

4-22-2021

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HNRS Thesis

22 April 2021

The Martyrdom and Monster-ization of the Mujahideen in the American Christian Mind

Abstract:

As the world was swept up in the Cold War, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan not only alarmed Western and Middle Eastern powers, but forced them to take active and often secret roles in defending Afghanistan. The USSR's Marxist, secularist puppet governments in Afghanistan were hated by the tribal warlords of Afghanistan, who would soon become the mujahideen after Christmas Eve in 1979. The mujahideen held a special place within the American public mind, as both the Carter and Reagan administrations exhorted the Afghan rebels for their courage, bravery, and piety. Although these rebels were indeed Muslim, American Christians held the same sentiment as their commanders-in-chief, that these freedom fighters were heroes, fighting for the same ideals America was established upon. Under the immense threat of communism and Marxist ideology, American Christians were willing to concede many points of contention between the mujahideen and themselves, in an effort to hold the Iron Curtain at bay. This effort would only hold until September 11th, when Muslim freedom fighters began to fight on the wrong side of justice – a side that would afford yet another war in the Middle East, this time with a previous ally, the US.

History of the Middle East and the US during Carter and Reagan Years

In the midst of the Cold War, conflict in the Middle East was altogether turbulent and teetering on the edge of war. This was not a new issue, but conflict that had been wrapped in

decades and century long entanglements between tribal groups and foreign entities. Afghanistan, a land-locked, mountainous country in the Middle East is called by some, the “graveyard of empires.” Through the expansion and colonization of the British and Soviet empires, Afghanistan became a buffer and place of interest for the two empires. The carving out of Afghanistan arbitrarily separated groups, both ethnic and tribal, creating much conflict without physical aggression. Afghanistan’s eventual status as an independent emirate and kingdom gave way to King Mohammed Zahir Shah’s rule, which pushed Afghanistan’s largely agrarian region to a rapid urbanization in the 1960s. Afghan citizens in urban areas praised the establishment of elections, political rights, and women’s education during this rule. Three decades after World War III, Afghanistan remained neutral and unaligned in the Cold War, even with a northern Soviet border. Although Afghanistan remained officially unaligned, both the US and the USSR saw the country as an opportunity to wield power in the Cold War.¹

King Mohammed Zahir Shah’s cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, staged a coup against his cousin’s rule, where Daoud Khan eventually named himself prime minister and president of the Afghan Republic in what is known as the 1973 Afghan coup d’état. Daoud Khan continued to push progressive policies like his predecessor. However, because of Daoud Khan’s Pashtun nationalism and desire for reunification of the Pakistani Pashtun people in Afghanistan, other ethnic groups in the region began to become disillusioned with the newfound president. Daoud Khan’s response to public opinion was to restrict civil liberties, causing both the left and right-

¹ Lowenstein, Julie, "US Foreign Policy and the Soviet-Afghan War: A Revisionist History" (2016). Harvey M. Applebaum '59 Award. 9.

https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/applebaum_award/9

wing political leaders and factions to despise him. In April of 1978, in the Saur Revolution, led by the Soviet-backed Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Daoud Khan was overthrown and Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin placed in power. Prime Minister Amin pushed for more and more progressive policies like women's' education, equality, and land redistribution to the poor. However, these policies displeased right-wing, rural traditionalists because of their lack of consideration toward their lifestyles. The cruel streak in Prime Ministers' responses to dissent didn't end with Daoud Khan, but was only exacerbated in Amin. However progressive Amin's policies were, he was extremely dictatorial and cruel, seeking to crush any resistance rising against him. Amin had dissenters imprisoned and executed, leading to riots in March of 1979. His response worried both Taraki supporters and the USSR, creating space for yet another uprising. Amin's President, Nur Muhammad Taraki, turned to Soviet support in disseminating riots and disempowering Amin. When Amin discovered Taraki's dealings with the Soviets, he had Taraki killed and himself declared President, further weakening the governmental system.

Because of the intense and frequent power struggles, USSR General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev sought to pacify the rebels and take over the Afghan government. The Iranian Revolution served as a brutal reminder to Brezhnev of how Muslim rule in the Middle East collapsed Soviet strongholds and weakened the empire. Brezhnev would not allow this to happen.

In the United States, President Jimmy Carter was chosen by an electorate dissatisfied and derisive of elected officials. Falling in the prolific wake of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and CIA foreign affairs scandals, Carter had immense gaps to fill as commander-in-chief. The shocks of these scandals left the American public with a desire for foreign relations that made peace

instead of war with the world. Soon after Carter's election, the American public shifted back to distrust of foreign entities and a want for a hardline style of foreign diplomacy. Carter's campaign promises of peace-making had to shift to hardline foreign policy, but he would never be able to shake his soft image. A bright spot of the Carter Presidency was his efforts in the Camp David Accords, a series of agreements between Egypt and Israel, in what Carter hoped would start a legacy of peace-making throughout the Middle East.² However, the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan amidst the Iranian Hostage Crisis made Carter seem weak on foreign policy. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1977, Carter said, "Our commitment to human rights must be absolute."³ However, his refusal to condemn Iran's Shah and his affront to human rights did President Carter no favors in the future. Carter created a specific division within the State Department with a sole function to advance human rights. This Human Rights office was to recommend U.S. policy initiatives and economic incentives or sanctions depending on the lack of or presence of human rights issues for foreign countries. However, because of high ranking career officials at the State Department and the presidency's tradition in foreign diplomacy, many countries who were already viewed as strategic partners were still given aid despite human rights considerations. Specifically, Carter saw Iran and the Shah as a strategic partnership, and even at a state visit to Iran in 1977 exhorted the Shah as a great leader and that Iran was "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.... We have no other nation on

² Lenczowski, George. *American Presidents and the Middle East*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

³ Carter, Jimmy. "Inaugural Address of Jimmy Carter." Speech, Carter Administration, Washington, D.C., January 20, 1977. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/carter.asp

earth who is as close to us in planning for our mutual security, and there is no leader with whom I have a deeper sense of gratitude or friendship.”⁴ At the time, no one in the Carter administration could predict the animosity growing toward the Shah in Iran, and by the summer of 1978, riots broke out across Iran.

In January 1979, the Shah’s troops were overtaken by Iranian protestors and armed fighters, causing the Shah to flee in exile. The revolutionaries seized power and Ayatollah Khomeinei, longtime political adversary of the Shah and Shia fundamentalist, was elected by national referendum to be the supreme leader of the new Iranian government, and a new theocratic-republican constitution was voted in by the people. In the Fall of 1979, the Shah, exiled from Iran in Mexico, became seriously ill with cancer, and needed specialized treatment. Carter, urged by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, allowed the Shah to enter into the US to receive medical treatment—a move read by Iranian students who supported Khomeini as an attempt by the US to strategize and secure the Shah’s return to Iranian political power. In order to keep the growing US Embassy from overthrowing the current Iranian government, Iranian students surrounded the embassy on November 4th, 1979. Students occupied the compound and took 66 Americans hostage. The Iranian government, deciding not to intervene, fully endorsed the student’s occupation and holding of hostages, creating a nefarious situation for the US and Carter. The Iranian Hostage Crisis would not be quickly over. The female and African-American hostages were returned to the US by Iran, but 52 white male US embassy employees were held as hostages for 444 days in the American embassy in Tehran.

⁴ Carter, Jimmy. “Island of Stability.” Speech, Carter Administration, Iran, December 1977.

<https://youtu.be/DqrHQpRHwvs>

Already distressed over oil shortages, spiking inflation rates, and the Iranian hostage crisis, Americans and the Carter Administration would not have a reprieve in relations with the Middle East. On Christmas Eve, 1979, Soviet forces launched an air and land invasion of Afghanistan, seizing urban areas, roads, and communication lines. Amin was captured, executed, and replaced with the much more moderate Soviet-controlled Babrak Karmal. Debates rose quickly internationally on whether this was an invasion or intervention, with the West and many neighboring Muslim countries deciding on the former. President Carter regarded the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with great sobriety and severity. Carter saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the end of the age of detente, and a threat to global security and stability. In his address to the American people after the invasion, Carter said of the invasion, “It is a deliberate effort of a powerful, atheistic government to subjugate an independent, Islamic people.”

⁵Carter’s tolerance and protection of the Islamic people of Afghanistan was a sentiment shared across the nation, even calling people of Afghanistan a “fiercely independent people.”⁶ This trend in seeing Afghan rebels who fought against the Soviets as kindred spirits with the Americans would follow throughout the Soviet-Afghan War. Tribal warlords of Afghanistan, driven out to the Northern mountainous desert by the Soviet invasion, saw the Red Army as a foreign, atheistic invader – much like Americans did – making this “jihad,” or holy war. Jihad literally means struggle, and can be used to reference an internal struggle with temptation or used to describe an outward struggle against non-Muslim oppression. America chose to define jihad as

⁵ Carter, Jimmy. “On Afghanistan.” Speech, Carter Administration, Washington D.C., January 4, 1980. Courtesy of the University of Virginia Miller Center of Affairs. <https://youtu.be/u2Y4t0-9MY>

⁶ Carter, Jimmy. “On Afghanistan.” <https://youtu.be/u2Y4t0-9MY>

the latter. These warlords united into a coalition that would come to be known as the “Mujahideen,” or freedom fighters, and were committed to combating the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, their home.⁷

In President Carter’s State of the Union Address in 1980, he announced what the administration called the “Carter Doctrine.” He characterized this new hard-line foreign policy initiative with, “any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region would be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”⁸ Carter’s newfound hard-ball style of foreign diplomacy was what the American people craved, and where Reagan’s beginnings in this style are found. Carter established economic and trade sanctions against the USSR, restricting technology trade, fishing industries, and grain exports to the USSR, while still assuring the American people that these efforts would not go to damage human life in the USSR, but hurt industry. The US Ambassador was recalled from Moscow, and organized amongst other foreign policy advisers, to best advise Carter in future dealings with the USSR. Carter requested a boycott of the US teams in the Summer Olympics in 1980, which was honored by US Olympic athletes, preventing Moscow’s potential tourism income surrounding the Olympics. Carter cut \$36 billion in planned domestic spending and got Congress to appropriate \$47 billion for weapons systems development for the Afghan resistance.⁹ For however soft Carter was made to

⁷ Cooley, John K. *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.

⁸ Carter, Jimmy. “State of the Union Address.” Speech, Carter Administration, Washington D.C., January 23, 1980. <https://youtu.be/CF9muAUuGVI>

⁹ Yaqub, Salim. “The Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis.” *The US and the Middle East: 1914 to 9/11*. Lecture, n.d.

be concerning foreign policy in the beginning of his presidency, in the latter months his policy became hardened to foreign threats.

The US, patiently waiting for their chance to intervene in an unstable Afghanistan, saw this as an opportunity to make strategic partnerships in an area with a much sought after commodity: oil. Before the invasion, the US supplied the Mujahideen with communications equipment, but saw Soviet aggression as an opportunity and force to a more active role. The US started funneling arms and equipment through Pakistan to the Mujahideen in an effort to stop the threat of communism. The US's effort to contain communism was not the only motivation in arming the Mujahideen, but to build rapport and confidence with potential future leaders of Afghanistan. This effort to supply arms and aid to the Mujahideen through other countries' financial and physical support came to be known as Operation Cyclone.¹⁰ This relationship had mutual benefit to all three parties: the Mujahideen wanted to combat Soviet occupation and an independent, Islamic Afghanistan; the U.S. wanted to contain communism, and Pakistan wanted to participate in pan-Islamic cooperation. Carter even passed Presidential Directive 59, mandating the creation of a possible nuclear war plan against the USSR. Operation Cyclone implored the help of both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, with Saudi Arabia in a financier role, and Pakistan taking a more active role in training of Mujahid fighters and distribution of weapons as a bordering country.

¹⁰ Cooley, John K. *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.

Carter even excused human rights violations and nuclear development in Pakistan in an effort to support Soviet success in Afghanistan. Washington modified previous policy against Pakistan as they helped support the Mujahideen effort. Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Zia ul-Haq was offered aid in return for Pakistan's help in recruitment and weaponization of Mujahadi fighters. Zia's human rights violations, efforts to procure nuclear weapons, and political agenda were all conceded in the threat of a potentially communist-led Afghanistan. Zia, an Islamic fundamentalist, funneled American money into Afghan groups that were ideologically like himself, with the most notable group being Hizbi-i Islami or the Islamic Party led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.¹¹ Due to extensive Pakistani support, Hekmatyar quickly became a top-player in the Mujahideen. Zia's play to position Hekmatyar in a leading role in the Mujahideen was an effort to position a future Afghanistan potentially led by Hekmatyar in a pro-Pakistan light.

The Mujahideen's independent financial support, especially with Saudi Arabia, afforded key players like Osama Bin Laden, a role in the Afghan resistance. Osama Bin Laden, a friend of the Saudi Arabian royal family, acted as a financier and symbol of support for the resistance. Bin Laden worked in tandem with the CIA, to recruit and train Mujihadi fighters. One such recruit was Umar Abd al-Rahman, who was recruited to give impassioned sermons to inspire fighters, but would later become part of the Al-Qaeda network, which Bin Laden established during his involvement with the Mujahideen. The US government worked to swell Mujahideen recruit numbers – recruiting young Muslim men from across the world to train in Pakistan and fight in the war. The pull for young Muslim men was to participate in jihad, or what the US definitively

¹¹ Yaqub, Salim. "Carter and Camp David." *The US and the Middle East: 1914 to 9/11*. Lecture, n.d.

defined for them as holy war. From 1982 to 1992, over 35,000 fighters were recruited from over 40 Muslim countries. The Mujahideen practiced guerilla warfare strategy, and were successful in some individual battles with the Soviet Army, overwhelming them in surprise and increasing numbers. This guerilla warfare strategy kept the Red Army on their toes, while the martyrdom of the Mujahideen inspired more and more membership and support from around the world and within Afghanistan. Yet even with foreign financiers and stealthy military strategy, the Soviets still held the upper hand in the war.

In July 1980, Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq, launched an attack on a distracted Iran, in an effort to control the Shatt-al-Arab waterway. This waterway had been disputed over for years, and in a 1975 US supported Kurdish uprising, both countries were to share control of the waterway, even when in a previous agreement Iraq was given full control. Hussein saw Iran's weakness and distraction in fighting off the Soviet invasion as a chance to once again control Shatt-al-Arab, and this war would last for the next 8 years. Resulting in immense casualties on each side, this set up a unique position for the US government to diplomatically settle the hostage crisis. The US's support of Iraq caused Iran to begin negotiations with the US, in an effort to gain an upper hand in the war. Eventually Carter would succeed in negotiating a deal that would return all 52 hostages, but not before Reagan was elected for his hard-on-foreign-policy political campaign.¹² Reagan highlighted the mishaps and oversteps by the Carter administration in a failed rescue mission and capitalized on the media sensation of the crisis, winning in a landslide in the election of 1980. Carter, a lame-duck president, negotiated a deal

¹² Smith, Gaddis. *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

that would unfreeze Iranian assets held in US banks and prevent further US interference in Iranian relations for the safe and peaceful return of all 52 hostages. Iran, in an effort to humiliate Carter further, released the hostages only minutes after Reagan was sworn into office on January 20th, 1981.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev's anti-war sentiment began to rapidly shift Soviet public opinion of the war. In 1986, Stinger missiles began to be supplied to the Mujahideen, allowing them to keep their mountains free of Soviet helicopters, and therefore Soviet access. Because of low sentiment for the war in the USSR, the success of Stinger missiles, and the Mujahideen's persistence, Gorbachev began to formulate an exit strategy and officially ended the war in 1988 with the Geneva Accords. The Geneva Accords stated that no further intervention from any foreign power would continue as the Soviets withdrew. The Soviet's replacement Prime Minister, Mohammad Najibullah, continued to be a target of the Mujahideen after Soviet withdrawal, which was to the Mujahideen a symbol of Soviet power and occupation. The USSR continued to aid the Afghan puppet government in fighting the Mujahideen until its fall in 1991. Najibullah disbanded the government in 1992 after the Mujahideen surrendered the capital city of Kabul, and Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Mujahideen's General Minister of Defense, advocated for an Islamic-coalition government. Hekmatyar, a Mujahideen leader, sought sole rule and continued to engage in conflict with Massoud and the rest of the Mujahideen for control of Afghanistan. In 1994, it seemed Massoud had defeated Hekmatyar until an outside group led by Mohammed Mullah Omar started backing Hekmatyar. This group would come to be known as the Taliban. Pakistan's favor transferred to the Taliban, and in 1996, the Taliban controlled much of the country, including Kabul. The Taliban executed President Najibullah, and continued the fight with the Mujahideen. On September 9th, 2001, Massoud was assassinated by Taliban

members posing as reporters, breaking down the alliance of the Mujahideen. Two days later on September 11th, a terrorist cell known as Al-Qaeda, led by previous Mujahideen financier Osama Bin Laden, attacked the World Trade Centers in New York City. Bin Laden was offered shelter in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and US President George W. Bush declared a war on terror, demanding the Taliban surrender Bin Laden. The Taliban refused and the US declared war on the Taliban, effectively starting the War in Afghanistan.

Mujahideen Support and Characterization in the Press

The United States' support of the Mujahideen against the Soviets is contrasted by the terrorist attacks of the successors of the Mujahideen. State-funded support of a group seen as a strategic ally who then turned state enemy is not only a dramatic turn of events, but ironic in the least. This irony is not lost on many, as both Carter and Reagan worked to achieve a peaceful agreement in Afghanistan and Soviet retreat from the country. However, what I find even more ironic is the American public support for the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen were referred to by local and national levels of news media as "freedom-fighters" throughout the Soviet-Afghan War, and were viewed quite favorably within public opinion. There was no widespread semblance of Islamophobia in a pre-9/11 America, and even most Christians are tolerant to the Muslim Afghan rebels. In a New York Times Article from 1985 titled, "Don't Forget the Afghans,"¹³ Orrin Hatch, a U.S. senator from California, wrote about the Mujahideen with sympathy: "The mujahideen have two fundamental strengths: the support of the majority of their countrymen and their own determination and raw courage." The Mujahideen are seen as tenacious, determined rebels which plays to a sense of American patriotism. Under the Cold

¹³Hatch, Orrin G. "Don't Forget the Afghans." New York Times, November 22, 1985.

War, the USSR is seen as an “evil empire”¹⁴ as dictated by President Reagan in his address to the National Association of Evangelicals. Senator Hatch was one of the key players in convincing President Reagan to supply the Mujahideen with the exceedingly instrumental Stinger missiles, and recalls his foreign relation efforts as exceedingly important in ending the Soviet-Afghan War, and eventually the Cold War. Hatch negotiated with China to form necessary supply lines in the effort, as reported by *Deseret News* in 1992¹⁵. Hatch’s status as an American Mormon seems not to color his perception of the Muslim freedom fighters. Instead, he expresses a rich sentiment for protecting Afghan human rights and liberties. This pulse is never far from anti-Soviet sentiment in American public opinion, with the iron curtain as a foe shrouded in fear and global panic. Hatch’s positive, even brotherly regard for the Mujahideen and their courage is one that will run throughout not only secular news sources, but ecclesiastical publications as well. Publications equate the mujahideen to “freedom fighters” and play on American notions of nationalism and patriotism. This sense of ethos toward Afghan rebels is established by coupling them with an image Americans knew all too well: the American Revolutionists.

President Jimmy Carter gave an address on January 4, 1980, in which he announced to the American people that Afghanistan had been invaded by the USSR.

¹⁴ Reagan, Ronald. “President Reagan's Address to the National Association of Evangelicals.”

Carter Administration, Sheraton Twin Towers, Orlando, Florida. March 8, 1983.

¹⁵Davidson, Lee. “Hatch Vital in Funneling Stingers to Rebels in Afghanistan, Report Says.”

Deseret News, July 20, 1992.

“50,000 heavily armed Soviet troops have crossed the border and are now dispersed throughout Afghanistan, attempting to conquer the fiercely independent Muslim people of that country.”¹⁶

Carter exhorts the Afghan people as an independent people seeking freedom. Much of this rhetoric is carried on into the Reagan administration which would replace him a mere 16 days later. In a 1982 Afghanistan Day Proclamation, Nahid, a young Afghan refugee who fled when Soviet forces attacked her schoolyard, gave a speech in which she dictated the horrors of Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and presented Reagan the national flag of Afghanistan as a symbol of partnership. Reagan’s following speech declares March 21 as Afghanistan day, “testifying to America’s deep and continuing admiration of the Afghan people in the face of brutal and unprovoked aggression by the Soviet Union.”¹⁷ His characterization of the Afghan people relates them to normal Americans, playing on the desires that every American has “to live their lives in peace, practice their religion in freedom, and to exercise their right to self-determination.”¹⁸ Reagan remarks on his talks with unsung American heroes, but notes that Afghanistan is “a

¹⁶ Carter, Jimmy. “State of the Union Address.” Speech, Washington D.C., January 23, 1980. <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>

¹⁷ Reagan, Ronald. “President Reagan Speech on Afghanistan Day Proclamation.” Speech, Reagan Administration, East Room, March 10, 1982. Master Tape #040. Courtesy of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. <https://youtu.be/PfwiqW8eyD4>

¹⁸ Reagan, Ronald. “President Reagan Speech on Afghanistan Day Proclamation.” <https://youtu.be/PfwiqW8eyD4>

nation of unsung heroes, whose courageous struggle is one of the epics of our time.”¹⁹ This likening of Afghan rebels to American heroes creates a sense of patriotism and camaraderie with the Afghan people to the American public.

“The brave Afghan freedom fighters have prevented the nearly 100,000 strong Soviet occupation force from extending its control over a large portion of the countryside.... Their heroic struggle has come at an immense cost.”²⁰

Reagan’s exhortation to the mujahideen as brave freedom fighters likens them to American patriots, solidifying them as valiant heroes in the American public mind.

In a 1985 address on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Reagan sympathizes again with the mujahideen and Afghan people. “It has been six years of utter hell for the Afghan people who still fight on in the name of the ideals upon which our own nation was founded: freedom and independence.”²¹ Reagan’s address condemned the USSR for horrific human rights violations and foreign aggression, all the while garnering sympathy and stirring public opinion of the Soviet-Afghan war. Reagan even invited Americans to religious sentiment for the mujahideen: “it is fitting for us to honor and pray for those brave men and women.”²² This type

¹⁹ Reagan, Ronald. “President Reagan Speech on Afghanistan Day Proclamation.”

<https://youtu.be/PfwiqW8eyD4>

²⁰ Reagan, Ronald. “President Reagan Speech on Afghanistan Day Proclamation.”

<https://youtu.be/PfwiqW8eyD4>

²¹ Reagan, Ronald. “Weekly Radio Show Topic: Afghanistan.” Weekly Radio Show, Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, December 28, 1985. Master Tape #187. Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. <https://youtu.be/5sTCjY988-A>

²² Reagan, Ronald. “Weekly Radio Show Topic: Afghanistan.” <https://youtu.be/5sTCjY988-A>

of talk makes the mujahideen seem as a greater extension of the US's own military, and puts American audiences in a paternal role in care and feeling toward the Afghan rebels. In questioning the outcomes of the war, Reagan lays out a scene in which the USSR takes control of Afghanistan.

“The Soviets at that point would have effectively cut off the freedom fighters’ lifelines, and although the mujahideen may never surrender, the Soviets would have received indisputable control of the country. An entire nation will have been strangled. My friends in the name of human freedom, we cannot—we must not allow that to happen.”²³

This appeal to Americans’ previous panic and fear of the USSR in an ongoing Cold War, inspires not only feelings of justice, but a call to action in awareness for the war.

Reagan’s policies and rhetoric, in presenting the USSR as an evil other, postures other countries and especially a Soviet-invaded Afghanistan as an in-group and ideological ally, at least for the time being. American interests in oil in Iran and Pakistan places Afghanistan as a strategic player in America’s future foreign economic interests. Afghan rebels are characterized by both the Carter and Reagan administrations as dauntless freedom fighters, which will be followed by not only national secular publications but Christian ones as well.

A Soviet publication cited that “two Lawrence of Arabia-like (American) secret agents were arming and stirring up Afghan rebels.”²⁴ In an article written by Bill Bradley, a 1980 junior Democratic senator who served as a member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times* that urged American support of Afghan rebels.

²³ Reagan, Ronald. “Weekly Radio Show Topic: Afghanistan.” <https://youtu.be/5sTCjY988-A>

²⁴Reuters. “Soviet Press Says 2 Americans Are Stirring Up Afghan Rebellion.” *New York Times* (Moscow, USSR), January 30, 1980.

Bradley cited reasons of “just cause with their national liberation, deliver an unambiguous message to the Russians ... and above all show that we have emerged from the shadow of Vietnam as a confident, prudent power.”²⁵ On January 13, 1980, the *New York Times* published a piece from Pakistani journalist M. Afzal Khan, that calls the mujahids, crusaders. Viewing this holy war in light of Christian holy wars creates an interesting interplay and comparison within Muslim and Christian soldiers of history. Pakistani men recruited for the war effort tell journalists in a 1985 article: “We want our country to be free. Our wives, our children, our parents would say to us: ‘Go to Afghanistan. Fight the holy war against the Russians.’”²⁶ This sense of duty and obligation to one’s ideals of freedom is a pulse felt throughout America, further instating the American public’s reverence for the mujahideen. Another mujahideen fighter says, “We don’t fight for the Peshawar leaders. We fight for God and country and our freedom.”²⁷ This logic and phrasing is something any American would be familiar with, further aligning the rhetoric shared by both America and Afghan rebels, which then created a rapport and trust between the resistance and the American public.

Brezinski, then the National Security Adviser, made a visit to the mujahideen in 1979 to arm them without revealing America’s increasingly active role in the war. “Your cause is right and God is on your side,”²⁸ said Brezinski to Afghan freedom fighters. This type of rhetoric that

²⁵ Bradley, Bill. “Captive Afghanistan, 6 Years Later: Fighters Need US Aid.” *New York Times*. December 27, 1985.

²⁶ Khan, M. Afzal. “With the Afghan Rebels.” *New York Times*. January 13, 1980.

²⁷ Khan, M. Afzal. “With the Afghan Rebels.” *New York Times*. January 13, 1980.

²⁸ *Cold War, Episode 24*. United States: CNN, United Kingdom: BBC2, 1998.

<https://youtu.be/A9RCFZnWGE0>

mixes both Muslim and Christian reverence of God assimilates Afghan soldiers further into the minds of the American public.

Christianity Today, one of the leading publications for Christian evangelical news in America published in a 1980 article,

“It makes no difference whether we have in mind the Christian’s God or the Muslim’s God; it is all the same to the dyed-in-the-wool secularists of the West, who long ago decided that religion was a paper tiger.”²⁹

This impulse to group both the mujahideen’s and American evangelicals’ faiths, yet all under the threat of communism, is illustrated beautifully in this article. Christians in 1980s America are willing to concede on every other religious issue with Islam, under the threat of the iron curtain. America’s intense fear and otherizing of the USSR makes an easy jump to group Afghan fighters with American Christians. The “evil empire” of the USSR, as coined by Reagan’s evil empire speech, presented an atheistic, religious threat to the American Christian family – a threat that was greatly feared by the American people. The secularism of the USSR causes its blunder in military strategy and foreign relations, according to the *Christianity Today* article, suggesting that those with God on their side – Afghan rebels and Americans – will prevail in military victory.

²⁹ “Religious Conviction: Power Beyond the Political.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 24, No.7, Page 12, April 4, 1980. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1980/april-4/editorials.html>

“We do not intend to compare Allah with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor do we plan to weigh the force of nationalism against the force of religious enthusiasm. No doubt they have fused in the present cataclysm.”³⁰

Even with this admonition, the *Christianity Today* article has already compared and grouped Muslims and Christians by virtue of otherizing and making evil the secular, Marxist Soviet Union. This otherization provides a path in which American Christians concede Islam’s differences in order to defeat a common foe in the spread of communism.

Conclusion

The current political climate toward Muslim people with surges of Islamophobia are unfounded in the rhetoric and publications of the 1970s and 80s. After 9/11, the term jihad takes a negative connotation in the American media, lending itself to cause fear in the hearts of traumatized Americans. Jihad's literal meaning, “struggle”, would not be highlighted by the American media, but what the Islamic fundamentalists of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda used it as—a religious justification to enact terror and violence in the West. After 9/11, the mujahideen are no longer freedom fighters linking arms with American revolutionists and battle heroes, but a very real threat to American national security and safety. This undoubtedly created an even more intricate and complicated relationship between Americans and Islamophobia, in that the US had financially backed and supported the very groups that attacked them only 20 years later. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda’s roots in the mujahideen served as a painful reminder to not only Americans, but evangelicals that Islam was inherently corrupt and evil, further externalizing evil

³⁰“ Religious Conviction: Power Beyond the Political.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 24, No.7, Page 12, April 4, 1980. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1980/april-4/editorials.html>

in what would be future foreign policies of intolerance and har-line tactics. This externalization of evil shifted from the evil empire of the USSR to any Muslim person or group, due to fear from traumatic terrorist attacks and radicalization of Muslims in the American media.

American Christians before 9/11 are willing to concede dissimilarities between themselves and Muslims, in an effort to fight the spread of communism. Even Carter, arguably one of the most overtly Christian presidents until that time, was more than willing to concede faith issues and theological disagreements in order to protect the world from the horror of a Soviet-controlled Middle East. Reagan, the president-hero of many evangelicals in the 1980s, played an even more active role in attaching the mujahideen to American patriotism and ideals of democracy. This ideological bent would flow into secular and faith-based media, with publications as internationally renowned as the *New York Times*, and other niche publications like *Christianity Today*. American Christians, due to national leaders linking the Afghan rebels to American ideals, saw their own legacy of patriotism and sacrifice in the mujahideen. “Freedom-fighter” rhetoric tied to the mujahideen placed them in the same reverence as American revolutionists and war heroes of the past. The narrative spun to externalize evil in the USSR created abundant space for the mujahideen to take the upright, defending underdog role, one that America deeply resonates with and loves.

President Donald Trump, in his familiar foot-in-mouth fashion, justified the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan with the falsity, “The reason Russia was in Afghanistan was because terrorists were going into Russia. They were right to be there.”³¹ Seen in his statements is the lack of understanding the history of the mujahideen and roots of terrorist cells in the Middle

³¹ Weiner, Tim. “History to Trump: CIA Was Aiding Afghan Rebels Before the Soviets Invaded in ‘79.” *Washington Post*. January 7, 2019.

East. Russia occupied Afghanistan to defend Babrak Kamal's reign in Kabul. This rhetoric from Trump smells of Islamophobia, especially in light of his travel bans and increasingly divisive comments on Middle-Eastern refugees. This bent in Islamophobia has infiltrated discourse of the Christian Right, and fostered an even stronger fear of Muslims in conservative evangelicals. In a post-9/11 world, evil has been externalized in not only Afghanistan or Iran, but in Muslims, creating yet another level of fear America holds for foreign entities.

This fear and knowledge of Islamic extremism did not go unnoticed by leaders at the onset of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, "They tend to be a pretty ugly bunch. I shudder to think of the human rights problems we would face if they came to power,"³² said national Security Council staffer Thomas Thornton to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. The CIA identified Hekmatyar as one of the most valuable militant Afghan leaders, and sent huge shares of weapons and aid to his faction of the mujahideen. However, Hekmatyar would later become involved with the Taliban. Brzezinski would even be willing to make a deal with Iran, who had held American hostages for 444 days prior, to smuggle arms to Afghan rebel fighters. Time and time again, American leaders are willing to sacrifice human rights issues in an effort to stop the spread of communism and Soviet influence, which would put an end to global stability and peace as the world knew it.

Now, American Christians are willing to concede anything but difference between themselves and Muslims. *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today* by author Daniel Phillipot is reviewed on *Christianity Today*. Phillipot writes, "Taken as a whole, at the present moment, the Muslim-majority world is less free and

³² Weiner, Tim. "History to Trump: CIA Was Aiding Afghan Rebels Before the Soviets Invaded in '79." *Washington Post*. January 7, 2019.

more violent than the rest of the world,”³³ which feeds into America’s continued distrust and fear of Muslims. Phillipot’s defense of religious freedom, particularly America’s defense of religious freedom implicitly defines Muslims as those who restrict religious freedom and pursue violence. When only 30-40 years before, Carter and Reagan exhorted the Afghan people for their devotion to God, Phillipot identifies this devotion to God as a radicalized, inherently violent notion. Carter and Reagan supported the Afghans’ pursuit to worship how they pleased, and condemned the atheistic USSR. This shift from tolerance and camaraderie to radicalization and fear has facilitated more stereotyped media attention and misinformation for the American public to face.

America’s involvement in foreign affairs have always been nuanced and clearer in hindsight, yet media perceptions and public opinion shift to fit present-day issues. Afghan holy soldiers, the mujahideen, were once seen as freedom fighters and unsung American heroes, yet in present day have become the violent, subversive aggressors in world conflict. The shift in these two very separate outlooks is that in a post-9/11 world, the Soviet Union has fallen and the spread of communism is not a front-running threat. American Christians, once seeing Muslim Afghan rebels as freedom fighters are now some of which radicalize Muslims the most. Tim Weiner writes, “But when the Soviets left, the Americans left the field of battle, too.....we created a vacuum. And that vacuum became a whirlwind. It spawned the Taliban and al-Qaeda. And then the war came home.”³⁴ The threat of communism was a threat too much for the American people to bear in the 1980s, but without it Americans are left with new fears – fears of

³³ Marshall, Paul. “Is Islam Receptive to Religious Freedom?” *Christianity Today*. April 15, 2019.

³⁴ Weiner, Tim. “History to Trump: CIA Was Aiding Afghan Rebels Before the Soviets Invaded in ‘79.” *Washington Post*. January 7, 2019.

violence and lack of control over the nation's security. Now the threat of terrorism is too much a burden to bear for Americans and American Christians, who see contemporary Muslims as anything but the once revered martyrs of the mujahideen.