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Comparing America's Failure in Afghanistan to the Soviet's in 1989

By John Glaser

January 2, 2013

The New Years experience tends to generate perspective and long-term thinking. At least, that's the case with two unlikely opinionators: *The New York Times* and the Taliban.

Both the *Times* and the Taliban have made strong, end of the year historical comparisons between the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, coming at least partially in 2014, and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

The young president who ascended to office as a change agent decides to end the costly and unpopular war in Afghanistan. He seeks an exit with honor by pledging long-term financial support to allies in Kabul, while urging reconciliation with the insurgency. But some senior advisers lobby for a deliberately slow withdrawal, and propose leaving thousands of troops behind to train and support Afghan security forces.

This is a nearly exact description of the endgame conundrum facing President Obama as he prepares for a critical visit by Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, planned for early January.

But the account is actually drawn from declassified Soviet archives describing Mikhail S. Gorbachev's closed-door struggles with his Politburo and army chiefs to end the Kremlin's intervention in Afghanistan — one that began with a commando raid, coup and modest goals during Christmas week of 1979 but became, after a decade, what Mr. Gorbachev derided as “a bleeding wound.”

Separately, the Taliban released an emailed statement ^[2] entitled “Quick Glance at 2012” in which they said “We can unmistakably state that 2012 in Afghanistan for the current occupation was exactly as 1986 was for the former occupation.” Reporting on the statement, AFP writes “The year 1986 is widely seen as a turning point in the Soviets’ ten-year presence in Afghanistan, with mujahideen attacks forcing Moscow on the defensive before the military finally left in 1989.”

The comparison is an important one, because in the West, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is universally regarded as retreat in the face of defeat. And Americans will have to watch, as 2013 and 2014 come and go, as their political leadership tirelessly claim that the war was worth it, the mission has been accomplished, and the troops are leaving with their heads high.

But it’s not the case. As Afghan President Hamid Karzai said in October ^[3], America’s war in Afghanistan “will not be successful.” And the surge Obama ordered in 2009 has been a complete failure by every observable metric. A Pentagon report to Congress last month “found that violence in Afghanistan is higher than it was before the surge of American forces into the country two years ago,” *The New York Times* ^[4] reported.

US troops are leaving in 2014, not because the mission has been accomplished, but precisely because it hasn’t, and it can’t be.

That said, there is one major difference between the US in 2014 and the Soviet Union in 1989: the US is not leaving Afghanistan. During the vice presidential debates, VP Joe Biden said, “We are leaving [Afghanistan]. We are leaving in 2014, period. Period.” But all along, the US has been working behind the scenes with the Kabul government on an agreement ^[5] that would govern the presence of at least 10,000 US troops well beyond 2014, perhaps until 2024.

Of course a major problem is that so long as any foreign occupation exists in Afghanistan, and so long as any Kabul government is propped up from abroad, the insurgency will remain alive and well. The insurgency has persisted for 11 years despite the efforts of the world’s most advanced military. And all signs tell me they will continue to fight to oust the occupier even after a “withdrawal” (which we now know really only means a smaller occupation).

So the Soviets perhaps were more prepared to face realities in their failed war than Washington. The trajectory of America’s failure rests on a much lengthier timeline than the Soviets on the eve of their demise. But it will be a failure, nonetheless.