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The moment that changed Afghanistan

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This week marks the 30th anniversary of the fateful decision, little noted at the time, that drew the [US](#) into its [Afghanistan](#) quagmire. If the current Afghan crisis can be said to have begun at any single moment, it was in the last week of 1979.

At dusk on Christmas Eve, following orders from President Leonid Brezhnev, units of the Soviet army crossed pontoon bridges over the Amu Darya river into Afghanistan. Brezhnev's decision was a catastrophic error that not only deeply damaged his country but also contributed to its extinction as a nation state. History is beginning to suggest, though, that decisions made in Washington during that week were just as tragically shortsighted.

One way for the US to have reacted to the Soviet invasion would have been to cheer the Soviets' stupidity and wait patiently for Afghan resistance fighters to do their duty to history. This would have been a prudent, restrained policy, one of limited ambition and risk. It would have kept the US out of a dangerous place where it had not previously been entangled and which it did not know well.

Instead the US chose the opposite path: hyperactive engagement. The CIA launched its biggest operation ever, pouring billions of dollars into the Afghan resistance, matched dollar-for-dollar by [Saudi Arabia](#). This operation contributed decisively to the Soviet defeat, culminating in the Red Army's retreat back across the Amu Darya in 1988.

America's decision to escalate this war also had other effects that only became clear later. It brought tens of thousands of foreign fighters, including [Osama bin Laden](#), to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. With them these outsiders brought harsh forms of Islamic fundamentalism that had been little known in Afghanistan. Their influence – Wahhabi fanaticism preached to Afghan resistance fighters in a war paid for by the US and Saudi Arabia – gave birth to the [Taliban](#). [Pakistan](#) served as eager midwife and quickly turned the Taliban into its proxy force in Afghanistan. Once in power, the Taliban offered a safe haven to [al-Qaida](#), which prepared the September 11 attacks there.

America's decision to plunge into Afghanistan 30 years ago also made the US an ally of Pakistan's reactionary military dictator, [Muhammad Zia al-Haq](#). The CIA needed bases for its anti-Soviet army, and therefore required Zia's cooperation. No one seemed to care that he had recently hanged the elected prime minister he overthrew, [Zulfikar Ali Bhutto](#), or that his two transcendent goals for Pakistan were creating a "pure Islamic order" and building nuclear weapons.

Thanks to the marvels of declassification, we now know precisely when America's engagement in Afghanistan was set in motion. It was on 26 December 1979, just two days after the Soviet invasion. President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), sent him a memo entitled "Reflections on Soviet intervention in Afghanistan". Carter endorsed it, and soon the CIA was funnelling huge amounts of money through Pakistan to fundamentalist warlords. A year later, after Ronald Reagan replaced Carter, American involvement further deepened.

"It is essential that Afghanistan's resistance continues," Brzezinski wrote in his historic memo:

This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice. 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 that our security policy toward Pakistan cannot be dictated by our nonproliferation policy.

Until that moment, the US had been closely monitoring Pakistan's nuclear programme and blocking it whenever possible. As soon as Washington signalled to General Zia that it would stop monitoring the program in exchange for his help with the anti-Soviet war, he launched a global effort, led by [AQ Khan](#), to assemble nuclear technology and fuel. Less than 20 years later, Pakistan successfully tested its first nuclear weapon.

Like so many American decisions to intervene in foreign lands, the decision in December 1979 to plunge into Afghanistan was made without serious consideration of the long-term consequences. It produced an apparent success that, with the passage of time, has come to look not much like a success after all