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These Colors Run Red

The U.S. follows the Soviet Union into Afghanistan

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

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

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

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

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

Pipes and others believed the ultimate Soviet objective was to seize control of Persian Gulf oil, something they insisted the United States prevent. President Jimmy Carter heeded that demand. In what became enshrined as the Carter Doctrine, he declared that attempts “by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf” would constitute “an assault on the vital interests of the United States,” to be “repelled by any means necessary.” Everyone understood “outside force” to be a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union.

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

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

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

That effort offended the sensibilities of some Muslims and provoked considerable resistance. American officials spent the next decade fixating on Saddam, said to be the source of all the woes afflicting that part of the world. In the meantime, a more genuinely dangerous adversary was gravitating to Afghanistan, of all places. By the 1990s, Afghan freedom fighters that Washington had enthusiastically supported in the 1980s were providing sanctuary to violent Islamists who wanted to wage *jihād* against the United States, primarily in retribution for sins committed under the aegis of the Carter Doctrine. Only with the events of 9/11 did Americans awaken—albeit only briefly—to the fact that efforts to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet Vietnam had produced poison fruit. When the Soviets announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan back in 1989, the CIA station chief in Pakistan sent Washington a two-word cable: “We won.” By September 2001, events were calling that verdict into question.

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

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

dysfunction. The conviction that “victory” in Afghanistan will make things right grips Washington with the same intensity that once gripped Moscow—and with as little justification.

Spooked by a nonexistent Soviet threat to Persian Gulf oil back in 1980, the United States committed itself to a course that in the years since has metastasized into a gargantuan enterprise that vaguely aims at remaking the entire Greater Middle East. In a supreme irony, that effort has now landed us exactly back where the Soviets, in a supreme act of folly, started the ball rolling. History has looped back upon itself. It’s déjà vu all over again, with American soldiers now playing the roles once assigned to Russian soldiers.

Writing 30 years ago, Professor Pipes got many things wrong, but he got Afghanistan right. It is still a place with “no natural resources of importance.” Opium apart, Afghanistan produces little that we need or want. It remains a “mountainous territory with a primitive economy, with a population that has never been subdued by any colonial power.” As Pipes correctly observed, to occupy such a forbidding country “makes little sense—unless you have some ultimate, higher strategic objectives.”

Soviet objectives—centered on the conviction that salvaging their empire required them to subdue the Afghans—proved self-defeating. American objectives—centered on a kinder, gentler version of the same idea—have not yet produced markedly different results.

To persist in Afghanistan will more likely compound the miscalculation that lies at the heart of our foreign policy: the conviction that the United States has no alternative but to use any means necessary to ensure its ostensibly vital interests throughout the Greater Middle East.

The debate that we need is not about Afghanistan as such but about the original sin that eventually mired us there: the misinterpretation of Soviet behavior back in 1979 that has disfigured U.S. policy ever since. If you want a strategy worthy of the name, start by repealing the Carter Doctrine.