each of the local allies has made its best deal with Washington. Foreign aid, trade terms, international monetary assistance, and military training and equipment are not the only factors in play. The bilateral agreements will significantly tie Washington’s hands in ways that will become visible only as the conflict progresses. For example, in the Philippines, where the national constitution prohibits foreign military involvement, American participation is limited and subject to potential controversy. Washington’s efforts to extend the envelope, to increase its freedom of action, will simultaneously make relationships more vulnerable to local concerns. Specific problems will take different forms in different nations, but the global reach of American action and the extension of commitments over time will make difficulties inevitable.

The Afghanistan secret war of the 1980s illustrates how “difficulties” can develop. With the CIA acting through Pakistan’s ISI, the latter selected the guerrilla groups to receive weapons and cash aid. Pakistan’s selection was not the one Washington would have made. The ISI’s favoritism for fundamentalist Muslim groups foreclosed the more moderate political evolution the United States would have preferred. At the same time the guerrillas’ success strengthened the ISI’s own sense of its correctness. That encouraged the agency to shift its support in the early 1990s to an even more virulent strain of fundamentalism in Afghanistan that became the Taliban, which the United States felt it necessary to combat after September 11.

Meanwhile, within the Muslim guerrilla groups, the prospect of outside support and the favoritism practiced by the states aiding the guerrillas had deleterious effects. Even favored groups experienced shortfalls in support and were encouraged to seek direct support from individuals and groups outside the arena of conflict. Brig. Gen. Mohammad Yousaf, who for four years at the height of the Afghan covert operation headed the ISI branch in direct contact with the Muslim rebels, reports that the more fundamentalist groups were the most successful at private fund raising. This opened the door for individuals and groups to influence the larger conflict. Osama bin

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6 Ibid., 106.
Laden, at first merely a wealthy Saudi Arabian with some dedication to radical Islam, began as one such individual. Bin Laden's evolution from supporter of the Afghan covert operation to mastermind of the attacks that kicked off the war on terrorism shows in microcosm a pattern that is likely to be replicated among nations and larger interest groups. As the war on terrorism proceeds, the United States will demand certain actions, and its allies will confront distracting political forces as they face their local realities. Degrees of allied support for the new U.S. agenda will wax and wane. It is also possible that nations or groups that at one point align with Washington may later be driven to oppose its policies.

Another effect of Afghan rebel groups' pursuit of extra funds during the CIA secret war against the Soviets was the emergence of trends entirely inimical to U.S. interests. For the Afghans raising money meant dealing—not just negotiations with outside supporters, but commerce in gems and drugs. Guerrilla leaders in the interior of the country actually preferred cash to supplies in kind, which they anticipated could be freely bought in local bazaars. During the CIA secret war, Afghanistan became one of the world's leading producers of heroin. Not only did this fly in the face of the war on drugs being simultaneously conducted by the Reagan administration, it created conflict between U.S. agencies involved in the Afghan and drug efforts, primarily the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration. Ironically, when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan after 1995, they largely eliminated Afghan opium production, but cultivation has resumed since they were overthrown by the new U.S. allies. As did the earlier secret war, the new war on terrorism is likely to lead to conflicting interests among the agencies conducting it. The U.S. government did not resolve its internal cleavages during the 1980s secret war; unresolved conflicts in a global war in the twenty-first century will detract considerably from the stated goals of the operations.

In the CIA covert operation against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the United States necessarily accepted the interests of the local groups, such as drug trafficking, as a condition of their participation on our side. That fact entailed subsidiary ones: the allies had objectives different from those of the CIA or the United States; they had a different level of determination than did the United States; they had a far different attitude toward compromise than the CIA. Thus the war frequently disappeared from January to March, typically the worst of the Afghan winter. Similarly, cooperation among rebel field commanders remained sporadic at best. General Yousaf's account is replete with examples of attacks canceled because groups refused to coordinate and of even simple coordination activities aborted for the same reason. Some U.S. allies in the Afghan campaign of 2001, particularly among the Northern Alliance, were people involved in the earlier CIA operation. This includes the former president of the country, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who headed one of the seven main resistance groups, as did Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former prime minister. Both of them were among the Muslim fundamentalist leaders. Abdul Rashid Dostum, now a govern-

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8 Yousaf and Adkin, Bear Trap, 36, 39-40, 42, and passim.
ment minister, was previously a general in the Soviet-aligned Afghan army fighting the resistance. The defection of Dostum and his troops in 1992 effectively ended the Soviet client state in Kabul. Unlike American leaders in the war on terrorism, who have enunciated their desire to get the enemy dead or alive, the Afghans happily trade in loyalties. Thus, in the denouement of the initial campaign of the terror war, in late 2001 and 2002, America’s local allies in Afghanistan took thousands of surrenders and defectors but kept only a few hundred prisoners to be handed over to Americans. Those released included senior Taliban officials. Such behavior is the norm, not the exception. It illustrates one important way in which the necessity for the United States to work through local allies in the terror war will reduce overall effectiveness.

Much has been made in journalistic accounts of the 2001 Afghan campaign of the military formula of using small teams of CIA and military special forces troops to summon air power and other means of attack. It is being pictured as a new standard technique. Interestingly, that too has its parallels in the CIA secret war of the 1980s. During the latter part of that war, the Soviets changed their tactics to give the major military role almost exclusively to their own Afghan allies, focusing on helping them plan operations and prepare attacks and then backing them with aircraft and artillery. The new U.S. formula is the old Russian one with the added element of reduced exposure for U.S. forces due to the sophistication of modern U.S. technology. The most important limitation on the technique is set by the effectiveness of the local forces cooperating with the United States. The key vulnerability of the system resides in its connectivity, that is, the ability of all parts of the dinosaur to communicate relevant information and to function in unison. Disruption can occur through communications failure, intelligence failure, or the coordination failure that keeps such cooperating forces as U.S. aircraft from being in place where they are needed. In the computer age there are many ways to disrupt connectivity, some of them quite innocuous, such as glitches in software or gaps in standard procedures, others purposefully sinister, such as the adversary’s jamming critical communications links or spoofing (that is, faking) responses.

There has been much discussion recently of the phenomenon of “blowback,” the tendency for actions to rebound and damage the initiator. In that regard, the CIA’s Afghan campaign is obviously closely related to current events. Osama bin Laden, as a rebel fighter from the CIA’s secret war who is suddenly at the heart of the new terrorism, is the clearest example, but indeed there are many. The term “Afghan Arab” came to denote a former fighter in the CIA covert operation who went on to other causes and affairs. In the Bosnian civil war of the early 1990s an estimated five hundred to a thousand veterans of the CIA secret war served on the Muslim side. Over the course of the campaign several thousand are thought to have participated. Afghan Arabs also participated in the civil war in Azerbaijan and in the struggle against Russia in Chechnya. Several of the terrorists involved in the 1993 attempt to car bomb New York’s World Trade Center were also Afghan veterans. As the first of the CIA’s

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9 Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, trans. and eds., The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost: The Russian General Staff (Lawrence, 2002), passim.
project leaders for the Afghan program, Charles G. Cogan, later put it, "The hypothesis that the mujahedeen would come to the United States and commit terrorist actions did not enter into our universe of thinking at the time."¹¹

As with people, so too with equipment, the dangers of blowback are real. The most prominent example from the Afghan secret war is the shoulder-fired antiaircraft missile called the Stinger. The cIA provided the Muslim rebels between 1986 and 1988 with approximately 1,000 of the missiles after an intense bureaucratic battle within the U.S. government between officials worried that the technology would leak into the wrong hands and anti-Soviet (or pro-rebel) activists. About 340 of the Stingers were expended in the anti-Soviet covert operation. Once the Russians had withdrawn from Afghanistan, in early 1989, the U.S. government asked for the return of the weapons. A typical response was that of the Islamic Party led by Yunis Khalis: "We will not return the Stingers. . . . We ourselves need them most."¹² Khalis was among the more moderate Muslim leaders. For a couple of years, while a Communist government in Kabul continued to resist the Muslim rebels, the United States remained quiescent. But in 1991 the cIA, which had given away the missiles, began a new covert operation to buy them back. Over the next several years, the agency spent more than $65 million on this program. Weapons that the U.S. had bought for $35,000 each were bought back for another $50,000 to $100,000. An estimated 200 Stingers were recovered by the cIA effort. Another 100 to 200 were believed still in Afghan hands in 2001, leaving hundreds unaccounted for.¹³ Some are known to be in Iranian hands; the whereabouts of the other Stinger missiles is unknown.

Given local allies, shifting loyalties, and the fortunes of war, the new struggle against terrorism is bound to generate blowback of its own. Whether this will involve governments that change sides, nations (including our own) that lose heart, ally groups who become enemies, or weapons that are turned against their producers cannot be known. What is apparent is that the political risks are high. The cIA experience in Afghanistan gives us no confidence that those risks can be avoided. Whether they can even be minimized remains to be seen. The Afghanistan covert operation leaves very cloudy portents for the war on terrorism.

