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Blowback and the "Great Game": When Secret Plans Go Bad

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For two decades the US government claimed that its decision to begin working for the overthrow of Afghanistan's government in the final days of the 1970s was a response to the invasion of Soviet troops. But in January 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Adviser at the time, finally admitted the truth: covert US intervention began months before the USSR sent in troops.

"That secret operation was an excellent idea," he bragged. "The effect was to draw the Russians into the Afghan trap."

During an interview with the French publication, Le Nouvel Observateur, which somehow never made it into US media, Brzezinski was grilled about the role he played in aiding the Mujahadeen. Former CIA Director Robert Gates had recently claimed in his memoir, From the Shadows, that US intelligence operations began six months before the Soviet intervention.

"According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahadeen began during 1980," Brzezinski noted,

> "that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly 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."

Seizing this opening, the interviewer suggested that perhaps Brzezinski intended to provoke the Soviets into war. "It isn't quite that," the former National Security Advisor replied cagily. "We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would." Nevertheless, when the Soviets tried to justify their invasion with the claim that they were responding to a secret war bankrolled by the US, few people believed them.

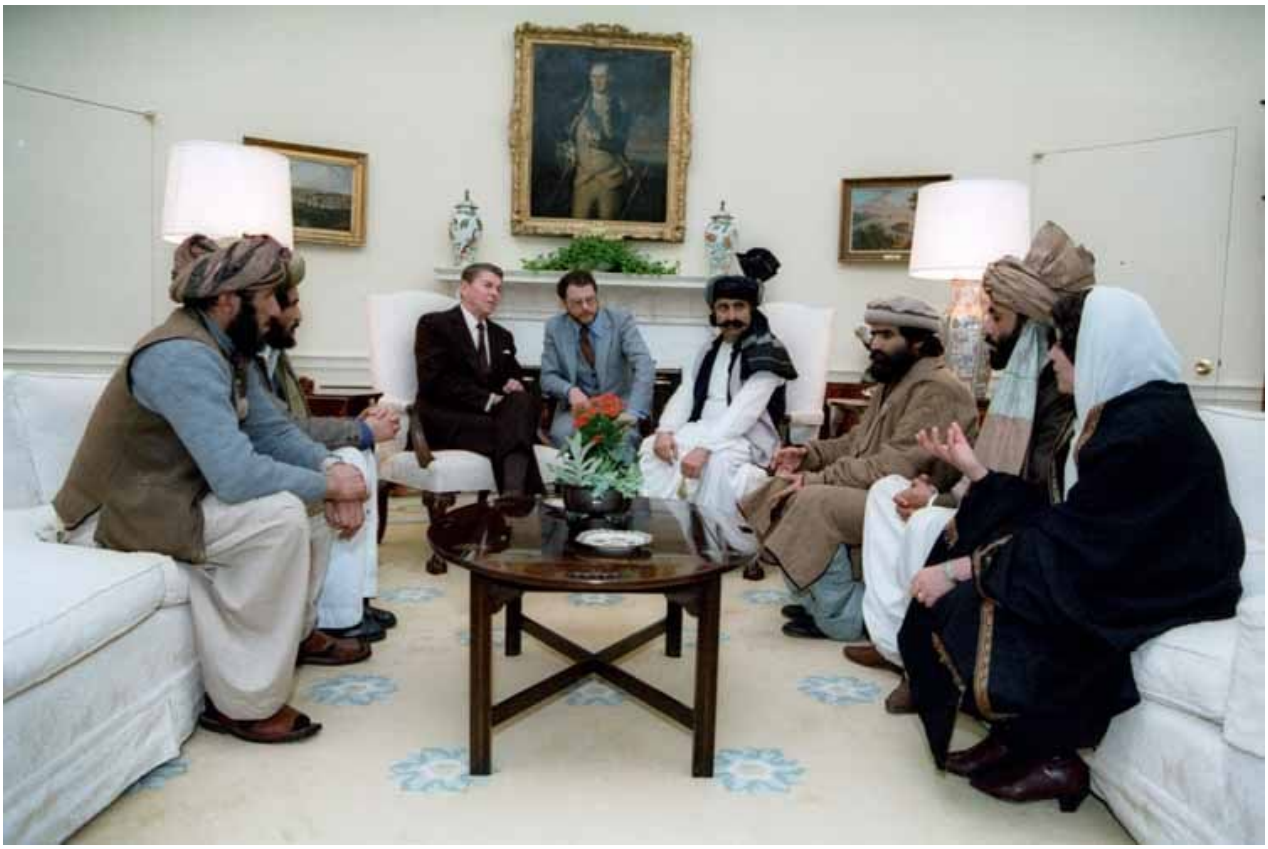
Did he regret anything? "Regret what?" Brzezinski shot back.

> "That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: 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."

But what about arming Islamic fundamentalists who might become future terrorists? Brzezinski's reply to that was brazen. "What is most 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?" The jury is out on such questions.

Brzezinski's strategy did net some obvious results. The 1980s conflict in Afghanistan, provoked by US leaders as a geopolitical move in the Great Game, led to almost two million deaths and sparked the Taliban's rise. Afghanistan became open territory for drug traffickers and energy companies eager to build oil and gas pipelines. Meanwhile, millions of Afghanis, including many who once worked with the CIA, paid a price. Eventually, the country served as a base for Osama bin Laden's crusade against the US, Israel, and Arab regimes in the Middle East.



Disaster in the Congo

Another prime example of covert manipulation going drastically wrong is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known as Zaire during the 37-year reign of Mobutu Sese Seko, and before that the Belgian Congo. In 1960, despite Belgian predictions that European rule would continue for another century, the Congo declared its independence, and out of a largely peaceful revolution emerged a charismatic leader, Patrice Lumumba, who became the nation's first Prime Minister. But US policy-makers considered Lumumba, actually militant nationalist, a communist sympathizer, and therefore a threat to vital interests.

Located in Africa's heartland, the Congo was vital for its vast mineral resources; one of the world's largest copper and industrial diamond producers, it also had gold, manganese, zinc, cobalt, and silver. To be blunt, it was a key source of raw materials for the emerging military-industrial complex. Its uranium, one of the only known sources during World War II,

was used in the first atomic bombs.

Even today, it isn't completely clear what sealed Lumumba's fate; some say it was his attempt to have UN troops step in to deal with the violence breaking out between tribes and political parties. In the richest province, Katanga, Moise Tshombe had declared himself ruler, attempted to secede, and recruited Belgian, French and South African mercenaries to fight the new government. However it was decided, Lumumba became a target for removal in the CIA's "golden age" of destabilization campaigns. After less than a year in office, he was deposed in a coup led by Mobuto, an Israeli-trained paratrooper who had Belgian and US backing. Mobuto, then called Colonel, turned Lumumba over the Tshombe, his archenemy.

Some details of Lumumba's assassination remain mysterious to this day. But in 2000 evidence surfaced that President Dwight Eisenhower may have directly ordered the CIA to "eliminate" him. The evidence came from Robert Johnson, who took notes at an August 18, 1960, White House meeting between Eisenhower and his national security advisers on the Congo crisis. Johnson recalled the president turning to CIA Director Allen Dulles, "in the full hearing of all those in attendance, and saying something to the effect that Lumumba should be eliminated." Eisenhower had strict rules for reports filed on National Security Council meetings: no direct quotations. With Johnson's revelation, the reason became only too clear.

Questions also surround the precise chain of events. But according to Lugo de Witte, a Flemish expert on Africa, Belgian officers probably implemented the plan. A document signed in 1960 by Harold Aspremont Lynden, Belgium's minister for Africa, announced that "the main objective to pursue, in the interests of the Congo, Katanga and Belgium, is clearly the final elimination of Lumumba." After his arrest by Mobutu's forces on

January 17, 1961, on orders from Belgium's foreign minister, Lumumba was transferred to Katanga, tortured in the presence of Belgian officials, and executed under the supervision of a Belgian captain.

The new nation, whose artificial boundaries had been set in negotiations between Belgium, Britain, France and Portugal, continued to hover at the edge of civil war for several more years.

The US stuck with Mobutu until the bitter end, propping him up as part of its Cold War strategy. As "president for life," he stashed a huge fortune in Swiss banks. It didn't matter, as long as he was an anti-communist bulwark. His rapaciousness ultimately spread throughout the country's bureaucracy, especially the army. Still, no discouraging words from

his overseers.

Much of his loot came from the US; he even pocketed CIA cash provided to support "contras" at work in Angola. None of this made any difference. Mobutu was a "friend," part of an elite club that included Noriega in Panama, Marcos in the Philippines, Diem and Thieu in Vietnam, Pinochet in Chile, Somoza in Nicaragua, Suharto in Indonesia, and the Shah in Iran.

And what did this ally do to his country? According to the World Bank, by the late 1990s the economy had shrunk to its 1958 level, despite a tripling of the population. Public finances were a mess, the national currency was worthless, and the State was insolvent. Upon its independence, the Congo had the highest literacy rate in Africa; by the time Mobutu was forced out in 1997, little more than half of all children were even attending schools. When open at all, they didn't have textbooks and the students often had to sit on the floor. Even the desks had been looted.

In the early 90s, Mobutu announced that he would end his one party state. But the transition never began, promised elections were canceled, and repression continued. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations looked the other way, while mainstream media continued a policy of self-imposed ignorance. Only after his departure did the news that Mobutu was a brutal tyrant begin to reach the general public. By this time, one of the continent's most promising nations was hobbled and deeply divided. A dictator had finally fallen, but the culprits who put him there, some even expressing belated outrage, escaped with impunity.

Iraq: Creating the next enemy

When pre-9/11 covert operations are discussed, officials and pundits are quick to claim that, as bad as things sound, that's "ancient history." Things were different during the Cold War, when beating communism excused some extreme, often unsavory tactics. But the logic is also reversed to argue, things are different now, in order to excuse the same cynical manipulation and disregard for human life.

An instruction example followed to fall of the Soviet Union, when a credible new enemy was needed. US policy makers quickly turned their eyes toward Iraq, fresh from victory after an eight-year war with Iran and well-equipped with modern French and Soviet weapons. Saddam Hussein was at the peak of his regional popularity.

Based on the theory that domination of the Gulf region by a Hussein-led Iraq could jeopardize access to oil supplies, Colin Powell, then chairing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called on General H. Norman Schwarzkopf in late 1989 to prepare a blueprint for combat. Schwartzkopf, who would lead Operation Desert Storm a year later, had just taken charge of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), an expanded version of the Rapid Deployment Force established under President Carter.

In May 1990, the National Security Council released a white paper that cited Iraq, and Hussein personally, as "the optimum contenders to replace the Warsaw Pact," using that claim as a justification for increased military spending. Meanwhile, at an emergency Arab summit held in Baghdad, Hussein called for a united front against outside aggression, more Arab coordination, and increased aid to the Jordan and the Palestinian Intifada. In the foreign policy establishment, these were interpreted as fighting words. Four months later Bush drew his line in the sand.

Hussein may well have been tricked into war by repeated assurances that the US felt no obligation to come to Kuwait's defense. It may sound like just one more conspiracy theory. However, this time there is a transcript to support the idea. On July 25, 1990, eight days before the outbreak of fighting between Iraq and Kuwait, US Ambassador April Glaspie held a taped meeting with Hussein, who apparently hoped to make sure the US would stay neutral and not intervene. Obviously, he understood that Saudi Arabia was Washington's key Arab ally, and hosted a significant US military presence in the Gulf. No credible evidence that Iraq planned to attack the Saudis has surfaced.

During their talk, Glaspie clearly suggested to Hussein that the Bush administration understood Iraq's point of view and did not want to meddle in an Arab dispute. At one point, she said, "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait…we see the Iraqi point of view that the measures taken by the U.A.E. and Kuwait is, in the final analysis, parallel to military aggression against Iraq."

A week later, that proved to be very bad advice.

Protecting the cover story

One covert operation that sparked some outrage at the time was the US training of Indonesian commandos accused of torturing and killing civilians. Despite a congressional ban in the 1990s, the Pentagon exploited a legal loophole that allowed "human rights training" to provide instruction in demolition, sniper techniques, psychological operations, and "military operations in urban terrain." The targets included workers who had lost their jobs during Indonesia's economic crisis, students opposing President Suharto's military-dominated regime, and East Timorese who wanted independence.

Until support for Suharto became completely untenable, the Clinton Administration defended this as "engagement with an important country" that served US national interests.

Less publicized but equally deadly was US involvement in low-intensity war in Mexico. Under the guise of anti-drug operations, the US provided hundreds of million to Mexico for arms and training beginning around 1995. This included the US training of the Air-Mobile Special Forces Group (GAFE), created in direct response to the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas. After courses at Fort Bragg, GAFE units went on to kidnap, torture, and kill government opponents. Wearing hoods, they would enter homes in the middle of the night to surprise their targets, and raid hotels and restaurants without presenting search warrants.

Although responsibility for a massacre of 45 civilians in Acteal in December, 1997 couldn't be traced directly to GAFE, the incident clearly reflected counter-insurgency lessons learned at the School of the Americas (SOA) in Georgia and other US training centers. Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest who spent more than two decades trying to close the SOA, repeatedly pointed out that the insurgents under attack were usually reformers, human rights workers, and peasants who opposed repressive governments. Despite platitudes about human rights, the US continued to use the same tactics that had marked earlier interventions in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

What we hear about such "humanitarian" intervention is usually just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, 24-hour news and social media promote the illusion that there are few secrets left. Reality is another matter. Assisting the CIA, front groups like the National Endowment for Democracy have funneled funds to countless so-called insurgencies for

years. Since declaring Islamic fundamentalism the post-communist global menace, the Agency is known to have run covert operations in most Middle-East states, from Libya and Iran to the Sudan.

Not so safe or secret anymore

While visiting London to promote his memoirs, Henry Kissinger once stormed out of a widely heard radio interview when the questioning turned to his complicity in war crimes. Jeremy Paxman, host of a Radio 4 program, asked the former secretary of state whether he felt like a fraud for getting a Nobel Peace Prize after plotting a coup in Chile and orchestrating slaughter in Cambodia. Kissinger fumed and denied everything, of course, charging that his host was woefully misinformed. But later the same day, he declined to show up for a BBC roundtable discussion.

Kissinger isn't the only former leader who sometimes gets nervous about accountability. Back when former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet was fighting extradition to Spain, other potential defendants fretted about the precedent it might set. And the Clinton administration did not help. Instead, it released documents on Chile that not only confirmed what many suspected — the US actively promoted the coup against Allende and sanctioned the subsequent repression — but also sparked a hailstorm of related revelations.

The administration's motives were not exactly pure. Bowing to pressure from a Spanish judge, human rights groups, and the families of victims, Clinton had opted to "declassify what we can, so that we can say we did our share." That's how a White House aide explained it. But the potential to embarrass political opponents didn't escape notice. With Texas Governor George W. Bush emerging as the Republican presidential front-runner, the thought was that his father's connection to Pinochet's crimes could become a factor, or at least a useful attack point, during the 2000 election. It didn't turn out that way.

Questions persist about what the first President Bush knew and did while serving as CIA chief in the mid-1970s, a period during which Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier and his US co-worker Ronni Moffitt were assassinated in Washington. At the time suspicions pointed to Chile's intelligence arm, DINA, a sponsor of international terror.

According to declassified documents, however, we also know that Kissinger, Nixon, and CIA Director Richard Helms ordered a coup even before Allende assumed office. Kissinger and Alexander Haig worked out the details, described in an October 15, 1970, memo. "It is the firm and consistent policy that Allende be overthrown by a coup," wrote CIA Deputy Director of Plans Thomas Karamessines, who coordinated the operation. "We are to continue to generate maximum pressure toward this end utilizing every appropriate resource. It is

imperative that these actions be implemented clandestinely and securely so that the USG and American hand be well hidden."

Two years later, their goal was achieved. In a victory report, Naval attache Patrick Ryan called September 11, 1972, "our D-day," noting that the coup "was close to perfect." In subsequent years, the State Department received detailed reports on the escalating death toll under Pinochet. Yet, in another memo Kissinger tells the general that the US is "sympathetic with what you are trying to do here."

Years later, as Pinochet faced charges for murder, torture, disappearances, rape, and genocide, the question naturally arose: Why not Kissinger and those responsible for mass mayhem elsewhere? If more documents were declassified, the list of possible defendants would undoubtedly grow.

The accountability chase

Even though he ultimately escaped punishment, the Chilean dictator's case did help peel away the facade of deniability, exposing high officials who provided weapons, training, financial support, and direct guidance for some of the worst modern violations of political and civil rights. Given that, is it any surprise the US backed out of an International Criminal Court (ICC), which was established in part to prosecute powerful individuals when domestic courts fail to act?

The treaty establishing the ICC wa adopted in 1998, and subsequently ratified by many countries. At the time, human rights groups considered it the most important advance for the cause of international justice since the creation of the UN. But the US refused to sign at first, joining such notable naysayers as Russia, China, Israel, Iraq, and much of the Middle East.

Officially, the US objection was that, as the world's pre-eminent (and most resented) power, it might be subjected to "frivolous" prosecutions. There were also suspicions about the UN itself. By delaying, US officials hoped to obtain a guarantee that no US citizen accused of war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity could ever be brought before the court. In a letter to European Union foreign ministers, Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under Clinton, implied that if her country did not get its way, it might withdraw from international peace-keeping and humanitarian missions. Pentagon officials went further, threatening to pull forces out of Europe.

In December 2000, the US finally signed, leaving Libya as the only country officially antagonistic the ICC's creation. But shortly after taking office, Bush II revived the old objections, suggesting that the court could expose US soldiers and officials abroad to politically motivated war crimes prosecutions. After 9/11 and the military response in Afghanistan, that looked more like a possibility. Thus, plans proceeded to reshape US relations with the UN. In May 2002, the administration informed the world body that it was nullifying its treaty signature. It was an unprecedented step; no other nation had ever before voided a signature on a binding international treaty. For many countries, the decision was a clear early sign of resurgent US unilateralism.

On the bright side, Kissinger did squirm a bit. Even Bush I sensed that he might not be immune. Predictably, the ex-president called the case against Pinochet "a travesty of justice." Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher also became edgy, making discreet

inquiries to Britain's Interior Ministry on the likelihood of being arrested while traveling abroad. As an old friend of Pinochet, the Iron Lady was worried about being charged as a war criminal for her actions in Northern Ireland and the Falklands.

The exposure of war crimes by former high officials like Kissinger, although it usually comes decades late and rarely leads to prosecution, does suggest that it may one day be possible to get at the truth about covert schemes and schemers. For Bill Clinton, meddling in Mexico and the Sudan, not to mention in Iraq and Kosovo, could prove damning if more of those stories were revealed.

In May 2002, eight months after 9/11, Bush II almost faced that same problem: premature exposure, in this case of what he actually knew and did before the attacks, could have led to embarrassing revelations about how and why the "war on terror" was launched. But no such luck. It still takes at least a generation, plus political convenience, to get far beyond the veil of disinformation.

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