



2010

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Recommended Citation

Szymanski, Michael R. (2010) "Frankenstein: The United States in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s," *Journal of the Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jiass/vol14/iss1/16>

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Undergraduate Student Paper

*Frankenstein: The United States in Afghanistan during the 1980s
and 1990s*

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ABSTRACT

For nearly the past quarter century, the United States has been involved in covert operations in a region of the world that most people could not locate on a map. Invisible wars being fought by the United States and other foreign intelligence agencies in Afghanistan sowed the seeds for the attacks on September 11, 2001. From the Soviet invasion in 1979 to the summer of 2001, intelligence agencies from around the globe have had a stake in supplying, training, and funding the very same people who carried out those terrible attacks. In the middle of this chaotic time period, Osama bin Laden used political manipulation to devise a plan that would leave a scar on the face of a nation for many years to come. This research will give a history of the U.S. government's involvement in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda would rise from the ashes of the Soviet conflict to become the new enemy of America. To combat these new faceless adversaries, historians need to look at the mistakes made in the past to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Soon after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, President George W. Bush, without much supporting evidence, declared that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda operatives were responsible. What was not reported in the days following the attacks of September 11 was that Osama bin Laden, now the world's most wanted terrorist, was initially recruited and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Soviet invasion of 1979 spurred a global movement for Muslims to travel to Afghanistan to fight. The United States believed that by turning this war into a jihad, it would end communism and topple the Soviet regime. In 1985, President Reagan signed a national security directive that stepped up covert military and financial aid to the mujahideen. The CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) became close allies in an effort to assist the Afghans in defeating the Soviets. This relationship would evolve into something that was uncontrollable by either side. The use of the opium trade, backed by CIA operatives, would spur an international drug trade. This would help finance additional operations in the war against the Soviet Union. The CIA and the American government had sacrificed the drug war to fight the Cold War.

To fully grasp the military actions in this region, it is important to understand how modern-day Afghanistan came to be. Present-day Afghanistan was born in the nineteenth century as a buffer state between the Russian and British empires as they played their "great game" in the

region (Gasper 2001:2). Although the Afghans never underwent colonial rule, the geographic difficulties caused by rough, mountainous regions made for stiff challenges when it came to economic development. During the 1970s, several civil wars resulted in frequent power shifting within the Afghan government. In 1978, a group of Russian political advisors and their families were murdered in an attempt to rid the Afghan government of foreign influence. The mujahideen, Islamic for “holy warriors,” rose to power through extreme oppression and torture (Gasper 2001:3). Still unwilling to leave this volatile region to govern itself, the Soviets decided to act. Major General Oleg Sarin, author of *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union’s Vietnam*, writes, “The Soviet leadership was sure that if only the Soviet troops would step into the territory of Afghanistan, coming ‘at the call of brothers in the class struggle’ the opposition would immediately become manageable” (Sarin and Dvoretzky 1993:43). On December 27, 1979, a force of 5000 Russian troops advanced on Kabul to oust the rebel leader, Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. Within a few days of Amin’s death, 80,000 Soviet troops were in Afghanistan. This figure would later reach upward of 100,000; the decade of Russian occupation of Afghanistan had begun (Gasper 2001:3).

Many Western countries, including the United States, saw the Soviet invasion as a thrust toward the Persian Gulf (Prados 2002:467). President Carter responded to this action by implementing what became known as the Carter Doctrine (Prados 2002:467). The Carter Doctrine stated, “An attempt by any outside force to gain control over 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” (Collins 1986:89). Clearly, the United States had oil on its mind. If Russia gained control over the oil-rich Persian Gulf, they would be able to dictate oil prices and maintain strict regulations over the newly formed OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries). Author Steve Coll writes, “A sustained rebellion in Afghanistan might constrain the Soviets’ ability to project power into Middle Eastern oil fields” (2004:42–43). In addition to giving the Russians their own version of the Vietnam War, U.S. intentions were also focused on future oil and gas reserves.

Another goal of the Soviets, who were beginning to feel the heat from negative international attention regarding their invasion, was to pass blame to the United States. Joseph Collins, the author of *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, writes that the Russians claimed “the Afghanistan crisis was a result of its [the United States’] plans for turning that country into an anti-Soviet military staging ground” (1986:91). The Soviet Union was stranded on an island from the perspective that no outside ally would support their invasion of Afghanistan. Russia’s closest ally at the time, Iran, was no different. Shortly after the invasion, the Iranian foreign minister said that “the Islamic government of Iran cannot agree with military intervention . . . by a superpower in a small country . . . because Afghanistan is a Moslem country and a neighbor of Iran, the military intervention of the government of the Soviet Union . . . is considered a hostile measure not only against the people of the country but against all Moslems of the world” (Collins 1986:92). Almost 31 years later, the United States is dealing with the same resentment that the Soviets faced at the onset of the Afghan war.

Logistically, it was a problem that the CIA needed to rely on outside forces to insert military supplies and training resources into Afghanistan. The Americans had to deal with their allies in Pakistan and its ISI (Prados 2002:468). This organization was known to be a more corrupt version of the American CIA. As a result of the secret war being run through Pakistan, a huge budget was allotted to the mission (Prados 2002:467). Another concern was that even with such a large budget, the project remained relatively small in terms of the CIA’s organizational

effort (Prados 2002:468). The CIA's covert action in Pakistan and Afghanistan was the largest in the organization's history since World War II. The primary question being asked throughout Washington at this point was, how do we support these "freedom fighters"?

One of the most important goals of the CIA was to be able to support the Afghan resistance without being perceived as having direct military involvement. In doing so, the United States would call on a number of outside actors to support the effort. Historian Phil Gasper wrote, "the objective of the intervention was to trap the Soviets in a long and costly war designed to drain their resources, just as Vietnam had bled the United States" (2001:4). Money, guns, and ammunition began to flow into Pakistan from all over the world. Author Tim Weiner wrote, "The Chinese kicked in millions of dollars' worth of weapons, as did the Egyptians and the British. The CIA coordinated the shipments . . . and handed them over to Pakistani intelligence" (2008:445). The Pakistani ISI was responsible for determining which resistance group would receive the supplies. Gasper writes, "as well as recruiting Afghan nationals to fight the Soviets, the CIA permitted its ISI allies to recruit Muslim extremists from around the world" (2001:6). The decision to allow these types of people to be funded and trained by American resources is one that would later have immeasurable consequences for the United States.

Later, it would become an issue that not all of the weapons and resources were landing in the hands of the Afghan fighters. Because of Afghan defeats throughout the country, it brought concern that some of the mujahideen warriors were not properly equipped. This confused members of the CIA because large shipments of weapons and ammo had been flowing into the region. Former CIA Deputy Director John McMahon said, "When we saw some of the Soviet successes against the mujahideen, I became convinced that all the arms we had provided were not ending up in Afghan shooters' hands" (Weiner 2008:445). McMahon would travel to the region for a meeting with the leaders of the Afghan rebel groups to discuss this situation (Weiner 2008:445). He told the leaders, "I was concerned that they were siphoning off the arms and either caching them for a later day or, 'God forbid, you're selling them.' And they laughed. And they said, 'you're absolutely right! We're caching some arms. Because someday the United States will not be here, and we'll be left on our own to carry on our struggle'" (Weiner 2008:445). The Pakistani chiefs who were responsible for distributing the supplies favored those groups who were the most capable in battle. These groups also proved to be the most extremist and committed Islamists (Weiner 2008:445). In a twist the CIA surely did not anticipate, these extremist warriors would one day turn their religious fury toward the United States.

With large supplies of weapons becoming lost in the fray, one particular item became of grave concern for the United States. First introduced to the battlefield in 1986, the Stinger missile would become a weapon that would "sow fear among thousands of Russian pilots and troops" (Coll 2004:11). The Stinger was a portable, shoulder-fired weapon that proved easy and durable to use. Its automated heat-seeking guidance system worked uncannily (Coll 2004:11). It is estimated that between 2,000 and 2,500 Stinger missiles were distributed to Afghan rebels from the CIA throughout the war (Prados 2002:471). The use of these weapons to down Soviet helicopters and transport planes made headway in leveling the playing field in the Afghans' favor.

The CIA would later attempt to implement a buyback program to recover the leftover missiles. Presidents Bush and Clinton would approve congressional measures to purchase these weapons back from anyone who possessed them (Coll 2004:11). Famed Cold War author John Prados wrote, "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 still believed to be in Afghan hands in 2001, leaving hundreds unaccounted for” (2002:471). These weapons posed a dire threat in the hands of anti-American groups. Although the CIA viewed the buyback program as a minor success, Steve Coll wrote, “the Stinger repurchases may have improved aviation security, but they also delivered boxes of money to the warlords who were destroying Afghanistan’s cities and towns” (2004:12). With the large number of missiles still unaccounted for, the United States has yet another concern when waging war in this region.

While billions of dollars came in from the United States, the Afghan people began to seek out more diverse income sources. Because of Afghanistan’s harsh climate, agricultural production was not something that came easy. Because of the constant bombings and warfare, much of the Afghan countryside was destroyed. One crop that was easy to cultivate in this climate was the poppy. Cultivation of this crop requires little water; thus, with the majority of the country’s irrigation systems destroyed by war, it seemed an easy choice. The production of opium in Afghanistan was not only to stoke the growing demand in the United States and Europe; it was a way to create jobs. University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Alfred W. McCoy wrote, “Since poppy cultivation requires nine times more labor per hectare than wheat, opium offered immediate seasonal employment to more than a million Afghans” (2010:4). After many of the country’s integral crops such as walnuts, pistachios, and mulberries were destroyed by the Taliban, “these strands of destruction knit themselves into a veritable Gordian knot of human suffering to which opium became the sole solution” (McCoy 2010:3). Pushed into a corner and forced to make a living to support their families, many Afghans saw no other choice. The production of opium and heroin became a source of income that would be unrivaled anywhere else in the world.

Afghan opium and heroin production tripled between 1979 and 1982. There was evidence that Afghan heroin producers had captured over 60 percent of the world market in just three years (Gasper 2001:4). While the United States had DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agents in place to combat such actions, the CIA would have the final say in what was allowed during this war. Gasper writes, “Trucks and mules supplied by the CIA to transport arms into Afghanistan were used on the way out to bring opium to heroin laboratories along the Afghan-Pakistan border. U.S. officials turned a blind eye to what was going on” (2001:4). A 1993 *Los Angeles Times* article described Afghanistan as “the new Colombia of the drug world” (Gasper 2001:4).

The funds that were procured from the sale of heroin have funded the Taliban since the early 1980s. A 2009 estimate from an anonymous intelligence official states that drug trafficking provides the Taliban insurgents with more than \$400 million a year (McCoy 2010:5). The manufacturing of heroin that was initially overlooked by the U.S. government during the Afghan war has now committed billions of dollars to funding terrorists around the world. To combat the new regime of terrorists and Taliban warlords in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated, “We have to go after the drug labs and the drug lords that provide support to the insurgents” (McCoy 2010:5). This is a strategy that should have been initiated during the 1980s. Not unlike sometimes in its decadent past, the CIA overlooked a crucial aspect of the war in order to drive out the Soviets.

To understand our current adversaries in Afghanistan, it is important to determine how these factions were formed. Through its ISI subsidiary, the CIA was complicit in the sale and distribution of heroin on a global basis, although it did not have much say in the decision to anoint certain people into positions of power during the war. When the ISI proposed a former Afghan ally, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as the overall leader of the ant-Soviet resistance,

Washington—with few alternatives—agreed (McCoy 2010). Hekmatyar, infamous for throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women at Kabul University in Afghanistan's capital, was hardly the right man for the job (McCoy 2010:2). One of the tasks that Hakmatyar was charged with was recruiting non-Afghan volunteers to join the ranks of the mujahideen (Gasper 2001:6). One of these men was Osama bin Laden.

Born in 1957, bin Laden was a member of a prominent Saudi Arabian family with ties to construction and engineering projects all over the world. His family's wealth allowed him to travel extensively throughout the region to promote his extremist views and to recruit new soldiers in the war against the Soviets. Osama bin Laden also worked closely with the CIA during the Afghan war, raising money from private Saudi citizens (Gasper 2001:6). By 1984, he was in charge of the Maktab al-Khidamar, which was an organization set up by the ISI to channel money, arms, and fighters from the outside world into the Afghan war (Gasper 2001:6). The CIA's development of these fluid networks of stateless Islamic radicals would cultivate into larger concerns for the U.S. government. The global revival after 1979 eventually birthed bin Laden's al-Qaeda. As time went on, these networks of radicals adopted some of the deception-laden tradecraft of the former intelligence services, methods they sometimes acquired through direct training (Coll 2004:17). With funding and training by the American CIA, bin Laden was able to develop a strong and battle-hardened army of Islamic warriors. Ridding the holy land of the infidels was their main cause, and they were all willing to die to see it through.

Faced with military humiliation and increasing financial burden of the occupation, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced in 1987 that he would begin to withdraw his forces from Afghanistan within a year (Forest 51). It was during this period that the political differences between the United States and Pakistan began to fully surface. The foremost goal of the United States was to see the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, without much regard to what happened to the country after that (Forest 51). When the United States left Pakistan, more than 3 million refugees became the responsibility of a defunct Pakistani regime (Forest 51). When the United States left this region and all of the people in dire need of humanitarian assistance, it laid the groundwork for a tragedy, the full ramifications of which cannot be fully measured yet (Forest 52). What rose from these ashes would become the Taliban. Literally the orphans of the Afghan war, these soldiers knew nothing but war. The Taliban (Pushtun for "students") were "boys that the war had thrown up like the sea's surrender on the beach of history" (Rashid 2001:32). These people had grown up in a generation that had never seen peace.

As the Taliban strengthened their grip on the Afghan countryside, they began to impose their harsh, ultra-sectarian rules. Women were forced to cover themselves completely when in public and were denied health care and educational rights. Even singing and dancing in public was prohibited (Gasper 2001:7). Selig Harrison of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars said, "The CIA worked in tandem with Pakistan to create the 'monster' that is the Taliban . . . the CIA made historic mistakes by encouraging Islamic groups from all over the world to come to Afghanistan" (Suri 2001:1). Even though the U.S. government initially supported the Taliban regime, its view quickly changed once human rights and women's organizations in the United States caught wind of the atrocities the Taliban committed. Tacit support for the Taliban continued until 1998, when Washington blamed Osama bin Laden for the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The United States retaliated by launching cruise missiles at some of bin Laden's supposed training camps in Afghanistan (Cooley 2002:220). Keep in mind that these were the same madrassas (religious schools) that the CIA had helped build in the 1980s. The Taliban's refusal to extradite bin Laden—not its appalling human-

rights record—led to United Nations-imposed sanctions on the regime the following year (Gasper 2001:8).

In an effort to give the Soviets their own version of Vietnam, the CIA fought a secret war in Afghanistan without congressional debates or protestors in the streets. This was a war that mostly remains undefined in the pages of American history. The most information that everyday Americans might gain from this conflict may come from a movie. Bucknell history professor Jeremy Kuzmarov writes about the film *Charlie Wilson's War*: “Based loosely on true events, the film focused on efforts of a Congressional representative from Texas, Charlie Wilson, to raise funds for mujahadin ‘freedom fighters’ seeking to ‘liberate’ Afghanistan from the Soviets,” (Kuzmarov 2007:1). This account does not take into consideration all of the factors that went into the planning of this conflict. Kuzmarov summed it up best when he wrote, in reference to the message in *Charlie Wilson's War*, “The message is that Americans should intervene more in foreign countries to alleviate their miseries—notwithstanding the reality that U.S. policy is usually based on underlying geo-hegemonic and economic agendas and frequently contributes to mass human rights violations and suffering, as in Afghanistan and Iraq today” (Kuzmarov 2007:3). In an age of warfare and international conflict, the United States should focus its resources on eliminating suffering rather than on creating circumstances that cause suffering to proliferate.

When Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, the book was seen as a warning against modern man during the Industrial Revolution. Although it was possible for Dr. Frankenstein to create a man in his likeness, he ultimately was unable to control the man. The CIA-led backing of the mujahideen and Islamic fundamentalist groups during the Afghan war would eventually create incalculable challenges for the United States. In revenge for the Soviets’ support of Vietnam, we funded and supplied the same groups that would eventually plot and carry out terrorist attacks against the United States. If there has ever been a stronger instance of blowback, I am unaware of it. The war in Afghanistan had been the nexus of what most CIA officers regarded as one of the proudest achievements in the agency’s history: the repulsion of invading Soviet forces by covert action (Coll 2004:15). By creating a monster in Afghanistan and throughout the Islamic fundamentalist world, the United States is now unable to regulate its actions. Global terrorism continues to plague our allies and costs thousands of lives each year. Our military is waging a war on two fronts in an effort to stymie these regimes. I can only hope that the lessons learned from the CIA’s past can help educate future operators in their endeavors moving forward.

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