



TIMES PAST



TIMELINE

1979: SOVIET INVASION ▲

When Islamic guerillas threaten to topple the Communist-leaning government in Kabul, the Soviet Union invades.

1986: COLD WAR BATTLE

The U.S. begins arming the *mujahedeen* guerillas fighting the Soviets. By 1989, after 10 years of war, the Soviets give up and head home.

1996: THE TALIBAN ▲

The Taliban seize power, imposing strict Islamic law, with women forced to cover themselves in public and men forced to grow beards.

AFGHANISTAN:

BOTH THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN AND AMERICA'S BATTLE WITH AL QAEDA SPRING DIRECTLY FROM THE SOVIET UNION'S INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN IN 1979

By Lawrence M. Paul

On Christmas eve in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan to rescue a Communist-leaning government under attack by Islamic rebels. No one could have known at the time, but this was one of the turning points of the 20th century, and maybe the 21st as well.

The grueling 10-year war that followed led to:

- The collapse of the Soviet Union itself, along with the end of the Cold War.
- The emergence of Islamic guerrilla fighters who evolved into Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

•Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, which drew the United States into its own wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that continue today.

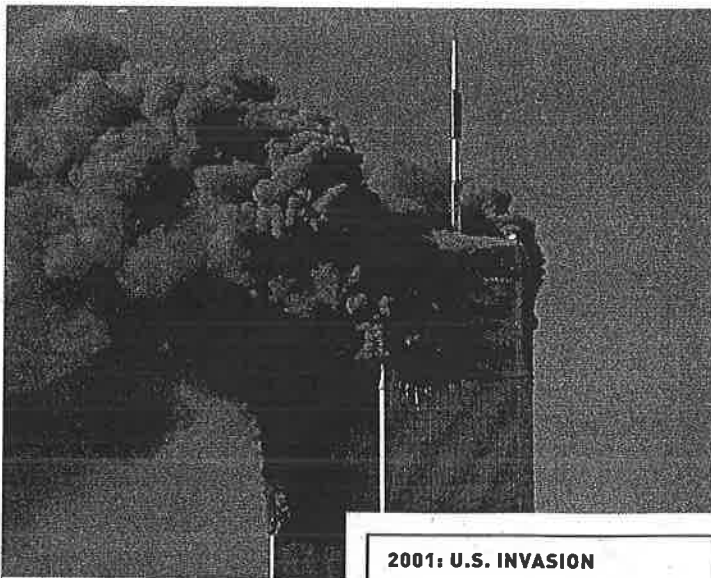
In response to the Soviet invasion three decades ago, President Jimmy Carter and other Western leaders expressed the usual Cold War shock and outrage (and Carter pulled the U.S. from the 1980 Moscow Olympics in protest). But Carter's advisers also hoped that the Russians would themselves be damaged by the war they had started.

With 80,000-plus troops in the field, the Soviets quickly discovered that conventional forces, even those as powerful as the Red Army, were of little use in a place like Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a country of rugged terrain and harsh weather, about the size of Texas. Then, as now, it was more a collection of tribes than a cohesive nation: People's loyalties tilted more to regional and ethnic leaders than to any national government.

So while Afghanistan has been invaded repeatedly over the centuries, it's difficult to rule and virtually impossible to truly conquer—as the Persians found in the 5th and 6th centuries B.C., and again in the 7th century A.D.; as the Mongols, including Genghis Khan, learned in the 13th to 16th centuries A.D.; and as the British found in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

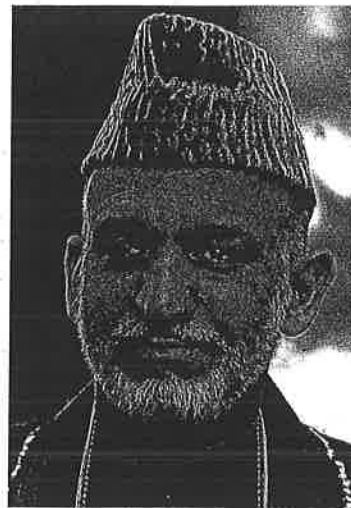
BETTMANN/CORBIS (TANKS); MIAN KHURSHED/REUTERS/CORBIS (SCHOOL GIRLS IN BURQAS)



2001: 9/11 ATTACKS ▲
The 9/11 attacks on the U.S. are planned by Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders allowed into Afghanistan by the Taliban.

2001: U.S. INVASION

Vowing to find Osama bin Laden and overthrow the Taliban, President Bush orders a U.S. invasion in October. The Taliban fall quickly, but Bin Laden escapes into the mountains on Pakistan's border.



2004: ELECTIONS ▲

Hamid Karzai is elected President in democratic elections. But he has proven unable to rebuild the nation, halt rampant government corruption, or stop the resurgent Taliban.



2009: MORE TROOPS ▲

In December, President Obama decides to send 30,000 more American troops, bringing the total to around 100,000. He says that U.S. forces will begin to leave in 2011.

HOW WE GOT THERE

The British left Afghanistan after World War I, and the nation struggled to find its footing as a monarchy and a republic. A series of coups in the 1970s brought to power a pro-Soviet government that Moscow sought to protect with the 1979 invasion.

"Time does not concern us," a guerrilla leader told a *New York Times* reporter during the first year of the Soviet war. "We have been fighting for centuries."

Soviet tanks and troops were of little use in the mountains and canyons. The only weapon that the guerrillas could not effectively combat was helicopters, which could see and attack from above.

HELP FROM THE U.S.

Unable to subdue the Afghan rebellion from the ground, Soviet pilots began turning their guns and rockets on villages and towns to terrorize the population and to discourage resistance.

Eventually, though, even the Soviets' air power met its match, thanks in part to the U.S.

During the Cold War, both sides followed the old adage: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." America's new friends in this case were the Islamic guerrillas known as *mujahedeen*, or "holy warriors," battling the Soviets. In 1986, the U.S. and its allies began arming the *mujahedeen* with Stinger missiles:

shoulder-fired rockets that could hit their targets from three miles away, which meant the rebels could shoot down aircraft before Soviet pilots even knew they were targets.

By the late 1980s, the *mujahedeen* had battled the mighty Red Army to a stalemate. Finally, the Soviet Union gave up, pulling out the last of its troops early in 1989.

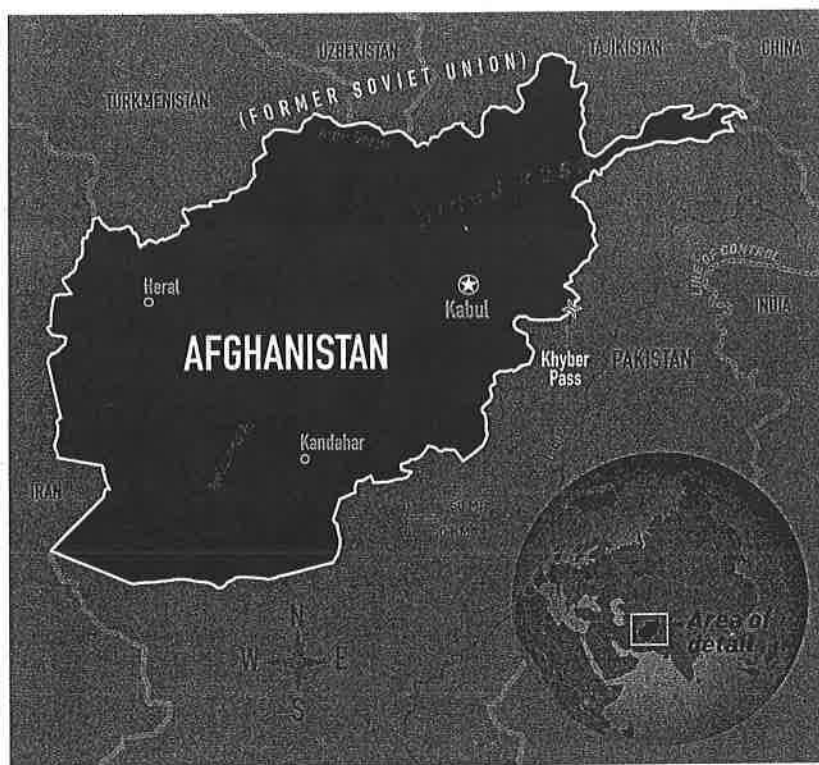
The war had taken a terrible toll on both sides. As many as 1.5 million Afghans died, including hundreds of thousands of civilians, out of a population of 15 million.

On the Soviet side, 15,000 soldiers died and another 11,000 returned home disabled. In addition, the war's enormous expense intensified already crushing economic problems at home. Public discontent, and tempers, ran high.

At the same time, some of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, like Poland and East Germany, were beginning to crumble. In February 1990, just a year after the retreat from Afghanistan, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev told the 15 Soviet republics to elect their own governments, beginning a disintegration of the Soviet Union that took only another year.

Back in Afghanistan, chaos reigned. With the Soviets gone,

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AL QAEDA LEADER Osama bin Laden

the tribal bands of the mujahedeen were battling each other for supremacy. Tens of thousands more lives were lost and much of Kabul, the capital, was reduced to rubble.

From this anarchy emerged the Taliban, young men who had been educated in schools of fundamentalist Islam known as *madrassas* (*talib* means student in Arabic). After fighting as mujahedeen against the Soviets, they were determined not only to restore order, but to implement their radical Muslim code of behavior.

At first, the Taliban were welcomed by many Afghans weary of conflict, and by 1996 they were in control of the country. But as they became more powerful, they became more repressive, forcing all Afghans to adhere to their interpretation of *sharia*, or Islamic law. Public executions for trivial offenses were common. Women and girls had no rights: no work, no school, no appearing in public without full body coverings known as *burkas*. They could be stoned to death for adultery (being raped constituted adultery), and shot for offenses as insignificant as wearing nail polish.

BIN LADEN EMERGES

Other mujahedeen leaders joined forces with the Taliban, including a tall, intense, and deeply religious billionaire's son from Saudi Arabia who had come to Afghanistan to fight in the holy war against the Soviets: Osama bin Laden.

He had returned to Saudi Arabia after the war, and became enraged at the U.S. (and the Saudi government) for stationing "infidel" troops in the birthplace of Islam during

the Persian Gulf War against Iraq in 1990 and 1991.

After being expelled from Saudi Arabia for his antigovernment activities, he was welcomed back to Afghanistan by the Taliban. Working with a growing group of other angry Islamic fundamentalists who became known as Al Qaeda, bin Laden began plotting against the U.S. and the West.

The exact number of terrorist acts committed by or inspired by Al Qaeda is not known (some say as many as 50), but the most notorious were the airplane attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, in which almost 3,000 people were killed by 19 suicide hijackers.

In response, President George W. Bush sent U.S. forces into Afghanistan, where Bin Laden was based, in late 2001, and then Iraq in 2003. (Bush accused Iraq of aiding Al Qaeda and harboring weapons of mass destruction, but both claims turned out to be false.)

Today, more than eight years after easily ousting the Taliban government in Afghanistan and nearly seven years after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the U.S. is still deeply involved in two wars.

As for Bin Laden, he escaped into the mountainous, uncontrolled tribal regions on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where U.S. commanders believe he is still hiding.

Afghanistan's President, Hamid Karzai, has been losing support both in Afghanistan and in Washington as a result of his failure to rebuild Afghanistan, keep the Taliban at bay, and root out rampant corruption in his government. This has given the Taliban an opening to regroup, rearm, and aggressively



PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS ORDERED a buildup to about 100,000 American troops in Afghanistan. Will they start to come home in 2011?

battle Afghan, American, British, and other coalition troops.

More than 4,300 American service members have died in Iraq (from where President Obama has said all U.S. combat forces will be withdrawn by this summer) and more than 900 in Afghanistan, which is now the bloodier of the two fronts.

There is something of a historical irony in this.

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, told the President that "we have the opportunity of giving the U.S.S.R. its Vietnam war." And indeed, there were many parallels between the U.S. experience in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s, and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan: a superpower unable to defeat a guerrilla resistance.

AMERICA'S NEXT VIETNAM?

Now, there is concern that the U.S. is in danger of repeating the Afghan mistakes of the Soviets—who repeated the Vietnam mistakes of the U.S.—by using a conventional army against guerrillas who strike quickly, use sabotage and trickery, then melt back into the population.

Some in Congress are speaking out against the growing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Opinion polls show that many Americans are turning against the war too.

Some historians have noted the parallels between the presidencies of Barack Obama and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-69), both men with ambitious agendas but burdened by wars.

"L.B.J. managed to create Medicare and enact landmark civil rights legislation, but some historians have argued that

the Great Society ultimately stalled because of Vietnam," Peter Baker wrote in *The New York Times*:

Robert Caro, the L.B.J. biographer, who discussed the predicament with President Obama at a dinner last June, observed:

"Any President with a grasp of history—and it seems to me President Obama has a deep understanding of history—would have to be very aware of what happened in another war to derail a great domestic agenda."

Obama's agenda is as far-reaching as Johnson's was: trying to lead the global effort to put the world economy back on solid footing, in addition to overhauling the nation's health care system and grappling with climate change.

In December, after months of wrenching deliberations with his top military and foreign policy advisors, Obama announced that he would send 30,000 additional American troops to Afghanistan—bringing the total to nearly 100,000—in an effort to halt the Taliban's increasing momentum.

"I do not make this decision lightly," the President said. "I make this decision because I am convinced that our security is at stake."

But Obama also said that U.S. troops would begin to leave Afghanistan sometime in 2011, which left some critics, and even some allies, convinced that he wasn't fully committed to the military escalation he'd just ordered, or to the war itself.

As he confronts the question of how to manage a war that he inherited but has called "necessary," his principal challenge is to avoid having Afghanistan, which became the Soviet Union's Vietnam, become America's Vietnam—again. ●