

These Colors Run Red

The U.S. follows the Soviet Union into Afghanistan.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

WITH THE 30TH anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan approaching, the question retains its fascination: Why did the Russians do it? The misguided Afghan War sounded the death knell of the Soviet empire. How could they have been so stupid?

With the United States several years into its own Afghan War, the question possesses more than academic interest. However wrapped in irony and paradox, history is offering us instruction that we ignore at our peril.

When it came to divining the motive behind that Soviet invasion, Richard Pipes, the Harvard historian and Russian expert, expressed considerable certainty. As he told the *New York Times* in early 1980, the incursion into Afghanistan showed that the Soviets were on the march. "Russians do not seize territories that have no strategic importance," Pipes announced.

Afghanistan has no natural resources of importance, and the risk of antagonizing the West is very high for a bit of mountainous territory with a primitive economy, with a population that has never been subdued by any colonial power.

To run all these risks for the sake of occupying this territory makes little sense—unless you have some ultimate, higher strategic objectives.

Pipes and others believed the ultimate Soviet objective was to seize control of Persian Gulf oil, something they insisted the United States prevent. Pres-

ident Jimmy Carter heeded that demand. In what became enshrined as the Carter Doctrine, he declared that attempts "by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf" would constitute "an assault on the vital interests of the United States," to be "repelled by any means necessary." Everyone understood "outside force" to be a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union.

Yet in reality, the Kremlin had no intention of using Afghanistan as a jumping-off point for a grand offensive across Iran and Iraq to the oil El Dorado of Saudi Arabia. Nor did the Soviet legions possess the capability of doing so. Pipes got it wrong. According to their own lights, the Soviets had entered Afghanistan for defensive purposes—to prevent this remote outpost of communism from slipping out of the Soviet orbit.

Allow the Afghans to go their own way, and other Soviet satellites might follow—or so the Kremlin feared. To preserve their empire, therefore, Soviet leaders embarked upon what became a costly, open-ended war, oblivious to the fact that the real threats to their empire were internal: the Soviet economy had stagnated, and the Soviet system was fast losing its legitimacy. The Kremlin's stubborn insistence on keeping a grip on Afghanistan served only to hasten the empire's demise—a process helped along when the U.S. and its allies famously funneled arms and money to Afghan "freedom fighters" resisting Soviet occupation.

Meanwhile, the force that actually

threatened the Persian Gulf appeared not outside but inside: Saddam Hussein's Iraq. During the 1980s, Washington had forged a marriage of convenience with Saddam, supporting his war of aggression against the Islamic Republic of Iran. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H.W. Bush called the marriage off and thereafter denied its existence. The Carter Doctrine underwent a subtle transformation: preventing outsiders from dominating the Gulf no longer sufficed; defending the Gulf now required that the United States establish itself in a position of unquestioned primacy. The Gulf War began the effort, still ongoing, to incorporate the Persian Gulf more directly into the American empire.

That effort offended the sensibilities of some Muslims and provoked considerable resistance. American officials spent the next decade fixating on Saddam, said to be the source of all the woes afflicting that part of the world. In the meantime, a more genuinely dangerous adversary was gravitating to Afghanistan, of all places. By the 1990s, Afghan freedom fighters that Washington had enthusiastically supported in the 1980s were providing sanctuary to violent Islamists who wanted to wage *jihād* against the United States, primarily in retribution for sins committed under the aegis of the Carter Doctrine. Only with the events of 9/11 did Americans awaken—albeit only briefly—to the fact that efforts to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet Vietnam had produced poison fruit. When the Soviets

announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan back in 1989, the CIA station chief in Pakistan sent Washington a two-word cable: "We won." By September 2001, events were calling that verdict into question.

So at the behest of President George W. Bush, the Carter Doctrine once again underwent a subtle transformation. No longer did the waters of the Persian Gulf define its scope. U.S. ambitions after 9/11 widened to encompass the Greater Middle East, a newly invented geographic expression that included the very place the Soviet empire had run aground. As the wheel of history turned, Afghanistan once again found itself positioned to determine the fate of empires.

As if responding to some cosmic imperative, the best minds in Washington proceeded to devise policies incorporating all the worst features of the Soviet policies that had hurtled the Soviet Union toward self-destruction. The Bush administration committed U.S. troops to what quickly became a costly, open-ended war, beginning in Afghanistan, then shifting to Iraq, then reverting in the Obama era back to Afghanistan. Like the Politburo of olden days, our political elites remain oblivious to the possibility that the real threats to the American empire might be internal: an economy in shambles and basic institutions wallowing in dysfunction. The conviction that "victory" in Afghanistan will make things right grips Washington with the same intensity that once gripped Moscow—and with as little justification.

Spooked by a nonexistent Soviet threat to Persian Gulf oil back in 1980, the United States committed itself to a course that in the years since has metasized into a gargantuan enterprise that vaguely aims at remaking the entire Greater Middle East. In a supreme irony,

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It is not a good time to be working in intelligence. CIA lawyers have advised that many officers should avoid traveling through Europe as pending court cases in Italy, Spain, and Germany could mean they are detained at airports and prosecuted for war crimes. Back at home, the Agency is bracing for a purge that could make the Frank Church hearings of 1973 look like a walk in the park. Some officers involved in "enhanced interrogations" have now decided to stay in government rather than retire to protect themselves against lawsuits, as government employees cannot be sued. There is a consensus that the Obama administration and the Pelosi Congress will use the Agency as a punching bag to keep the memory of Bush administration malfeasance fresh. The recent transfer of control over naming chiefs of station to the office of the director of national intelligence is being seen as a major blow, stripping the Agency of its *raison d'être*. A bizarre column, "What the CIA Hid From Congress," by Congresswoman Jane Harman, which appeared in the *LA Times* on July 25, is regarded as a harbinger of things to come. The article claims that the CIA concealed aspects of the so-called "Terrorist Surveillance Program." Harman, who blames the intelligence community for outing her connections to an Israeli spy, knows that the program was run by the National Security Agency, not the CIA, but her opinion piece leaves no doubt that a rogue CIA has been running around lying to everyone in sight. She describes how crafty Agency briefers misled her and other gullible representatives over the legal status of programs. If she had not been deceived, apparently she would have done the right thing and demanded an end to the illegal activity.



Metrics run the war in Afghanistan. The State Department has teams in every province in Afghanistan that is safe to travel in, all wildly compiling data to demonstrate what is happening and why. But the mass of numbers may have little relationship to what is taking place on the ground. Metrics cannot, for example, easily determine how much of the countryside is under Taliban control after dark. Such reports can predict that victory is just around the corner even when it is not. And while metrics appeal to audiences used to PowerPoint presentations, the intelligence community is seeing something different. A picture is emerging of creeping Taliban control, including inside the major cities, combined with growing popular hostility toward eight years of American occupation. Analysts note that little is known about the situation in neighboring Pakistan, a safe haven and recruiting ground for insurgents. Gen. Stanley McChrystal's clear, hold, and build strategy is only viable if the clearing is based on good intelligence to root out insurgents and does not involve killing the rest of the population. Analysts know that such intelligence does not exist, and they believe that it probably cannot be developed.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow with the American Conservative Defense Alliance.