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“ONE MAJOR STEP SHORT OF WAR”
JIMMY CARTER, THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN, AND THE LAST
CHAPTER OF THE COLD WAR

A Thesis
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the foreign policy of Jimmy Carter and his Administration in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The study is based on newly declassified documents from the Jimmy Carter Presidential in Atlanta, Georgia as well as published material by and about Jimmy Carter.

The thesis challenges the popular caricatures of Jimmy Carter, that he was ineffective in matters of foreign policy and that he was largely concerned with establishing a legacy as a peacemaker. The thesis contends that Jimmy Carter was a much more cunning Cold Warrior than his detractors give him credit for and that the shift in American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union largely credited to Ronald Reagan actually began with the Carter Administration.

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Chapter One – Introduction

Introduction

During his four years as president, Jimmy Carter witnessed continual upheaval in the remote country of Afghanistan. For much of his term, Carter's administration simply monitored events in the region, as they did not significantly affect American foreign policy or the country's interests. Few people in the administration saw Afghanistan as a place of consequence and even fewer anticipated that it would remain on the world's center stage almost three decades later.

As Christmas of 1979 approached, Afghanistan was not foremost in the thoughts of Jimmy Carter and his administration. Events of December 1979, however, irrevocably changed Afghanistan's status when the Soviet Union invaded the small country at its southern border, beginning a struggle that would last for ten years. The invasion of Afghanistan would be the issue that forced the United States to reconsider its foreign policy and rethink the way it fought the Cold War.

This thesis will demonstrate that Carter's response to events in Afghanistan suggests that he was a more cunning Cold Warrior than both his critics and supporters recognize. Furthermore, this thesis will refute the popular caricatures of Carter as either a naïve leader or an impotent Commander-in-Chief. Finally, this thesis will show that the final stage of the Cold War began with Carter's actions and reactions to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, rather than with the words and deeds of his Republican successors.

Prior to the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan, Carter and previous presidents had preached détente, seeking a peaceful coexistence between the United States and the

USSR. Indeed, the cornerstone of Jimmy Carter's plan for fighting the Cold War was the SALT II (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) treaty that was mired in the Senate as 1979 came to an end. A former warrior, Carter sought peace, a world absent of the tensions present since the end of the Second World War. He did not see the Soviet Union as an immediate threat and treated it accordingly, not as an ever-present enemy.

The invasion of Afghanistan changed Carter's outlook overnight. The Soviet Union quickly established itself as an imminently dangerous adversary once again. The United States renewed a more aggressive policy for fighting the Cold War. Gone were SALT II and other peaceful diplomatic overtures, replaced by harsher rhetoric and foreign policy that sought to curtail Soviet initiatives. Carter no longer sought to work in relative harmony with the world's other superpower.

United States foreign policy underwent a drastic facelift as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Many historians see Ronald Reagan and his henchmen as the inventors of these changes, some even crediting him as the architect of American victory in the Cold War. Carter is often incorrectly viewed as the well-meaning but ultimately weak and ineffective leader Reagan portrayed him as during the campaign of 1980. Carter lost his bid for re-election largely because voters did not believe he provided the active leadership America needed to face the future. Reagan was viewed as the cure for this general feeling of malaise.

Contrary to this common belief, most of the changes credited to Reagan did not originate from his administration. Jimmy Carter had a full year to alter American foreign policy in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion. He did not idly sit by and watch the United

States lose ground in the Cold War. By the time Reagan ascended to the presidency, America's course had already been charted.

Timeline

Jimmy Carter devoted most of the January 23, 1980 State of the Union address to the recent Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, calling it “the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War.”¹ The Soviet offensive was less than a month old although the United States had indifferently noted the Soviet military presence for much longer. Afghanistan and its government had undergone a series of upheavals in the years leading up to the Soviet invasion but the United States hardly lifted a finger in response.

Although events could be traced back infinitely, for practical reasons, they began in 1973 when Mohammed Zahir Shah, the last Afghan king, was overthrown by his first cousin and brother-in-law Mohammed Daoud Kahn, who disbanded the monarchy and declared himself president of Afghanistan. Shah had been in power since 1933 and was known for bringing relative progress to the country, often placing him at odds with his religious opposition. He remained overseas, where he was at the time of his overthrow, until 2002 when he returned with a warm welcome to an Afghanistan controlled by the United States.

Mohammed Daoud Kahn assumed power in July 1973 and continued the comparatively progressive tendencies of his deposed cousin. While he did favor expanded rights for women, he was, on the other hand, ruthless towards both his religious

¹ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 194-200.

and leftist opponents. During his reign, he did not align Afghanistan with either the United States or the USSR, preferring to act strictly in what he considered to be the best interests of his country.

The leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized control of the Afghanistan government and murdered Mohammed Daoud Kahn on April 27, 1978. Noor Mohammed Taraki took the reigns of the government. If the United States took more than a passing interest in the situation, it was to quietly support the religious fundamentalists that now provided the main opposition to the PDPA.

Taraki tried to enforce leftist reforms on a country not amenable to centralized government and further social reforms on a country deeply rooted in Islamic culture. Naturally, he sought the Soviet Union's help. Purportedly because he could not control his religious opposition, he was overthrown by his rival, Hafizullah Amin, and allegedly smothered with a pillow in October 1979.

Amin remained the head of Afghanistan until the Soviet Union invaded in 1979 and killed him on the 27th of December. Known for brutality, Amin rigorously pursued his opposition. The Soviets supported Amin's objective but believed he was only destabilizing the country. The USSR invaded and installed Babrak Karmal as Afghanistan's leader. Now the United States could no longer publicly avoid the issue of Afghanistan.

As the USSR's chosen leader, Karmal never enjoyed the support of nations outside of the Soviet Bloc. He, and the Soviets, could never consolidate power within the country as well, opposed by Islamic fundamentalists and other anti-leftist factions. If it had not officially started, the civil war that would plague Afghanistan for most of its

distant future began. Before the Soviet Union withdrew its troops almost a decade later, one million Afghans were killed, three million disabled, and five million were refugees, totaling roughly half of the population.

Jimmy Carter condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. His administration had been willing to let Afghanistan solve its own disputes, tolerating any government as long as it did not openly align itself with the USSR. Carter was also willing to accept Soviet activity as long as it did not overtly challenge the newly established *détente* between America and the Soviets. The invasion threatened the stability Carter sought, forcing him to quickly adapt to the rapidly changing reality of the Cold War. His reactions set the tone for the remainder of the Cold War.

Historiography

The scholarship on Jimmy Carter is naturally limited, as he is less than three decades removed from office and still occasionally making headlines. Much of the writing is by journalists and not trained historians, lending it a less objective and more polarized feel. One way or another, all of Carter's literary examiners form a strong opinion of his record, if not his character.

Even less is written on Carter's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The available literature is limited to a few paragraphs or, at best, a few chapters of larger studies of his presidency or the era in general. What little a writer says about Carter's record on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan almost exactly mirrors his or her image of the president's larger body of work.

For starters, many administration insiders have written books on Carter's presidency. Naturally, his cabinet members have mostly praise for his efforts, as they were directly involved in the process. Perhaps the most extensive writer on foreign policy in the administration, Zbigniew Brzezinski, ends his account, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, by cataloging several pages of Carter's positive accomplishments and stating, "The list speaks for itself. And it guarantees that President Carter will be appraised more generously by posterity than he was by the electorate in 1980."²

If Brzezinski faulted Carter for anything, it was his tendency to be a micromanager. In his memoirs, he says of Carter, "He told me in an icy fashion that I just want to be involved in everything." Indeed, many members of the administration echoed this sentiment, as do historians, who base their judgment on this fact and the vast volume of paperwork that Carter insisted pass his desk.³

In his record, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, Carter assumes partial responsibility for some of his failures, claiming, "There is no doubt that I could have done some things better." On the other hand, he blames Congress for its intractability and special interest groups that hounded Washington and stifled any genuine interest that fellow politicians had for America's needs. He claimed, for example, "I found through bitter experience, however, that any tax proposal – including our welfare and tax reform packages – attracted to Capitol Hill a pack of powerful and ravenous wolves, determined to secure for themselves additional benefits at the expense of other Americans. Whenever

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 528-529.

³ Ibid., 71.

tax measures were considered, we found ourselves fortunate if we left Congress with the same hide we wore in. It was perennial temptation for Congress to pass tax legislation that was a Christmas tree full of goodies for special interests.” Carter absolves himself of much of the blame, claiming, “As soon as I left office, the special interests were successful in implementing proposals far worse than those which had been considered by Congress while I was President.”⁴

As for the less partial scholarship, much of the literature finds little positive in Carter’s four years as president. The harshest critics characterize Carter as inept, an outsider who never figured out how to maneuver among the politicians of Washington or how to lead America. Betty Glad, for example, sees Carter as a failure because he could not comprehend or provide the “moral direction” America needed. In *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House*, she briefly mentions his inability to “meet the challenge” of the Soviet invasion. In *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist*, Kenneth Morris sees Carter as weak, “best remembered for alerting Americans to their festering malaise, only to prove incapable of addressing it.” Written at a later date for the purpose of synthesizing previous writings, Burton Kaufman’s *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* finds Carter’s harshest critics to be “justified” in their assessment of his administration. He cites Carter’s actions as the cause of “a mediocre, if not a failed, presidency.”⁵

⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 88-89, 92.

⁵ Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980), 505, 507; Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 320; Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 3.

Some writers see Carter as a failure for other reasons. For example, Laurence Shoup, in *The Carter Presidency and Beyond: Power and Politics in the 1980s*, cites Carter's ties to the Trilateral Commission as having negatively affected his appointments and, subsequently, his policy. In his classic *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, Howard Zinn states, "Carter, despite a few gestures toward black people and the poor, despite talk of 'human rights' abroad, remained within the historic political boundaries of the American system, protecting corporate wealth and power, maintaining a huge military machine that drained the national wealth, allying the United States with right-wing tyrannies abroad."⁶

Many observers who label Carter inept preface their judgment with the notion that, at least, he deserves credit for his admirable intentions. Despite once claiming that "Carter never really got a fair shake," Henry Kissinger claimed in his voluminous *Diplomacy* that Carter's righteousness occasionally threatened his policies. In *The Carter Implosion: Jimmy Carter and the Amateur Style of Diplomacy*, Donald Spencer sees Carter as naively utopian but thoroughly lacking any understanding of political reality; he promised greatness but offered only retreat. Edwin Diamond and Bruce Mazlish come to a similar conclusion in their psychological study *Jimmy Carter: A Character Portrait*, admiring Carter's moral fiber while deeming it unfit for national leadership. In his work *In the Absence of Power: Governing America*, Haynes Johnson admires Carter's integrity, acknowledges his failures, and wonders if the task of bringing morality to politics might have been impossible. Clark Mollenhoff's *The President Who Failed:*

⁶ Laurence Shoup, *The Carter Presidency and Beyond: Power and Politics in the 1980s* (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1979); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2003), 565.

Carter out of Control views Carter as idealistic in rhetoric but hypocritical in reality, failing to keep any of his campaign promises. In *James Earl Carter: The Man and the Myth*, Peter Meyer sees the same failure to fulfill promises but views Carter as having too many different and incompatible sides.⁷

One author's analysis sees Carter's failures as emanating from his methods, not his character. In *Foreign Policy Under Carter: Testing Multiple Advocacy Decision Making*, Alexander Moens sees Carter's failure as resting not in his idealism but in his decision-making process. He was too limited in his options by the fact that he consulted only a select group of close associates.⁸

Of those who see Carter as a noble failure, some claim history will be kind to him. In *Jimmy Carter, Public Opinion, and the Search for Values*, Gregory Domin argues that Carter favored integrity over expediency in politics and, while this may have made him immediately unpopular, Carter has gained respect in hindsight and the world is a better place for his efforts. Douglas Brinkley's *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* sees Carter's morality as his "greatest strength and bane," having produced good and tragic results that Americans will appreciate in hindsight as Carter continues to work for peace and justice.⁹

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 772; Donald S. Spencer, *The Carter Implosion: Jimmy Carter and the Amateur Style of Diplomacy* (New York: Praeger, 1988), ix; Edwin Diamond and Bruce Mazlish, *Jimmy Carter: A Character Portrait* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Haynes Johnson, *In the Absence of Power: Governing America* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980); Clark R. Mollenhoff, *The President Who Failed: Carter Out of Control* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980); Peter Meyer, *James Earl Carter: The Man and the Myth* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1978).

⁸ Alexander Moens, *Foreign Policy Under Carter: Testing Multiple Advocacy Decision Making* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

⁹ Gregory Paul Domin, *Jimmy Carter, Public Opinion, and the Search for Values, 1977-1981* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003); Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Viking, 1998), 6-7.

Many historians see Carter's failure as partially caused by the volatile times in which he was president. Charles Jones views Carter as a moralist in *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress*, elected to provide his brand of leadership in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Unfortunately for Carter, the country's mood shifted and his style was no longer wanted or popular. While recognizing both positive and negative aspects of his presidency, Erwin Hargrove's *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of Public Good* sees Carter as the "perfect match" for the years of his service; any failures of Carter were also a product of the general American malaise of the time. In "Jimmy Carter: Crisis of Confidence," Peter Carroll blames Carter for his hesitant nature but also claims Congress stifled much of his momentum.¹⁰

Some writers who claim Carter's failures were a product of his time now see him in a more favorable light. In *Comparing Presidential Behavior: Carter, Reagan, and the Macho Presidential Style*, John Orman says Carter should not be blamed for the circumstances of his presidency that would have been hard for any president to face. He should be remembered for his positive achievements, not the failures that were inevitable. Timothy Maga's *The World of Jimmy Carter: U.S. Foreign Policy, 1977-1981* sees the

¹⁰ Charles O. Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of Public Good* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 193; Peter Carroll, "Jimmy Carter: Crisis of Confidence." In *America since 1945*, ed. David Bruner and Robert D. Marcus (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

Carter presidency as marked by sincerely bad luck, acknowledging that he did the best he could.¹¹

A few writers who dismiss negative aspects of Carter's record to outside forces claim that the administration looks better in hindsight. In *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency*, Peter Bourne claims that outside circumstances defeated Carter and that he receives "little credit for managing those difficult times and for healing the nation after a period of profound trauma." Gary Fink and Hugh Davis Graham make a similar argument in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* but add that this improvement in public standing is a product of collective memory. John Dumbrell's *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation* argues that Carter's human rights record is vindicated with time, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. Brinkley's *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey beyond the White House* and Robert Gates' *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* claim that Carter's emphasis on human rights helped end the Cold War, that he was the first president to challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet's rule at home and that this encouraged dissidents to eventually overturn the communist system. In "What's Important to Remember about Jimmy Carter," Martin Walker states, "Americans should recall the steel beneath the gentleness; the real historical legacy of Jimmy Carter is [as] one of the men who won the Cold War."¹²

¹¹ John M. Orman, *Comparing Presidential Behavior: Carter, Reagan, and the Macho Presidential Style* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Timothy P. Maga, *The World of Jimmy Carter: U.S. Foreign Policy, 1977-1981* (West Haven: University of New Haven Press, 1994).

¹² Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 7; Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham, *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the*

Some writers take the opinion that Carter had decidedly different phases of his presidency. In *The Presidency and Domestic Policies of Jimmy Carter*, while arguing that Carter has been unfairly judged “for failing to pull off the impossible,” Herbert Rosenbaum and Alexej Ugrinsky further claim that a marked shift in Carter’s outlook can be seen after the Iranian hostage crisis and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Jerel Rosati’s *The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and their Impact on Behavior* claims that Carter’s inexperience led to the early naivety and false optimism that swiftly ended. In *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*, Gaddis Smith, while claiming Carter failed because of bad luck and naivety, sees the same change in the administration as Rosati, although he claims any alterations in policy were reluctant and only done out of necessity.¹³

The vast majority of historical writing on Carter was published in the immediate wake of his years in office. Subsequent writing has done nothing to further vindicate or demonize Carter. He remains either loved or hated, his actions likewise praised or condemned, his character either celebrated or viewed as a liability. The events of his presidency are still seen by some as beyond his control. Others see the same events as evidence of his weakness. As for any shifts in his thinking or actions, a closer examination of his record shows that Carter came into office with solid beliefs and that

Post-New Deal Era (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter’s Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Viking, 1998); Robert Michael Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Martin Walker, “What’s Important to Remember about Jimmy Carter.” *Washington Post*, National weekly edition, 27 June – 3 July 1994.

¹³ Herbert D. Rosenbaum and Alexej Ugrinsky, *The Presidency and Domestic Policies of Jimmy Carter* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 16, 210; Jerel Rosati, *The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community: Beliefs and their Impact on Behavior* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

he did not stray from them despite the volatility of world events and the constant pressure to act more rashly. And in the end, his quiet resolve impacted America and the world for much longer than his four years in office, setting the stage for the coming decades. After all, Carter was never interested in what was politically popular at a given moment. He sought to create a lasting, better world for Americans and people of all nations.

Chapter Two – Actions

A Peacemaker?

Jimmy Carter is most commonly viewed as a peacemaker, despite his graduation from the United States Naval Academy and subsequent seven years of military service. While his post-presidential career has arguably been more productive, Carter worked tirelessly for his visions of world harmony as president. If his four years as head of state have one distinguishing theme, it was a sincere desire for peace on a global scale. His most notable achievement in office might very well be the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. Carter certainly believed it was.¹⁴

Carter's rhetoric sought an absence of conflict, something he believed his predecessors had unfortunately neglected. This was his intention from the very beginning. In his Inaugural Address, he stated, "When my time as your President has ended...I would hope that the nations of the world might say that we had built a lasting peace, based not on weapons of war but on international policies which reflect our own most precious values."¹⁵

Carter's rhetoric did not abandon these values once in office. In an often quoted speech given at the University of Notre Dame's 1977 graduation, he stated, "For too many years we've been willing to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our own values for theirs. We've fought fire

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), xiv.

¹⁵ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1977), Jimmy Carter, 1977, 1-4.

with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water. This approach failed, with Vietnam the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty.”¹⁶

Carter’s foreign policy not only sought the absence of destructive conflict, it ideally sought to protect the rights of all the world’s citizens. In the same commencement speech he claimed, “I believe we can have a foreign policy that is democratic, that is based on fundamental values, and that uses power and influence, which we have, for humane purposes.” He believed that the United States was the most influential nation on earth but that this authority came with inherent responsibilities, duties his predecessors had abandoned. He later explained his views, stating, “There is no more powerful force for peace than the United States of America – a beacon for freedom and for human rights, committed to world peace for all, and strong militarily. And our military power today is second to none on Earth, and as long as I am President and share this commitment of the American people, the United States will stay this way.”¹⁷

On the other hand, Carter did not seek harmony at any cost. He refused to give up crucial American interests in the name of peace. While he did not see war as the best option to secure American welfare, he was not opposed to military action, once stating, “The Soviet Union can choose either confrontation or cooperation. The United States is adequately prepared to meet either choice.” He further explained his views, “Our country has been one that does commit itself to the preservation of peace, but peace through strength, not weakness. That has been our policy. That will still be our policy.” He

¹⁶ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1977), Jimmy Carter, 1977, 954-962.

¹⁷ Ibid.; U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 577-579.

backed up such rhetoric by advocating increased military spending, though he hoped such a measure would be preventative.¹⁸

If Carter subscribed to a modern version of Theodore Roosevelt's theory that the United States must "Speak softly and carry a big stick," he sincerely hoped the stick would never be used. Indeed, he displayed a quote by Thomas Jefferson in the Oval Office that stated, "I have the consolation to reflect that during the period of my administration not a drop of blood of a single citizen was shed by the sword of war." His goal was to be able to say the same as he left office and, except for the eight servicemen killed during the failed rescue attempt of the American hostages in Iran, he did.¹⁹

In dealing with the Soviet Union, Carter first and foremost sought a peaceful coexistence with the world's other superpower. Rather than spewing belligerent rhetoric, Carter sought a lessening of the seemingly imbedded tensions. The cornerstone of his efforts was SALT II, negotiations with the Soviet Union to reduce nuclear weapons. Indeed Jimmy Carter came to an agreement with his Soviet counterpart, Leonid Brezhnev, on June 18, 1979. World events would table the agreement before the year's end and severely test Jimmy Carter's commitment to peace.

The Invasion that Changed Everything

In his memoirs, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski claims to have broken the news of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to Carter. He states, "At 6 p.m. on

¹⁸ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1978), Jimmy Carter, 1978, 1052-1057; U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 111-112.

¹⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 604.

Christmas Day I called the President at Camp David to inform him the Soviets had made their move... the stalemated relationship became openly antagonistic.” A hot, new battle in the Cold War had begun.²⁰

The Carter Administration publicly claimed to have been monitoring events in Afghanistan since March of 1979 although, in his memoirs, Carter claims it was May of 1979. When asked by the media in March, Carter stated, “We are concerned that the Soviets might play an excessive role there in trying to interfere with the internal affairs of Afghanistan.” The administration then watched a steady flow of Soviet military advisers and other supplemental forces enter the country. Still, Carter later stated, “We did not anticipate the Soviets’ move into Afghanistan. This is a radical departure from the policy and actions of the Soviet Union ever since the Second World War.”²¹

Perhaps National Security Advisor Brzezinski is best suited to establish a timeline, as his position expected him to keep Carter informed of world events. He certainly wrote more extensively on the matter than anyone else in the administration. Furthermore, based on the available documents and historiography, Brzezinski dominated the administration’s foreign policy much more than anyone in the State Department, to include Secretary of State Cyrus Vance who would soon resign from his position. Brzezinski claims that Carter was aware of the situation from an early date, even stating that in 1977 Carter was apprised of the situation from an unusual source, the soon to be deposed Shah of Iran, perhaps acting in his own best interest. In his memoirs, Brzezinski

²⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 353.

²¹ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1979), Jimmy Carter, 1979, 557-566; U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 329-332.

states, “The Shah was extremely wary of Soviet designs on Afghanistan, and during his 1977 visit to Washington he spent a good portion of the presentation to President Carter in the Cabinet Room of the White House expounding the shared American-Iranian interest in protecting Afghanistan’s genuine neutrality. A strong Iran, backed by the United States, was clearly in a position to make a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan both more costly and internationally dangerous.”²²

Brzezinski reconstructs a precise timeline for the Soviet buildup and invasion: “My notes show... that I brought this issue up several times in late March and early April, and that in early May 1979 I warned the President that the Soviets would be in a position, if they came to dominate Afghanistan, to promote a separate Baluchistan, which would give them access to the Indian Ocean while dismembering Pakistan and Iran. I also reminded the President of Russia’s traditional push to the south, and briefed him specifically on Moscow’s proposal to Hitler in late 1940 that the Nazis recognize the Soviet claim to preeminence in the region south of Batum and Baku. The President then instructed Vance to have the State Department brief all of Afghanistan’s neighbors on the situation... In April of 1979, I pushed a decision through the SCC [Special Coordination Committee] to be more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country’s independence... On July 23, I warned the President that the Soviets would probably unseat Prime Minister Amin, since Amin’s Communist terror tactics were proving counterproductive... By early September, the situation had become sufficiently

²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 356.

grave for the President to ask me to prepare contingency options in the event of an overt Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.”²³

Newly declassified White House documents reconstruct a similar timeline. The United States was conscious of Soviet action in Afghanistan more than a year before the invasion officially started. As early as November 3, 1978 the United States was aware of the growing Soviet presence in Afghanistan. The mention of this presence to Carter was little more than a factual statement.²⁴

The next mention of the Soviet presence came on March 28, 1979. A White House memorandum said, “Numerous intelligence reports have indicated Soviet support and assistance for the Afghans in meeting their present internal crisis.” Still, the Carter Administration expressed little concern.²⁵

In Afghanistan, Taraki, backed by Moscow, felt he was losing control of his reign. His fears were well-founded as he had merely half a year left in power. The Soviets began sending a steadily increasing stream of military advisers, much like the United States had done in Vietnam under John F. Kennedy.²⁶

The United States realized early on that the Soviets might feel pressured into acting by unraveling events in Afghanistan. A report from Brzezinski to Carter that autumn stated, “If the recent events precipitate a further crisis and if Soviet military personnel already in the Kabul area prove inadequate in a deteriorating situation,

²³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 427.

²⁴ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 3 November 1978, “Weekly Reports (to the President), 71-81: (9:78-12/78)” folder, Box 42, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, 1972-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁵ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-6-1-2-3-9, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁶ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-13-6-6-7-8, Jimmy Carter Library.

Moscow will be faced with the decision it probably prefers to avoid: whether or not to escalate the level of intervention.” Though they obviously would not condone such an action, the administration conceded that Moscow might feel backed into a corner and act militarily if that was the only solution they deemed practical.²⁷

On September 14, 1979 the administration realized Soviet action might be forthcoming. A report from CIA Director Stansfield Turner said, “The Soviet leaders may be on the threshold of a decision to commit their own forces to prevent the collapse of the Taraki regime and protect their sizable stake in Afghanistan.” The administration knew what was happening. Given Carter’s reputation as a micromanager, he certainly must have known all available facts. Perhaps he and his staff merely believed the CIA was presenting a worst case scenario. Whether the Carter administration believed the news to be alarmist or not, they were advised of the near inevitability of Soviet action in Afghanistan to protect their perceived interests.²⁸

A few days later, the question was asked in the White House, “What Are the Soviets Doing in Afghanistan?” The answer: “Simply, we don’t know. Speculation is, however, intriguing. Most likely, the Soviets have just been pushed a big step nearer to their moment of truth in Afghanistan. In this game of ‘Ten Little Afghans,’ there is now only one left... Whatever the Soviet role in this, they should be made to look as if they had a hand in the operation.” Though the thought in some circles was that Soviet action

²⁷ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-12-5-6-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁸ Memo, Stansfield Turner to National Security Council, 14 September 1979, “Afghanistan: 4/70-4/80” folder, Box 1, Records of the Office of the National Security Adviser (Carter Administration), 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

was inevitable, the consensus did not expect an imminent invasion. Still, the administration was advised of the potential for exploiting the situation.²⁹

Shortly thereafter, the Carter Administration was made aware of possible Soviet intentions. A CIA report claimed, “Soviet Ambassador Puzanov in Kabul has acknowledged that President Brezhnev discussed the eventual removal of Amin when he met with Taraki in Moscow last week.” Amin was the second most powerful politician in Afghanistan at this point but had designs on still more power. Before Taraki and Moscow could remove him, Amin struck and assumed control of Afghanistan. Taraki was smothered with a pillow and the Soviets faced a regime not to their liking. Their presence in Afghanistan escalated.³⁰

Reports in October simply confirmed the expanding Soviet presence in Afghanistan. While the administration did not express public concern over the matter, they privately kept their eyes on the situation. As time went on, however, events in Afghanistan took a back seat to the new hostage crisis in Iran.³¹

Still, the Carter administration did not completely forget Afghanistan. Realizing that the situation in Afghanistan might be spinning out of control, an October 4, 1979 report from Brzezinski to Carter stated, “A de facto Soviet military intervention may well be the case.”³²

²⁹ Memo, Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, 17 September 1979, “Afghanistan: 4/70-4/80” folder, Box 1, Records of the Office of the National Security Adviser (Carter Administration), 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁰ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-23-61-2-10-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

³¹ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to The Director, Internal Communications Agency, 4 October 1979, “Afghanistan: 4/70-4/80” folder, Box 1, Records of the Office of the National Security Adviser (Carter Administration), 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

³² Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-12-6-12-8, Jimmy Carter Library.

While the United States was not completely idle in responding to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, they were not overtly vocal in their objections. According to press guidance, the White House privately expressed their concerns to the Soviets on December 11, 1979 through acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher.³³

The Soviets were not listening. They had already committed to action. A summary of events in Afghanistan distributed to White House staff claimed the Soviets had made up their minds to invade at least a month in advance. The unclassified report read, “The final Soviet Politburo-level decision to invade was probably made in late November or early December. This would have been around the time of the 28 November Central Committee Plenum.”³⁴

Regardless of the specific timeline, the Carter Administration claimed to have been fully aware of the growing Soviet presence in Afghanistan as it happened. Carter stated in an interview, “We did have adequate intelligence prior to the Soviet’s action in Afghanistan. We knew about the degree of their buildup.” Carter even claimed in the same interview that “deep concerns” were “expressed directly and forcefully to the Soviet Union,” referring to Christopher’s mission.

Still, the administration did not anticipate a full scale invasion. Carter claimed, “We did not know ahead of time that they would have a massive invasion of Afghanistan.” This was not necessarily due to a lapse of intelligence. He stated, “There was no way to anticipate that they would actually invade Afghanistan.” The

³³ Press Guidance, 12 December 1979, “Soviets in Afghanistan” folder, Box 79, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁴ The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 31 January 1980, “Soviets in Afghanistan” folder, Box 78, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

administration predicted the increasing Soviet buildup but never believed the Soviets would directly invade Afghanistan.³⁵

If the Carter administration had been privately concerned with events in Afghanistan, they did not publicly acknowledge this information. On February 22, 1979, the administration announced that they were cutting almost all aid to Afghanistan in light of recent shifts to a more socialist government. This was the only public reference to Afghanistan in the year before the Soviet invasion and was hardly alarmist as it did not mention any perceived threat to American interests.³⁶

The administration first publicly addressed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on January 2, 1980 although it said little on the matter except that the issue would be addressed in full in the coming days. The administration's first tangible reaction to the invasion came the next day when Carter withdrew the SALT II treaty from consideration in the Senate.

On January 4, 1980, Carter addressed the nation, saying, "Massive Soviet military forces have invaded the small, nonaligned, sovereign nation of Afghanistan, which had hitherto not been an occupied satellite of the Soviet Union... attempting to conquer the fiercely independent Muslim people of that country." Carter explained that the Soviets, who Brzezinski later accused of being drunk when issuing the order to invade, claimed to have been invited by the Afghan government to help quell an international threat. Carter scoffed at the idea, pointing out that the President of Afghanistan, who had supposedly asked for help, had been assassinated. Carter then explained the importance of

³⁵ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 239-244.

³⁶ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1979), Jimmy Carter, 1979, 310.

Afghanistan, saying that the Soviet invasion was a threat to the region's stabilization and that the country was "a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world's oil supplies." Carter never claimed that the country was significant on its own, only that it affected the larger balance of power, literally and symbolically. He concluded by stating, "History teaches, perhaps, very few clear lessons. But surely one such lesson learned by the world at great cost is that aggression, unopposed, becomes a contagious disease." The case was being made for the American response.³⁷

In a conversation with Brzezinski, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin claimed that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan out of necessity and not greed. He stated "that the Soviets had no intention of moving into Afghanistan but the deteriorating situation gave them no choice." To protect their perceived interests, the Soviets believed they had no other option but to act militarily. In a subsequent letter to the White House, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko defended his country's actions in the face of American rhetoric, arguing, "It is clear that an approach whereby the US arbitrarily declares regions of the world thousands of kilometers away from it to be a sphere of its 'vital interests' and reduces everything only to securing its own egoistic interests without wishing to take account of the legitimate interests of others, cannot lead to anything good."³⁸

³⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 92; U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the *Federal Register*, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 21-24.

³⁸ Memo, Leslie G. Denend to Arnie Raphel, 18 March 1980, "Alpha Channel (Miscellaneous) – (1/80-3/80)" folder, Box 20, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library; Letter, Andrei Gromyko to Jimmy Carter, 17 February 1980, "Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)" folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev took a less defensive position in explaining his country's action. As Carter stated in an address to the country, a letter he received from Brezhnev claimed that the government of Afghanistan had requested the Soviet military presence. Carter had a habit of scrawling his reaction to documents in their margins. Near Brezhnev's claim, he sarcastically wrote, "The leaders who 'requested' SU presence were assassinated." Later in the same letter, Brezhnev reiterated, "I must with all certainty stress that the change in the Afghanistani government was the result of the Afghanistanis themselves and only by them. Ask the Afghanistani government itself." Carter scrawled, "They're dead or either new SU puppets." If Brezhnev was correct and the government of Afghanistan asked for their help in maintaining control, they were no longer around to substantiate the claim. If Amin needed the Soviets to protect his rule, events soon ensured the opposite.³⁹

Carter was not alone in questioning the Soviet's reasoning. In a speech to the United Nations Security Council, America's UN Ambassador Donald F. McHenry questioned Brezhnev's claims, claiming they defied logic. He asked, "Are we to believe that President Amin invited Soviet troops to come into Afghanistan in order to oversee his own downfall and his own execution?"⁴⁰

While privately harsh, Carter was more diplomatic in his public assessment of Brezhnev's claims. A reporter asked him, "Well he is lying, isn't he, Mr. President?"

³⁹ Letter, Leonid Brezhnev to Jimmy Carter, 29 December 1979, "U.S.S.R. – Carter / Brezhnev Correspondence: (09/79-02/80)" folder, Box 18, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴⁰ Statement by Ambassador Donald F. McHenry, United States Representative to the United Nations, 6 January 1980, "Soviets in Afghanistan" folder, Box 79, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

Carter refrained from calling Brezhnev a liar but replied, “He is not telling the facts accurately, that is correct.”⁴¹

Later in the same interview, he claimed, “My opinion of the Russians has changed most drastically in the last week, than even the previous two and one-half years before that,” and “This action of the Soviets has made a more dramatic change in my own opinion of what the Soviets’ ultimate goals are to anything they’ve done in the previous time I’ve been in office.” Any chance at continued détente had vanished.⁴²

Still, the Soviet Union continued to justify their presence in Afghanistan by claiming that they were only countering the United States’ meddling in the country. In late February, 1980, Brezhnev claimed, “The United States is loudly demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops but in fact is doing everything to put off this possibility. It is continuing and increasing its interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.” The Soviets pointed to continuing American assistance to anti-communist forces.⁴³

Regardless of alleged Soviet motives and American provocations, four days after initially addressing the nation on the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, Carter addressed the country again and unequivocally stated, “The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War.” He further stated the case for American intervention by claiming, “There is no doubt that the Soviet’s move into Afghanistan, if done without any adverse consequences, would have resulted in the temptation to move again and again until they reached warm water ports or

⁴¹ Interview with the President by Frank Reynolds, 31 December 1979, “Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)” folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Reuters Report, 22 February 1980, “Soviets in Afghanistan” folder, Box 78, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

until they acquired control over a major portion of the world's oil supplies." The United States seldom worried about access to such things and perhaps felt threatened that the Soviet Union might challenge their interests in the future.⁴⁴

He stated that the United States had three options. The first was military action which he saw as inappropriate because it would cause more problems than it solved. The other options were political and economic responses, which he chose to pursue. He did not believe his actions would immediately drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. He simply wanted the Soviets to know that there would necessarily be consequences for their actions.⁴⁵

Carter carefully measured his words for strength when addressing the crisis. While never employing bellicose language, he nonetheless used firm vocabulary although, curiously, he called the Soviet invasion an "intervention" in two press releases in early January, never explaining his choice of vocabulary.⁴⁶

His State of the Union Address of January 23, 1980 certainly minced no words. He repeated the claim that the Soviet invasion was "the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War." When explaining the importance of Afghanistan, he stated of the greater region, "It contains more than two-thirds of the world's exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world's oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a

⁴⁴ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 38-42.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 43.

strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.”⁴⁷

He continued by stating what became known as the Carter Doctrine, “Let our position be absolutely clear: 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.” The line in the sand had been drawn although the address later conceded, “The crises in Iran and Afghanistan have dramatized a very important lesson: Our excessive dependence on foreign oil is a clear and present danger to our Nation’s security.”⁴⁸

The concerns regarding the Soviet presence in Afghanistan did not strictly revolve around oil. Politically, the United States worried about the implications of recent events. A White House spokesman placed the invasion in the larger context of history, claiming, “What is at stake in this situation is not just U.S.-Soviet relations or détente between the East and the West; indeed what is at stake is the rules of international conduct and the law by which all nations, especially the super powers, have an obligation to live by and to observe.”⁴⁹

Privately, Carter knew that the future of interaction between the two superpowers was at stake. The United States could not appear weak, certainly not to the Soviets but also to the rest of the world. In the wake of Vietnam, America’s strength needed to

⁴⁷ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 194-200.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Transcript of Special News Briefing, 17 January 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 1/17/80-1/31/80” folder, Box 36, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

appear credible. Brzezinski advised Carter, “Without firm US action, some of these [non-aligned] countries may draw the conclusion that they have no choice over the long run except to accommodate themselves to Soviet power.”⁵⁰

Carter’s rhetoric did not strictly focus on oil and politics as the reason for American action. He did cite humanitarian concerns for the plans he had proposed and enacted. Continually juxtaposing an atheist Soviet Union with a deeply religious Afghanistan, Carter identified with the Moslem cause. He never claimed that the invasion was meant to be an attack on Islam, but he suggested that it was a de facto assault. Allying America with the world of Islam, he stated, “We believe that there are no irreconcilable differences between us and any Islamic nation. We respect the faith of Islam, and we are ready to cooperate with all Moslem countries.”⁵¹

In a later speech, Carter addressed the human rights issue again, speaking of the invasion’s “appalling inhumanity.” He explained, “The Soviet Union is violating human standards in the grossest kind of way. Hundreds of Afghan freedom fighters are dying every week, some in brutal mass executions. Entire villages are being wiped out. More than 800,000 people have fled the country. Terror tactics, including the use of chemical weapons, are the trademark of the ruthless attempt to crush Moslem resistance and to install a Soviet form of peace – a peace of brutal armed suppression”⁵²

In the weeks following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter’s rhetoric established that the United States would not tolerate the actions of Moscow. Carter

⁵⁰ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 2 January 1980, “Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)” folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵¹ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 194-200.

⁵² U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 634-637.

spelled out the reasons why the United States and the rest of the world could not accept a Soviet-dominated Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Carter devised and implemented a plan of action to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Chapter Three – Reactions

Carter's Reactions

Regardless of the cause for American alarm, whether it was ideological or practical, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caused marked changes in American foreign policy. Carter immediately implemented several measures aimed at making the Soviets rethink their actions.

Carter briefly considered military action against the Soviet Union before dismissing the idea. He later explained his stance, stating, “I think it’s important for us to remember that the best way to deal with a question like Afghanistan is not to send American military forces halfway around the world to fight in a neighboring country, when the Soviets have millions of troops a few miles away. The best way to address those kinds of issues is through moderation, strength, political, diplomatic, and economic means.” Perhaps he also realized that the Soviet Union had more at stake as the situation was in their own backyard.⁵³

Indeed, when a similar situation occurred in Czechoslovakia at the end of the previous decade, when the Soviets used military force to ensure the continuation of Communist rule, military options were not considered prudent. Still, tough measures were necessary. Brzezinski recognized that the response must be historically consistent, warning Carter that, lest he appear weak, he must act similarly and at least as decisively

⁵³ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 2265-2566.

as Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk after the August 20, 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.⁵⁴

With military action against the Soviet Union not an option and the situation not an immediate threat to American borders, Carter sought political and economic means that would create pressure on the Soviets. Believing time to be on America's side, he sought conditions that would "be one major step short of war," a stance firm but not overly jingoist.⁵⁵

First and foremost, Carter sought to isolate the Soviets politically. He denounced their actions and called on other nations to do the same. In time, the United Nations joined together to speak against the Soviet invasion.

Carter did not think that rhetoric alone would drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, which was the desired American resolution of the situation. Even the combined voice of the world would not change the course of recent events. He sought political denunciation to deter any further reckless acts on the part of the Soviets. He stated, "We are not trying to bring the Soviets to their knees; we are not trying to humiliate the Soviet Union. We're trying to let them know that there is a world condemnation of what they have done. If they, with impunity, can take over this adjacent country, then my judgment is they'd be much more tempted to take a further step into Pakistan, Iran, or some adjacent country."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Letter, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 29 December 1979, "Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)" folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 597.

⁵⁶ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 329-332.

Carter further compared the situation with World War II, implying that events might spiral into another World War if not properly handled. While such a comparison might today look unfounded, Carter considered that the Soviets might be at a similar stage as Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. He did not know if the invasion was a prelude to larger war or an end in itself. Either way, he did not want the world's weakness to create another disaster. Carter warned, "Winston Churchill once called World War II the unnecessary war, because the Allies did not stand up to aggression until it was too late. We cannot allow another such mistake."⁵⁷

Tangibly, this meant not seeking peace without regard to cost. SALT II was Carter's cherished hope for the future but he quickly scrapped its outlook, withdrawing the signed treaty for consideration in the Senate. Although the measure was personally dear to him, he did not want to bargain with the Soviets regardless of the actions they took. Such continuation of negotiations would appear as appeasement or conciliation of power.

Carter's reactions did not simply mean that current negotiations for peace were scrapped. It also meant that the posture of war had to be adopted to prevent further Soviet military excursions. Because of this, Carter sought additional foreign military bases, specific to the current threat in Afghanistan. America's military presence was extended into the Middle East and into the North Indian Ocean.

Carter also reinstituted the Selective Service. He was clear that he did not expect to implement a draft. Instead, he only sought to make the conditions easier, should the

⁵⁷ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 577-579.

situation present itself. He later stated, “We did not need to draft young people to serve in the armed forces, but it was necessary to register them, so that we could mobilize more rapidly if the need should arise.”⁵⁸

Carter realized that America wasn’t the only country that needed military strengthening. He specifically feared that the Soviet Union’s next target might be Iran or Pakistan. Iran was not on friendly terms with the United States so military aid to the Ayatollah was out of the question. Pakistan was on more solid political ground and reaped the benefits of American financial and military aid. Carter met with Pakistani officials on January 12, 1980 to discuss possible options. Pakistani President Mohammed Zia quickly became an ally.

Carter sought more than political and carefully measured military responses to the crisis in Afghanistan. He also implemented several economic measures, designed to put pressure on the Soviet Union. Most controversially, Carter halted grain sales to the Soviets. All trade in high technology was suspended. He also denied fishing rights to the Soviets in American waters. Cultural exchanges between the two superpowers were also restricted.

Carter took heat from both Republicans and Democrats for his economic embargoes, chiefly the halt on grain sales. Senator Bob Dole stated, “Carter took a poke at the Soviet bear and knocked out the American farmer.” Presidential hopeful Edward Kennedy stabbed, “A weak foreign policy can’t be redeemed by suddenly getting tough on farmers.”

⁵⁸ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 492.

Perhaps the most visible American reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games held in Moscow. Carter issued an ultimatum that Soviet troops be withdrawn from Afghanistan by February 20, 1980 or the United States would lead a boycott of that summer's events. Sixty-four teams joined the United States in the eventual boycott, most notably West Germany, Canada, Japan, and the People's Republic of China. Important allies that did participate in Moscow were Great Britain, France, and Italy.

Jimmy Carter offered an explanation for his request in a letter to Robert Kane, President of the United States Olympic Committee. He stated, "If Soviet troops do not fully withdraw from Afghanistan within the next month, Moscow will become an unsuitable site for a festival meant to celebrate peace and good will." Sending American athletes to Moscow would be tantamount to condoning Soviet action in Afghanistan.⁵⁹

In a later speech, Carter further explained his reasoning behind his decision to withdraw the United States from the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. He compared the Soviets to the Nazi regime of 1936, saying, "It is extremely important that we not in any way condone Soviet aggression. We must recall the experience of 1936, the year of the Berlin Olympic games. They were used to inflate the prestige of an ambitious dictator, Adolf Hitler, to show Germany's totalitarian strength to the world in the sports arena as it was being used to cow the world on the banks of the Rhine. The parallel with the site and timing of the 1980 Olympics is striking."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Letter, Jimmy Carter to Robert Kane, 1 January 1980, "Afghanistan, 01/01/1980-06/30/1980" folder, Box 1, Records of the Speechwriter's Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁰ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 634-637.

All of these tangible and public actions were swiftly taken to counteract the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan. Though they met with varying degrees of opposition, particularly the grain embargo, they were generally accepted by the American public and fellow politicians in Washington. Their implications were not as unanimously accepted.

Deeper Shifts

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan provoked a clear American reaction with tangible and predictable responses. Carter enacted several public measures designed to put the greatest possible amount of pressure on the Soviets to leave Afghanistan without resorting to war. He had no delusions that the Soviet Union would back down although that would have been the situation's ideal solution. Carter simply wanted to publicly tell the Soviets that there would be consequences for their actions and that further aggression would also be punished.

Behind the public responses were deeper shifts in American foreign policy, changes that would remain in place until the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union had crossed a proverbial line in the sand and forever altered the way in which the world's two superpowers would relate to one another.

On the surface, the Carter Doctrine reinforced that America would protect its interests by military might if necessary. In this case, America's interest was oil, what Carter once called the "economic lifeblood of many nations." On a deeper level, oil was not the root of the problem. The dilemma was that the Soviet Union was threatening America's access to a valuable resource. Even more simply, the Soviet Union had challenged the tentative coexistence of *détente*. A buffer had been eliminated and Carter

would swiftly shift America's foreign policy to a more active form of containment, a more aggressive stance found in prior decades. The Cold War quickly rose in temperature.⁶¹

In spite of Carter's future claim that "Brzezinski was remarkably sober, concerned about future relationships with the Soviet Union," the National Security Advisor did take a much harder line towards Afghanistan. Brzezinski claimed that the situation "could become a Soviet Vietnam." He saw the situation as an opportunity that could shift the Cold War along similar lines. Afghanistan could trip up the Soviets as events in Southeast Asia had America.⁶²

Brzezinski was not alone in this thought. Representative Charles Wilson of Texas commented, "There were 58,000 dead in Vietnam and we owe the Russians one... I have a slight obsession with it, because of Vietnam. I thought the Soviets ought to get a dose of it." Wilson would later be instrumental in aiding the Afghanistan rebels.⁶³

Though more tempered at the time, Carter later made the comparison to the United States' experience in Southeast Asia, observing, "Their predicament was becoming reminiscent of the American involvement in Vietnam." Clearly, those inside and outside of the administration were thinking of the future implications of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and how it could be exploited in the coming years. Perhaps the

⁶¹ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 346-347.

⁶² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 486; Reflections on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan, 26 December 1979, "Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (12/26/79-1/4/80)" folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶³ Bob Woodward and Charles R. Babcock, "U.S. Covert Aid to Afghans on the Rise," *Washington Post*, 13 January 1985, A1.

Soviet military machine would be trapped and weakened in Afghanistan and the United States would thus gain leverage over their rival.⁶⁴

While the United States did not overtly commit itself to a military solution to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration did much more than they publicly acknowledged to curb Soviet aggression. Behind the scenes, the United States worked to support the Afghan insurgency, engaging in what Brzezinski referred to as “direct U.S. assistance to the native resistance in Afghanistan in order to bog down the Soviet army.”⁶⁵

The aid, typically credited to Reagan as his administration’s idea, was specifically intended to frustrate Soviet efforts and may have started before Moscow officially invaded Afghanistan. Brzezinski later said that United States used early secret operations in full knowledge that the Soviet reaction could be harsh. He stated, “We didn’t push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.” Such a statement suggests that the Soviets were not as far off the mark as believed by the Carter administration when they claimed they were forced to act by American actions.⁶⁶

Early in the decision-making process, in a memorandum to the President, Brzezinski rhetorically asked the question, “What is to be done?” His answer: “A. It is essential that Afghanistani resistance continues. This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice; B. To make the above possible we must both reassure Pakistan and encourage it to help the rebels. This will require a review of our policy toward Pakistan, more guarantees to it, more arms aid, and, alas, a decision

⁶⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 498.

⁶⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 7.

⁶⁶ “Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15-21 January 1998, 76.

that our security policy toward Pakistan cannot be dictated by our nonproliferation policy; C. We should encourage the Chinese to help the rebels also; D. We should concert with Islamic countries both in a propaganda campaign and in a covert action campaign to help the rebels.”⁶⁷

While many documents on the matter are still classified, concrete evidence of the United States’ covert aid to the insurgents exists. For example, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown traveled to China soon after the invasion. He was given a list of points to discuss. Among other items, Brown was to make clear to the Chinese, “We intend to supply weapons to the rebels, on a covert basis, although the divided loyalties of the opposition to the Kabul government and the very large Soviet commitment make it doubtful that we can force the Soviets out of the country in the short term... It would help if China could provide arms for the Afghan nationalists and for Pakistan also.”⁶⁸

The Soviets claimed that such aid was partially the cause for their invasion. As early as March 1979, the Soviet press claimed that the United States was involved in the support of the Afghan insurgency. At the time, Brzezinski advised the White House, “I have been authoritatively assured that the United States is not involved.”⁶⁹

Shortly after the invasion, a White House memorandum reported, “Soviet television depicts a large cache of allegedly U.S., British, and Chinese origin [sic] small arms captured from Afghan insurgents and interviews insurgent prisoners who claim they

⁶⁷ Letter, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 26 December 1979, “Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)” folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁸ Southwest Asia, January 1980, “Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)” folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁶⁹ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-6-1-1-14-8, Jimmy Carter Library.

have been trained and equipped over the past three years by U.S. and Chinese officers operating out of Pakistan.” Obviously, the United States denied involvement.⁷⁰

In a 1998 interview, National Security Adviser Brzezinski placed America’s support of the Afghani rebels as much earlier than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He claimed, “According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Moujahedeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 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.” To date, no such directive or note has been declassified. The July 3, 1979 date, however, has been confirmed by other insiders, most notable Robert Gates, who served on Carter’s National Security Council.⁷¹

Later in the interview, Brzezinski was asked if he had any qualms about the American action, as it had subsequently brought the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. He sounded off, “Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Soviets into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, in substance: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire... What is most

⁷⁰ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-13-8-3-5, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷¹ “Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15-21 January 1998, 76; Robert Michael Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 146.

important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?” This statement was made roughly three years before September 11, 2001.⁷²

At the time, the United States did not make public any support for the Afghan insurgency. Predictably, their official position consisted of little more than denials and refusals to comment.

In an often heated yet comical exchange, White House spokesman Hodding Carter continually refused to comment about possible aid to the insurgents in Afghanistan. During a January 7, 1980 daily press briefing, he first spoke on the issue, saying, “I have no comment on that question,” and, more emphatically, “If you think for one minute that I’m going to answer ON THE RECORD anything to do with that question, then you’re wrong.” His answers did not satisfy the press.⁷³

The next day, when asked about possible moves the United States could make to assist the insurgency, Hodding Carter balked, finally claiming of such actions, “They would not be announced from this podium, nor would they be announced while waving the flags standing on top of the Capitol,” and, “A lot of the things you’re suggesting are not the kind of things that a President of the United States is going to go waving around saying he was doing if he were doing them.” His answers still did not satisfy the press.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 7 January 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 1/7/80-1/16/80” folder, Box 36, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁴ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 8 January 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 1/7/80-1/16/80” folder, Box 36, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

The next day, he was asked yet again about possible aid to the insurgency and answered, “I think you can probably ask that a long time and I’ll never have an answer for that one. There is nothing I have to offer on that subject... I have, in the past, dealt with that question by saying that I know of no such provision. That’s the best I can do for you. I don’t have any change in the old guidance.” Still, the question remained.⁷⁵

The next day, a member of the press asked about such aid again, suggesting “the possibility that it’s being done but they aren’t telling you about it.” Hodding Carter’s response, “(Laughs.) I could hardly argue with the thought that there are a lot of things that go on in government that I don’t know about... I, personally, am perfectly happy to deny it... If we did, I wouldn’t say it. It’s not the kind of question I would comment on, and I am simply not going to go into it at all.” The question still didn’t go away.⁷⁶

In February, Hodding Carter had to address the issue of American aid to the Afghan insurgency once more. He reiterated the same point he had always made and explained, “Following standard procedure on stories of this kind, I will not be commenting on allegations of U.S. assistance to the forces in Afghanistan. I would only observe that a refusal to comment here must not be taken as an excuse for any inferences about what we are or are not doing. As a matter of policy, I do not comment.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 9 January 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 1/7/80-1/16/80” folder, Box 36, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁶ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 10 January 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 1/7/80-1/16/80” folder, Box 36, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁷ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 15 February 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 2/01/80-2/15/80” folder, Box 37, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

The issue still did not go away. Later in February, a member of the press asked, “How can you justify not saying whether the United States is in fact assisting these groups?” Hodding Carter answered, “We can justify it on the basis of precedence, on the basis of what we consider to be the best interests of the people of Afghanistan. Because once you start answering questions that have to do with such activities, a refusal to answer them in the future is then taken as an implicit admission that ‘something is going on.’ The only way not to get onto that slope, is not to comment on it at all.” Still, the press persisted with their interrogations.⁷⁸

For his part, Carter denied the existence of American aid to the Afghan insurgency. When asked in an April 1980 interview, he stated, “That’s a difficult thing for us to do or to discuss... I don’t think there are any American weapons at all in Afghanistan. I think there have been a few grenades, I understand, found in Afghanistan, but those were derived from previous sales made to Iran in years gone by... But I think the Afghan freedom fighters are doing very well on their own in getting weapons away from their own previous armed forces and also perhaps some from the Soviet invaders.” Later he simply refused to comment, saying, “That’s a question I would rather not answer.” Given his reputation as a micromanager, it is hard to imagine Carter was not aware of every major covert move the United States considered.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Department of State Daily Press Briefing, 27 February 1980, “State Department – Iran & Afghanistan, 2/19/80-2/29/80” folder, Box 37, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁹ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 658-666; U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 1191-1204.

While unable to comment at the time, Carter later admitted that America had a role in the Afghan insurgency. In his memoirs, Carter addresses the issue, “In a highly secret move, we also assessed the feasibility of arranging for Soviet-made weapons (which would appear to have come from the Afghan military forces) to be delivered to the freedom fighters in Afghanistan and of giving them what encouragement we could to resist the subjugation by the Soviet invaders.”⁸⁰

Carter had no illusions that the Afghan insurgency would immediately expel the Soviets. They did not have the strength or organization to face a superpower on a traditional field of battle. However, Carter did believe that the insurgency could hinder the Soviet Union in the long term. He stated, “If the Afghans could continue their courageous struggle, the Soviet leaders would have to settle for a long, drawn-out, and costly war.”⁸¹

The insurgents primarily came from the more fundamentalist Islamic factions of Afghanistan, perhaps because the Soviet Union sought to oppress all religion or perhaps because most of the Muslim clergy were wealthy through land holdings that communism would evaporate. Regardless of the rebels’ motives, the Carter administration did recognize the potential for categorizing the conflict in terms of religion. A February 4, 1980 report said, “More and more Afghans are talking about a ‘holy war’ against the Soviets.” The United States quickly adopted rhetoric friendly to the Islamic world.⁸²

In hindsight, the United States might not have been wise to ally itself with a group of fighters that would become a regime it would oust little more than twenty years later.

⁸⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 484.

⁸¹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 481.

⁸² Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-14-1-8-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

But American foreign policy has typically been guided by expediency, not genuine concern for the interests of others, and the rebels were willing to stand up to America's chief enemy. Besides, at the time, America had no quarrel with Islamic extremists. The only parts of the Arab world with which the West squabbled were the leaders of OPEC who were comparatively secular Moslems.

While the Afghani resistance did not presently have any noticeable negative associations, America did quickly adopt new partners that did come with baggage. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced Carter to evaluate America's allies and establish fresh alliances that were not clear of controversy, mainly with China and Pakistan.

Carter had already attempted to establish a better relationship with China, whose diplomatic doors had been officially closed from the time communism became the law of the land until the presidency of Richard Nixon. The Soviet Union's aggression made better ties with China even more urgent. Just as Nixon theorized, if China became one of the United States' principle allies, the Soviet Union might tremble at the implications, the balance of power having shifted away from their interests. Already, the two largest communist nations had an unfriendly rivalry. A further rift might create peace on America's terms.

The United States not only sought a cordial political relationship with China, one that might frustrate the Soviet Union, but also a backdoor for arming the Afghan insurgency. The United States was reluctant to arm the rebels using normal channels, as the paper trail would clearly point to their involvement. As the Reagan administration would do in the Iran-Contra scandal, Carter and his advisers wanted their support to take a circuitous route.

On the agenda for Secretary of Defense Brown's trip to China was a "private exploration of possibilities for US-PRC cooperation in facilitating support for Afghan insurgents and steps to bolster the security of Pakistan." The talks were not made public, just as America's support for the Afghan resistance was kept silent.⁸³

Though the support and cooperation with the Chinese was supposed to be kept secret, the Soviet Union claimed to be aware of the assistance and collaboration. As early as January 9, 1980, Pravda claimed that "Secretary Brown and his Chinese hosts have discussed the possibility of cooperative subversive actions against Afghanistan with Pakistan having a key role." Naturally, the White House dismissed the report.⁸⁴

China was not merely a pawn in United States foreign policy. No supporters of the Soviet Union, they were willing cohorts and may have even triggered the partnership of convenience. As early as October 1979, the Chinese expressed interest in supporting the Afghan insurgency. A White House memorandum stated, "The ambassador [Zhang, Chinese, to Thailand] reports that China has no intention of concluding another friendship treaty with the Soviets and is applying pressure on them by supporting anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Africa, and the Middle East." China had significant interest in Afghanistan, as they were Soviet rivals as well.⁸⁵

The renewed ties with China came at a price. China was known for its poor human rights record and Carter took much criticism for allying America with such a country. Many Americans also criticized the president's policy because they believed the proper Chinese government was in exile on Formosa. Because of the urgency of the

⁸³ SCC Meeting, 2 January 1980, "Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)" folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁴ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-13-7-21-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁵ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-1-12-6-8-3, Jimmy Carter Library.

situation in Afghanistan, however, Carter was happy to look the other way at human rights abuses and other criticism.

Brzezinski certainly had no qualms about such backdoor deals with dubious allies. He later spoke of a similar situation involving American relations with China, “I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him but China could.” America “winked semipublicly” as arms made their way to Pol Pot’s regime to oust the Vietnamese from Cambodia.⁸⁶

Unlike the renewed alliance with China, the Carter administration never hid its military support of Pakistan. While Pakistan’s human rights record was far from spotless, they were already something of an American ally. Located next to Afghanistan and closer to the Indian Ocean, the defense of Pakistan had an immediate sense of urgency as well after the Soviet invasion. Carter never faced overwhelming criticism because of his support of Pakistan, but he was forced to compromise his principles nonetheless.

While the United States did not have to compromise its ideals by allying itself with Pakistan as much as it did with China, Carter still conceded his and America’s ideal interests by turning a blind eye to Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions. The 1976 Symington Amendment to the Arms Export Control Act forbid the United States from providing all but the most basic forms of humanitarian aid to countries seeking to develop the capability for nuclear weapons. Pakistan was on the list of forbidden nations but the realities of Afghanistan made Carter reconsider America’s position. A White House report stated, “We believe that we can develop, together with the Congress, a means of balancing our continuing concerns about Pakistan’s nuclear activities with the urgent

⁸⁶ Strobe Talbott, “Defanging the Beast,” *Time*, 6 February 1989, 40.

need to respond, in a clear and credible manner, to the Soviet challenge to peace in Asia... This is clearly an exceptional circumstance. We remain committed in our opposition to any proliferation of nuclear devices.” Regardless of the rhetoric, idealism took a backseat to political reality.⁸⁷

White House guidance subsequently publicized that the President would work with congress to support Pakistan despite their joint concern regarding its nuclear capability. Carter announced, “In consultation with the Congress, I will be requesting authority to provide the full range of necessary assistance to Pakistan. This legislative authority will make an exception to restrictions in existing law that prohibit aid to Pakistan because of its nuclear activities. We remain firmly committed, as a matter of profound national interest, to continuing our determined efforts to avoid nuclear weapons proliferation in that region and elsewhere. But the need to provide concrete support for Pakistan’s defense is compelling. A strong response to Pakistan’s urgent requirements will demonstrate to that government that its security can be maintained by conventional means.” The resolute commitment to prevent nuclear proliferation was traded for expediency and Pakistan faced few roadblocks on its subsequent route to becoming a nuclear power.⁸⁸

Commenting on the situation, Brzezinski stated in his memoirs, “Although we succeeded in diverting the world from a scramble for plutonium, we could not control the serious proliferation risk in Pakistan. Altered strategic realities in southwestern Asia (Afghanistan and Iran) complicated the problem further. We attempted to solve a

⁸⁷ Report, January 1980, “Afghanistan / Invasion” folder, Box 1, Records of the Office of the Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs (Carter Administration) 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁸⁸ Talking Points, 15 January 1980, “Soviets in Afghanistan” folder, Box 79, Records of the White House Press Office, 1977-1981, Jimmy Carter Library.

problem that was unmanageable at best, and the policy has to be judged in that context.”

The Carter administration compromised their principles because it saw such a choice as the lesser of two evils.⁸⁹

And thus Pakistan pursued its nuclear ambitions without fear of reprisal, expediency having shifted American attitudes towards the country. Pakistan’s President Zia saw the change for what it was and compared being America’s ally to living by the shores of a great river. He told subsequent CIA Director William Casey, “The soil is wonderfully fertile but every four or eight years the river changes course, and you may find yourself alone in a desert.”⁹⁰

The United States did more than simply supply military aid to Pakistan despite their nuclear ambitions. Pakistan became as necessary a partner as China in supplying the Afghan resistance. Brzezinski knew the importance of Pakistan to the supply chain that would eventually aid the Afghan insurgency. He remarked to Carter, “If we can stiffen Pakistan’s back, we should be in a position to extend some aid to the Afghani rebels, in order to keep the Soviets bogged down.” Thus began a chain of events that saw American money spent to purchase Chinese weapons shipped to Pakistan and then to Afghani freedom fighters who would use them against Soviet troops, a tangled web that would make the most cynical member of the Reagan administration proud, a convoluted trail that even Oliver North could not have fathomed.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 144.

⁹⁰ Joseph E. Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 313.

⁹¹ Letter, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 3 January 1980, “Southwest Asia / Persian Gulf – Afghanistan: (1/5/80-10/1/80)” folder, Box 17, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also forced the Carter administration to make changes on the domestic front. Typical of Presidents in times of perceived crises, Carter asked for greater power for his administration to collect intelligence on foreign and domestic fronts. In his 1980 State of the Union Address, he listed among his solutions to countering the Soviet Union, “We need to remove unwarranted restraints on America’s ability to collect intelligence.”⁹²

From the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to Abraham Lincoln’s Civil War suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus to the present day’s USA PATRIOT Act, American presidents have often made similar requests and have frequently come under attack as enemies of the Bill of Rights. Carter, however, made it clear that he did not want to infringe upon sacred American rights, qualifying his statement by later saying, “While protecting the constitutional rights of Americans and avoiding the abuses of the past, we must remove all impediments to an effective intelligence capability for our nation.” Still, in the face of a grave threat, the United States gave greater power to agencies that would abuse their power, a trend that continues to this day.⁹³

Perhaps the greatest shift in American foreign policy occurred in the arena of military spending. Partly because of détente, the federal government had consistently decreased the U.S. military budget in the years before Carter took office. Despite his critics’ claim to the contrary, Carter increased military spending each year of his presidency and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan stimulated him to propose still further spending.

⁹² U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 194-200.

⁹³ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 346-347.

During his 1980 campaign, Carter outlined his history of military spending. He stated, “We have not had a decrease, but a real increase in the readiness of the military forces of this country in the last 3 ½ years. When I went into the Oval Office, for 8 years prior to my Inauguration, 7 of those years we had an actual decrease in budgeted funds going for military defense. Since I’ve been in office, every year above and beyond inflation, in real dollars, we’ve had a steady, predictable, well-planned, orderly increase in the commitment of budgeted funds to improve the military.”

In the same speech, he outlined his vision for the future of military spending, claiming, “We have a commitment for the next 5 years, not just the last 3 years, to continue this orderly increase every year in commitments for defense. It amounts to about 5 percent of our Nation’s gross national product, not excessive. I have no apology to make for it. It’s a good investment.”

While Carter did propose an increase in military spending, he did not view such an augmentation as a prelude to war. He saw it as a largely preventative action. He maintained, “The best weapon is one that’s never fired in combat, and the best soldier is one who never has to lay his life down or shed his blood on the field of battle.” Still, Carter did not want America to appear the slightest bit vulnerable. In a rare expression of machismo, he stated, “It’s also important that potential adversaries know that if they attack the United States of America, that they will be committing suicide.”⁹⁴

Many experts largely credit Reagan’s stance on defense spending with his 1980 victory over Carter. In truth, Reagan did propose a seven percent increase in spending

⁹⁴ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 2292-2293.

compared to Carter's five percent. But this two percent difference hardly qualified Carter as weak, as Reagan suggested. All jingoist rhetoric aside, the only major difference between Carter's and Reagan's military spending in office were the B-1 bomber and the SDI systems, both of which Carter did not support because he saw them as impractical, not because he lacked a commitment to America's defense.⁹⁵

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan changed American Cold War policy in drastic ways, altering both foreign and domestic habits. The Carter administration was forced to reconsider its thawing relationship with the Soviet Union, adopt new, questionable allies, increase the power of government agencies both domestically and abroad, and rearrange its spending habits, devoting more money to defense. These new policies would remain intact until the end of the Cold War. While many observers credit Ronald Reagan with implementing the changes, Jimmy Carter was the one who suggested and employed the measures that would define American foreign policy for the next decade. By the time he left office, Carter had more than a year to react to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and had used that year to solidify America's stance for the final phase of the Cold War.

⁹⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 85-88.

Chapter Four – Conclusion

Keeping the Peace

In his Inaugural Address, Carter expressed his desire for a world defined by peace. He hoped that the hallmark of his foreign policy would be a peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world, one that would survive to the next generation, and importantly, one that also did not compromise American strength. A former military man, he wanted his legacy to be one of peace.

Carter wanted peace but he wanted it on America's terms. To secure American interests, the United States had to be strong and dominant in world affairs. Such power came with the possibility of abuse, against which Carter vowed to fight. In his 1980 State of the Union Address, he confirmed, "I'm determined that the United States will remain the strongest of all nations, but our power will never be used to initiate a threat to the security of any nation or to the rights of any human being. We seek to be and to remain strong – a nation at peace in a stable world."⁹⁶

Carter was successful in keeping America at relative peace while not sacrificing vital American interests. His results were not without compromise, however. His idealism in regards to human rights suffered in measurable ways.

In his Inaugural Address, he stated, "We can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our commitment to human rights must be absolute." Carter left office still committed to the plight of human rights around the world. But in the interim,

⁹⁶ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 194-200.

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced him to make some choices that favored expediency over integrity.⁹⁷

Carter abandoned arms negotiation with the Soviets, heating up the Cold War. He supported an oppressive regime in China and lent support to the nation of Pakistan which was in the process of developing nuclear weapons. He opened the United States government to secret intervention in the far corners of the world and increased its power to collect intelligence domestically. He furthered the military industrial complex, committing the United States to spending that would soon spiral out of control. Granted, none of these actions individually bankrupted the United States' morality. But taken together, they show a president who favored practical but somewhat contentious solutions rather than measures pious yet unrealistic, a president more cunning and hardnosed than his critics suggest.

Perhaps that was just what the world needed. In his memoirs, Brzezinski wrote about a conversation with Carter, "I commented that I understood his desire to go down in history as a President Wilson but added that 'before you are a President Wilson you have to be for a few years a President Truman.' By that I meant that the President had to first convince the American public and the world of his toughness, and only then, during his second term, could he adopt a more Wilsonian approach." Carter desired an America leading the world for the greater benefit of humanity, a country that stood up for

⁹⁷ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1977), Jimmy Carter, 1977, 1-4.

righteousness rather than selfishness. But such a country can only lead if strong enough to weather and tame the blows of other self-seeking nations.⁹⁸

While he may have sacrificed ideal conditions for a greater peace, something for which he has been criticized even regarding his numerous post-presidency peace missions, Carter did realize many successes in his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Although it is doubtfully the sole work of Carter, the Soviet Union did not venture into additional corners of the world, seemingly deterred and bogged down in Afghanistan.

Unlike most modern presidents, Carter was able to establish closer ties with the Islamic world. In the aftermath of the events in Iran and Afghanistan, Carter focused on the similarities between the United States and Middle East, not the differences. He claimed, "From the very beginning, the United States has enjoyed close and valued ties with the Muslim world... I have been struck, personally and in my experience as President, by the human and moral values which Americans as a people share with Islam... Of course there is indignation among Americans today over events in one Islamic country [Iran]. I share that indignation. But I can assure you that this just anger will not be twisted into a false resentment against Islam or its faithful... We continue to seek the closest possible political, economic, and cultural ties with the Islamic nations and with Muslims throughout the world."⁹⁹

Carter's support of the Islamic world extended beyond rhetoric and beyond strategic alliances with heads of state. He was naturally concerned with the plight of

⁹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 432.

⁹⁹ U.S President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1980-81), Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, 283-284.

everyday citizens and pledged substantial money to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan in January 1980 and declared a week in July 1980 to be Afghanistan Relief Week, urging Americans to support displaced Afghans.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan angered much of the rest of the Middle East, turning nations that were neutral or conciliatory towards the Soviet Union against them. The United States realized that, with any power shift, new diplomatic opportunities presented themselves. Specifically, Brzezinski advised Carter, “The Afghanistan invasion does give us some openings for a quiet dialogue with Iraq, Libya, and Algeria.” While Iraq and Libya eventually became enemies of the United States, at the time they were in danger of straying into the Soviet camp and this was prevented.¹⁰⁰

Carter’s support of the Islamic world was not without criticism. Even during the famous Camp David peace talks, Carter was accused of catering to the Arab world and interests at the expense of Israel. While Carter did not endorse either side over the other, he showed much more respect to the Arab world than many of his contemporaries. He even celebrated Islamic faith. While it differed from his brand of Christianity, he respected all religions and their practitioners.¹⁰¹

Carter’s successes with his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan extended beyond the Middle East. As he sacrificed short term ideals, he hoped to eventually bring about greater freedoms in East Europe and the Soviet Union itself. He later claimed that his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan allowed a subsequent Polish uprising to take place without fear of reprisal. He stated, “I was

¹⁰⁰ Remote Archives Capture Project, ESDN: NLC-6-51-8-5-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁰¹ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 30-31.

convinced that the Soviets would already have moved into Poland if they had not been bogged down in Afghanistan and condemned by most nations of the world for it.”¹⁰²

Indeed, Carter’s insistence on the implementation of the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords is often credited with allowing many revolutionary groups in Eastern Europe to thrive. Eventual Czech and Polish presidents Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa credited Carter with assisting their burgeoning movements that eventually toppled the Communist Party in their countries. Perhaps Carter’s insistence on human rights was respected by the Soviet Union because he stood up to them when they invaded Afghanistan. While many other factors prevented the Soviet Union from cracking down on such groups, Carter certainly aided the struggling movements.

Carter’s foreign policy, both while in office and as a subsequent peacemaker, has been criticized for focusing too much on the big picture and not enough on the details. He responds by claiming that peace talks cannot happen while bullets are flying. He once said, “The Nuremberg trials could not have taken place while the Second World War was raging.” In the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he compromised on the details in order to save the overall picture. He sacrificed short term human rights interests to create a world more conducive to peace. He brought the nation “one major step short of war” to produce a lasting peace. And in the end, although they were not swift enough to earn him another four years in office, his policies saw America through to the end of the Cold War.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 594.

¹⁰³ Douglas Brinkley, “Jimmy Carter’s Quest for Global Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* 74:6 (November / December 1995), 90-100.

In a recent interview, Carter reflected on his years as president and concluded that he had met his ultimate goal, leading the United States through turbulent times without involving the country in war. He claimed, “In the end, I was thankful that although my profession was that of a military man – commander in chief of the armed forces, prepared to defend my nation with maximum force if I had to – I was able to go through my entire term without firing a bullet, dropping a bomb, or launching a missile.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the turbulent times in which he served, Carter steered the nation clear from war. His critics may have called him weak but, in the end, he was vindicated when the Cold War ended without any direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Such a war would have been disastrous, as would a weakened United States that buckled under the advance of the Soviet Union. Jimmy Carter was able to guide the country between two extremes and through to a more peaceful world.

Historians who have been unkind to Carter perhaps do not grasp the entire picture. The benefits of time and new materials paint a new portrait. His reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan hardly portrays him as inept nor does it show a naïve newcomer to Washington. His actions were swift and practical. Those who portray him as a well-intentioned but clumsy politician fail to see the depth of his vision for the long-term future of foreign policy and his skill at enacting his plan. Those who see Carter as a victim miss the big picture as well. Certainly he served in a volatile and trying time, but he was hardly the victim of circumstances. Rather, when events began to spin out of control, he managed the situation to realize his plan for the future. He did not suddenly mature in the White House; he was simply forced to make the difficult choices he hoped

¹⁰⁴ Jimmy Carter, “What I’ve Learned,” *Esquire*, January 2005, 79.

would never come. Perhaps Carter can be criticized for sacrificing short term gains for the future benefit of the world, but that is wholly consistent with his character as he has always focused strictly on results.

Carter entered the White House with a vision for America's future and when the world outside his country's borders shifted, he adjusted American foreign policy to the world's new reality and ushered in the changes that remained intact until the end of the Cold War. While the subsequent Republican presidents receive the credit for managing America's role in the end of the Cold War, they were simply following the cue of Jimmy Carter, a man much more committed to a just and peaceful future of the world than they.

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