

CHAPTER 10

WHY A WINNING STRATEGY MATTERS: THE IMPACT OF LOSING IN VIETNAM AND AFGHANISTAN

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Poets, novelists, and playwrights are all likely to observe, “in war there are no winners, only losers.” Even if true, such philosophical musings are a luxury not shared by strategists. Because war is the most horrible trauma that humans choose to inflict on each other, the difference between winning and losing does matter. The outcome of war efforts eventually determines survival and prosperity of all state actors in the international system, and the road to victory or road to defeat starts with strategy. Occasionally, bad strategic planning may result in victory if an overwhelmingly powerful state is pitted against a materially overmatched opponent (e.g., Russia v. Finland circa 1939-40); however, history has proven that such imbalances of aggregate power do not always guarantee victory. Indeed, while mired in the fog of war, the very weak can overcome the very strong in the most unlikely of places. Nowhere is the truth of this claim better illustrated than during the U.S. war in Vietnam and the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan. This chapter is, however, not devoted to a critical analysis of superpower strategic policy in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Rather, I seek to extend Clausewitz’s most famous maxim “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” by investigating the impact of war *loss* on the asymmetrically more powerful actor. Therefore, the statement “war loss will undermine the stability of domestic politics and at times threaten national survival” expresses the major theme of inquiry in this chapter.

At the outset of their respective interventions, both superpowers determined that sending their troops to war served the vital interests of the nation. Likewise, nearly a decade later the decisions to withdraw were also seen to be in the vital national interests of both countries. Clearly, in both cases what constituted the national interest had changed over time. Although it is clear that a mixture of international and domestic factors were involved during the initiation of hostilities, there is little doubt that the international considerations manifested in the Cold War ideological struggle for global power were primarily responsible for influencing President Johnson (1965) and General Secretary Brezhnev (1979), the two key decisionmakers in these wars. However, while the decisions to disengage from these conflicts were also driven by an amalgam of domestic and international factors, the emphasis had clearly switched, with domestic considerations playing the dominant role in the minds of President Nixon (1973) and General Secretary Gorbachev (1989). As the late great Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas “Tip” O’Neill (D-MA) was fond of saying, “all politics is local.”¹ The “local politics” at the national level in the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) illuminate a number of similarities and differences in how losing strategies impact domestic politics in countries with very dissimilar governing structures.

The Impact of Vietnam on the United States

In American history no other event, with the exception of the Civil War, has had a greater impact on the domestic tranquility of the United States as the Vietnam War. The United States survived its Vietnam experience as it had the Civil War—battered, changed, bloodied, but intact. The withdrawal of U.S. forces

in 1973 and the unification of Vietnam under a communist government in 1975 did not produce the dire consequences predicted by those who argued for intervention. The Asian communist dominos did fall in Cambodia and Laos; however, the original American belief in a monolithic international communist movement shed its last vestiges of credibility when Vietnam invaded its communist neighbor, Cambodia, in 1978 to oust the genocidal regime of Pol Pot; an act that, in turn, caused communist China to invade Vietnam briefly in 1979 to reassert Chinese regional hegemony. But the dominos stopped falling in Indochina, and communism did not spread as predicted to Japan, which lay at the root of the original U.S. justification for projecting containment into Vietnam. Thus, one of the most significant impacts of the Vietnam War was the stark clarity with which the original domino theory was rebutted as the other Asian “dominos”—Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Japan—all remained standing. George Herring provides a poignant critique of containment and the domino theory:

By wrongly attributing the Vietnamese conflict to external sources, the United States drastically misjudged its internal dynamics. By intervening in what was essentially a local struggle, it placed itself at the mercy of local forces, a weak client and a determined adversary. It elevated into a major international conflict what might have remained a localized struggle. By raising the stakes into a test of its own credibility, it perilously narrowed its options. A policy so flawed in its premises cannot help but fail, and, in this case, the results were disastrous.²

At home, the impact of war loss, in material, psychological, political, and cultural terms was tremendous. Before its end, U.S. involvement in Vietnam had inspired some of the most violent protests in the nation’s history, and the final U.S. withdrawal and swift unification of Vietnam under the communists also had a profound impact on the United States. In April 1975, Americans watched in stunned disbelief as the last helicopter lifted off from the roof of the U.S. embassy in the final hours before Saigon’s fall. The first televised war ended with scenes of chaos as thousand of Vietnamese tried to flee the invading communist forces. For the families of over 58,000 dead American service personnel, there was no satisfactory answer to the question of what they had died for. To some U.S. citizens, the American military had failed the country, either for acts that violated morality, human rights, and justice, or for the simple dereliction of duty in failing to strongly protest political decisions which were strategically culpable.³ For many others, images of the My Lai massacre, in which American soldiers had slaughtered over 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians, drove home the vision that the true enemy was “us.” Others adopted a “stab in the back” analysis that blamed the government for not allowing the army to win the war, and “tying the military’s hands,” a common response by the losing side at war’s end throughout history. Others blamed the protesters—“the hippie-freak/pinko/commie/fags”—for undermining the system and for being “un-American.” The simplistic slogan “America—love it or leave it” was hurled like an epitaph on those who protested the war. Others blamed the press for distorting the images of the war, arguing that the horror of Vietnam was no different from that any other war, and that the atrocities committed by America’s enemies had been lost in the sensationalism of live coverage showing only the death and destruction caused by U.S. forces. Still, many others reacted with a combination of denial, confusion, and amnesia. Immediately after the war, there was little debate outside the halls of academia as to who “lost” Vietnam. In the political realm, the latest Cold War rendition of “losing China” to communism could not easily be used again for political purposes, as both major U.S. political parties had been deeply involved in the war’s beginning and its outcome. Even the leading members of American media were reluctant to raise the issue, having become sensitized to the accusation of undercutting public support.⁴ Only one year after America’s “child” was lost in Asia, Vietnam was scarcely mentioned in the 1976 presidential campaign.⁵

The economic impact of the war, although less spectacular than the emotional trauma, was possibly equally damaging to American society. A study by Anthony Campagna estimates that the direct total cost of the Vietnam War on the U.S. economy was \$515 billion. If indirect costs (such as war-caused recessions

and long-term inflation, the deterioration of trade conditions, etc.) are included, the cost of the Vietnam War exceeds \$900 billion. In his analysis of the costs, Campagna notes:

It takes little imagination to wonder what sums like these could have accomplished if used for other purposes. Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" plan for domestic renewal was sacrificed, urban problems were allowed to fester and grow, mass transportation was discarded, schools were ignored, and so on. There is little point in belaboring the issue or listing the social ills—the butter that was sacrificed for the guns. Whether or not these problems would have been addressed in the absence of the war is problematic anyway, and little is gained in speculation. It is sufficient to point to the enormous waste of resources in the pursuit of unspecified goals and thereby hope to avoid its repetition.

He then reaffirms the critique with an assessment of the war's positive value.

The enormity of the folly is evident when one looks at the benefits of the war. That no one, except perhaps for defense contractors, seems to have benefited appears distressing in view of the costs involved . . . costs may be easier to measure than benefits, but more gains should be readily identifiable. Only the military sector appears to show temporary gains, either for contractors or in promotions for officers who reported for battle. The rest of society was badly divided with little in economic gains to smooth over the dissension.

Campagna concludes, "Considering the total costs minus the total benefits leaves only one conclusion—it was not a worthwhile endeavor. Looking at costs and benefits are one way to pass judgment, but whether considered from an economic, legal, moral, or military view, the same conclusion emerges—the war cannot be justified."⁶

The American economy was also damaged by Vietnam on the international level. Beginning during the Johnson administration, worldwide confidence in the dollar began to erode because of growing deficits both in balance-of-trade figures and in federal budget outlays. In his 1984 analysis of the evolution of the U.S. role in the global debt crisis, economist John Makin states:

The decade that had forged ahead on hope for the future had reached its extravagant goal, to put a man on the moon, with no great amount of thought given to just why it was being done and how it was going to pay for itself. All of this, along with Vietnam, began to take its toll. Inflation reached 6.1 percent in 1969—its highest level since World War II. Americans were beginning to feel the weight of Vietnam on their spirits and their pocketbook . . . wage increases were starting to fall behind inflation. The federal government's \$3.2 billion surplus that year was the last Americans have seen to date. By the mid-1970s, Vietnam, social programs, and the politicians' imperative to postpone as much of their cost as possible to an inevitably more prosperous future brought in the first \$50 billion deficit since World War II.⁷

The federal budget deficit was tied to Johnson's guns-and-butter policies, with the war directly blamed for the outflow of dollars. The global economy of that time, still tied to the gold standard, became increasingly volatile and unstable. The United States was increasingly unable to exchange gold for dollars with investors; thus the price of gold rose, and the value of the dollar fell. The United States, still committed to the Bretton Woods monetary regime, was also committed to sustaining the dollar's parity against other international currencies. Investors responded by selling dollars en masse to foreign central banks, creating a run on the dollar. Because of massive intervention by the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank in 1968, the dollar's slide was temporarily halted. However, the decline in the postwar U.S. economic hegemony had begun. It accelerated during the Nixon "shocks" of 1971, a trend that continued throughout the 1980s when the United States moved from being the world's largest creditor nation to being its largest debtor. It cannot be said that the Vietnam War itself was more than a small part of this overall trend, and a detailed analysis of

the impact of Vietnam on global U.S. economic hegemony is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, according to political economist David Calleo, “the Vietnam War undoubtedly cost the country’s economy a great deal. Enormous defense budgets throughout the postwar era may well have distorted and weakened American economic growth. Steady overseas investment may well have slowed the modernization of domestic industry.”⁸ While America was “investing” in the Vietnam War, Japan, Germany, and others were investing in their domestic economic infrastructure.

One positive result of American defense spending in Vietnam was on other U.S. allies, especially those in East Asia. In the late 1950s and 1960s, industrialists based in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan were given privileged access to the U.S. market as part of economic development strategies to undermine communism’s appeal. Major contracts for war materials and spending by soldiers on leave helped to stimulate the local economies in the region. The meteoric economic rise of the East Asian “Tigers,” widely hailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was part of a wider matrix of U.S. policies in Asia during the Cold War, of which Vietnam was the most visible location. The United States tolerated tightly protected markets in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan while pressuring other countries to pursue open or free trade, a practice that began to unravel only in the late 1980s as the Cold War wound down. In Vietnam the anticommunist crusade was fought with dollars, guns, and soldiers; in the rest of Asia, dollars were the primary instrument of U.S. influence, much to the benefit of East Asian economies.⁹

The economics of war loss are often of secondary importance to the more significant shocks to a society’s political culture. Like the impact of World War II on Japan’s culture, Vietnam has had a lasting impact on American society. In the case of Japan, a polity once distinguished by its glorification of the individual warrior and the *samurai* code is now fundamentally pacifist, with a deep-seated suspicion of the military and its role in Japanese society. In the case of the United States, a polity historically distinguished by the glorification of the ideals of democratic governance is now fundamentally suspicious of and cynical about both governing institutions and politicians. In the years since Vietnam War, general public distrust in government has grown, even as Americans are increasingly more willing to discuss the war. Academic texts as well as anecdotal accounts by American veterans are continually added to a growing body of literature. The trauma and drama of Vietnam are replayed (and often history is rewritten) in television shows, documentaries, and major movie productions.¹⁰ Vietnam veterans, who were initially perceived as drug-crazed, gun-toting, hair-trigger maniacs, have been in great part socially rehabilitated in movies and television shows, with much of the rest of American society feeling a collective sense of guilt and shame for having treated veterans so poorly on their return from Vietnam.

The war also continues to have a tangible impact on the lives of its combatants. In the 1980s evidence emerged that many veterans (both U.S. and its allies) were dying from various cancers that are linked to Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant that had been used indiscriminately to destroy the jungle vegetation that had served so effectively as a cover for the Vietnamese combatants. In the 1990s the long-festering issues of prisoners of war (POWs) and soldiers missing in action (MIA) again became prominent. During the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign, new and as yet unsubstantiated evidence and allegations emerged that Americans had been left behind in Vietnam and Laos. The candidacy of Arkansas Governor William Clinton was questioned on the grounds of “character,” with some seeking political advantage by questioning Clinton’s patriotism for his opposition to the war as a college student. Other contentious issues continue to resurface, including the plight of Vietnamese “boat people,” refugees, and unpaid war reparations. Even the U.S. Army has begun to come to terms with Vietnam. In March 1998 two American soldiers, Lawrence Colburn and Hugh Thompson, received medals for heroism under enemy fire in a moving ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, a site that continues to affect profoundly virtually everyone who visits it. The bestowing of medals on these soldiers was a monumental act, as it

acknowledged their heroism for risking their own lives to protect Vietnamese civilians from rampaging American troops during the My Lai massacre in March 1968.¹¹

In the realm of foreign affairs, the impact of Vietnam remains the most clearly tangible component of American politics. After the Vietnam War, the doctrine of communist containment remained the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy; however, the use of military force came under great scrutiny, with comparisons to Vietnam being raised thereafter whenever military intervention has been contemplated. In relations with its allies, the U.S. global position was perhaps shaken, but it was not structurally altered in the immediate wake of the Vietnam War. The Western European alliance structure remained intact, and new organs of international cooperation (most notably the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe [CSCE]) were born. On a strategic level, both the Soviet Union and China were eager to maintain the status quo or to proceed with arms control negotiations and confidence-building measures. In the age of nuclear interdependence, it was clear to all sides that the vital national interests of the members of the nuclear club could not be directly assailed. The American defeat in Vietnam was actually followed by improved relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the USSR—and the fall of Vietnam did not inspire an entirely new wave of communist aggression or communist-inspired rebellion. In the late 1970s socialist forces did gain ground in some countries. However, in countries where communists gained power (Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan) U.S. national interests were not threatened, and eventually the support of these new allies became major economic burdens for their Soviet patrons, adding to the eventual communist collapse.

In a more direct challenge to U.S. national interests, in Latin America and the Caribbean various communist insurgencies also made tangible gains. However, the Vietnam War had clearly shattered the anticommunist consensus that had existed under U.S. containment doctrine since the late 1940s. Even before the fall of Saigon, public opinion polls had indicated that only one-third of Americans felt that the United States should intervene militarily to protect any of its allies, with only the defense of Canada being endorsed by a majority.¹² During the second half of the Carter administration American anger was rekindled in the humiliation of the Iranian seizure of the U.S. embassy; however, Carter refused to use military force in an attempt to challenge the outcome of the Iranian Islamic revolution. His ill-fated hostage rescue mission, that ended with the death of a number of special operations troops, was a mission which had no immediate strategic impact at that time, other than perhaps to seal Carter's loss in the next election. However, despite its failure, "Desert I" led to the further expansion of U.S. special operations capabilities that would play increasingly important roles in future conflicts, culminating in their critical strategic role in overthrowing the Afghan Taliban regime in 2002.

American nationalism and a renewed emphasis on military force reemerged somewhat with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Like many cold warriors of the 1950s, Reagan embraced a relatively simplistic view of world affairs—the source of all evil was communism, primarily communism centered in Moscow and spread by the Soviets and their proxies. During his tenure in office, Reagan ordered U.S. troops to intervene globally on a number of occasions, the most successful operation taking place on the small Caribbean island of Grenada in October 1983. Reagan ordered 1,900 U.S. troops (supported by 300 troops from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States) to liberate the island from a pro-Cuban communist faction that had seized control. The U.S. troops quickly overwhelmed the Marxist forces and restored a representative government to the island. The Reagan administration bragged that it had reversed the "Vietnam syndrome" by showing that Washington would use military force when necessary to block communist expansionism in the Western hemisphere. However, many other countries condemned the U.S. act as an illegal act of aggression, including Reagan's closest ally, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.¹³

Grenada clearly marked the reemergence of military intervention as a tool of U.S. foreign policy after

approximately a decade of post-Vietnam inhibition. However, Grenada was an operation of limited scope, with a mission against a tiny number of lightly armed forces located in a small, isolated, and easily controlled geographic space—a qualitatively different matter from an operation the size and scope of Vietnam. A more comparably valid scenario presented itself in Nicaragua, a country that had witnessed the overthrow by leftist forces of the pro-U.S. Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979. For the next decade, the shadow of Vietnam openly influenced the domestic political debate on what U.S. response was appropriate in Nicaragua, a country located in a region the United States had long considered as its exclusive sphere of influence. Turning back Marxism in Nicaragua became a personal obsession for Reagan; however, the strong fear that U.S. policy might be headed toward a Vietnam-style military intervention was prevalent among members of the U.S. Congress, who sharply curtailed the president's ability to act in Nicaragua. Congressional limits were imposed on spending by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for the support of the Nicaraguan "Contras," a group consisting mainly of ex-National Guard troops from the Somoza dictatorship. When in 1982 members of Congress raised questions about the scope and purpose of U.S. covert operations, CIA director William Casey falsely assured them that neither the Reagan administration nor the Contras sought to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. With the memories of the Gulf of Tonkin deception echoing in the background, Congress revealed its lack of trust in the executive branch by passing a series of laws that steadily undercut funding for the Contras. In April 1984, when it was revealed that the CIA had illegally mined Nicaraguan ports and harbors, Congress acted to bar the CIA or any other U.S. intelligence agencies from aiding the Contras.¹⁴

Reagan, like his Republican predecessor, Richard Nixon, in Vietnam, would not be deterred by legal constraints. Members of his national security staff, including the NSC director Robert McFarland and his deputy and successor, Admiral John Poindexter, supervised an effort organized by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North to bypass the congressional restrictions. In part of a highly controversial and illegal strategy, North's plan called for covertly selling arms to Iran in an attempt to free U.S. hostages in Lebanon who had been seized by pro-Iranian militants. The profits from the illegal arms sales would then be funneled to the Contras. After a U.S. transport plane was downed in Nicaragua in October 1986, the Iran-Contra scandal erupted, nearly bringing the Reagan presidency to an end. Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz, warned the president that his order to circumvent Congress by soliciting foreign funds for the Contras might constitute an impeachable offense, to which Reagan responded that if the story ever got out "we'll all be hanging by our thumbs in front of the White House."¹⁵ Reagan would publicly deny his knowledge of the transfer of funds from the Iranian operation to the Contras, a denial contested by Colonel North, who claimed that the president had full knowledge of North's activities. During the Iran-Contra congressional hearings, it was revealed that North had conducted extensive planning for a U.S. military invasion of Nicaragua, which appears to be modeled on U.S. policies in Vietnam under the Eisenhower administration. North's plans included the creation of a new Nicaraguan government made up of pro-U.S. leaders who would declare their sovereign independence from the leftist Sandinista regime. The United States could then recognize the new government as legitimate, thereby justifying the invasion of U.S. forces to protect an allied state. Being a veteran of the Vietnam era, North knew that an explosion of antigovernment protest in the United States would erupt after any invasion. Thus his contingency plans included a declaration of marshal law in order to prevent any repeat of the domestic upheavals that had plagued the country in the late 1960s.¹⁶

Although President Reagan avoided impeachment in the Iran-Contra scandal and his various aides' direct criminal activities were mostly absolved on the basis of legal technicalities and grants of congressional immunity, for many observers the entire Nicaraguan scenario in the 1980s was a replay of the U.S. approach to Vietnam. Rather than focusing on the political history of Nicaragua and the local conditions that led to the overthrow of the Somoza regime by a populist uprising that included both

communists and noncommunist forces, Reagan blamed Latin America's problems on the evil influence of the Kremlin. As in Vietnam, in Nicaragua the Reagan administration seemed unable to comprehend that nationalism could be championed by those who also professed a pro-socialist political ideology, and that the majority of Nicaraguans viewed the Sandinista regime as their legitimate government. As in Vietnam, it was falsely believed that a military solution could be found to what fundamentally was a question of political legitimacy, with the U.S.-created "contras" being viewed as illegitimate in the domestic polity of Nicaragua. As in Vietnam, in order to achieve the administration's policy goals in Nicaragua, both Congress and the American people were lied to repeatedly, and the White House pursued illegal acts. However, unlike in Vietnam, congressional oversight and influence of U.S. foreign policy were much greater, primarily through the aggressive control of funding measures. It is also clear that Colonel North's views on Nicaragua did not represent those of the majority of the U.S. military establishment, which, like Congress, was hesitant to become embroiled in what was clearly a domestic political upheaval with numerous parallels to Vietnam. The military did not want to again be blamed for losing a war, and, with the perspective gained from Vietnam, it seemed unlikely that a U.S. war in Nicaragua could be won without great cost. It was clear that an invasion of Nicaragua would require the U.S. military to reengineer fundamentally the politics of a revolutionary state that was strongly unified by the drama and sacrifice of a recently won popular struggle against a highly unpopular dictatorship. The potential quagmire in Nicaragua in the early 1980s was analogous to that in Vietnam in the mid-1950s, and the majority of the U.S. military understood this, despite the simplistic illusions of their commander in chief.

Most Americans supported President Bush's decision to send troops to Panama in December 1989, though criticism abroad was widespread. Bush's intervention had deep roots in the tangled history of U.S.-Panamanian relations. In May 1989 Manuel Noriega, the head of the armed forces who had been indicted in the United States on drug trafficking charges, annulled Panama's presidential elections. Despite the irony that Noriega had long been on the CIA's payroll, the Bush administration, embarrassed by this affront to democracy in a long-time U.S. vassal state, urged Panamanians to overthrow Noriega. In mid-December 1989 the Noriega-controlled National Assembly declared war on the United States and sanctioned the continued harassment of U.S. service personnel and their dependents, who were stationed in Panama as part of long-standing agreements. Bush responded with what can only be described as overwhelming force, including over 25,000 troops and the most advanced weapon systems in the U.S. arsenal. Within days, organized resistance was destroyed, and Noriega soon surrendered to U.S. troops. Bush's objectives were achieved: to protect the lives of U.S. citizens and the security of the Panama Canal, to take Noriega into custody, and to reestablish the elected government of Panama. The forces used in the operation were withdrawn less than two months after the operation.¹⁷ Most important, however, is that many Panamanians also strongly supported the U.S. action. Before the invasion, Noriega had attempted to foment support for his regime by accusing the United States of "Yankee imperialism." Although the mass of citizens were not willing to confront the Panamanian military forces as urged by Bush, nor were they willing to support Noriega's desire for an anti-American nationalist uprising. The dreaded Vietnam-like quagmire did not develop, showing clearly that local conditions in Panama were unlike those in Indochina.

The problematic issues of post-Vietnam U.S. military intervention were again raised during the Persian Gulf War of 1991. The Bush administration's public relations campaign to gain both congressional and public support was largely built around the strategy of explaining why Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the proposed American response comprised a set of circumstances entirely different from those that led to defeat in Vietnam. Bush's major task was to overcome opponents who argued that "Iraq was Arabic for Vietnam," envisioning another unpopular, unwinnable war, this time in the desert. During these debates, the average American was exposed to a series of useful and informative comparisons. Vietnam was largely a civil disorder between domestic Vietnamese factions struggling to control the national government. Kuwait

was the victim of a conventional invasion by an outside aggressive force bent on territorial expansion. In Vietnam, the United States had attempted to create a legitimate government; in Kuwait, the United States would restore a legitimate government. In Vietnam, the military had been constrained by political considerations that limited its ability to win the war. In Kuwait, the military would not be constrained, with maximum force being employed as rapidly as possible. According to Bush, the war in the Persian Gulf would “not be another Vietnam,” and he and his military advisers, many of whom had fought in Vietnam, would pursue the war and achieve victory on the basis of the lessons of the Vietnam defeat. In retrospect, it would appear that they kept their word. On the eve of certain victory, Bush refused to widen the war and destroy the Iraqi regime outright, instead acting within the existing framework of the international agreements that provided a legal mandate only for the liberation of Kuwait. In a euphoric victory statement, President Bush claimed, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!”¹⁸

The president was only partially correct. The Gulf War had shown citizens of the United States that their military was capable of victory, and it had convinced decisionmakers that the government could rally popular support for the use of force abroad. However, the Gulf War’s success also clarified the vast differences between the types of struggles involved in Vietnam and the Gulf. Vietnam was not forgotten; the victory in the Gulf War reminded Americans of just how different the war in Vietnam was, a fact confirmed by the president’s own behavior. Bush’s refusal to try to solve the “Saddam problem” was not only contingent upon the international agreements that authorized the transition from Operation DESERT SHIELD (to protect Saudi Arabia) to Operation DESERT STORM, which liberated Kuwait by force. Rather, George Bush’s decision to limit the operation was also a recognition of the political and military quagmire that might have ensued if the United States had continued the invasion of Iraq with the intent of installing a new government. Who would that government consist of? How would it remain in power? Would the Iraqi people rebel against foreign occupation? Would U.S. troops be forced to prop up the new government indefinitely? What would happen to U.S. credibility in the Middle East and elsewhere? Would the American people support an extended operation that had no clear resolution, massive costs, and continual casualties? These and other questions clearly echoed Vietnam’s lasting influence on policymaking in the Bush White House.

In the years since the Gulf War, the United States has been willing to send forces into various operations, each of which has been closely scrutinized through the Vietnam lens. In the post-Cold War era, the argument over ideology has largely disappeared; however, the arguments over the utility and limits of military force remain highly salient. Perhaps the two best examples are the operations in Somalia and Bosnia. Bush was supported by the American public in his decision to send U.S. forces to Somalia in 1992, with the goal of averting a humanitarian disaster. Domestic turmoil by warring Somali factions had paralyzed the food distribution system and threatened the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somalis with starvation. The initial mission to feed the population was remarkably successful. However, by the autumn of 1993 the U.S. mission had incrementally changed, with U.S. troops becoming embroiled in the domestic dispute. When eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed, the shade of Vietnam immediately reemerged in the domestic debate. Critics from both liberal and conservative poles of the political spectrum cited the lesson of Vietnam that the United States could not be the world’s “policeman” in the “new world order” envisioned by President Bush. President Clinton agreed, ordering the withdrawal of American forces and making it clear that the “Vietnam syndrome” remained alive and well in the hearts and minds of both citizens and policymakers.¹⁹

In short, the “lessons” of Vietnam have been applied to each use of force in American foreign policy since 1973. However, it should be noted that Vietnam was a unique historical experience that may have only limited utility in determining the proper course of action in any subsequent scenario. Furthermore, there is

little agreement on just what exactly the lessons of Vietnam are. The 1990 Gulf War's success rekindled the notion that massive uses of force can be the means to achieve moral, legal, and practical interests that serve both the United States and the international community. However, because the nature of the conflict in the Vietnam War was so fundamentally different from that of the Gulf War, the liberation of Kuwait has confirmed the notion that old-style forms of cross-border aggression between sovereign states are much easier to deal with using counterforce methods than are domestic civil disputes.

Thus Panama, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia each provide a different amalgam of lessons as a result of its comparison with Vietnam. Americans have shown their willingness to support intervention in a domestic civil dispute when they perceive U.S. national interests to be at stake. However, the determination of national interest, always a problematic endeavor among the nation's foreign policy elite, will remain a matter of rancorous public discourse in the post-Vietnam era. In the cases of Grenada and Panama, Presidents Reagan and Bush did not seek public support; they acted unilaterally, correctly gambling that if rapid victory could be achieved with minimal costs, the American people would deferentially accept fait-accomplis justifications of U.S. national security interests. With the war won and their sons and daughters coming home alive and well rather than dead and wounded, most Americans were willing to overlook the complex moral, legal, and ethical issues that both of these interventions raised in the international community. However, the American public and Congress would not deferentially accept justifications for the use of force when given the opportunity to express themselves. Any proposed or ongoing intervention must pass some loosely defined "Vietnam test" before approval is given, and such approval is generally highly qualified. Clearly, Americans are willing to support intervention when they perceive a significant moral rationale, either to avert a massive humanitarian crisis or to prevent the gross violation of human rights. However, as Somalia shows, such support can rapidly be withdrawn when American casualties are incurred and there is no clear and compelling national interest at stake that justifies further sacrifice of American lives. As shown in Panama, Haiti, and Kuwait, Americans are willing to support intervention when they perceive that either internal or external forces have wrongly overthrown a legitimate government. However, Somalia clearly lacked such a government, and in the Balkans the new governments are understood to be the fragile creations of a peace imposed by the outside world, a peace that could rapidly unravel into a new quagmire of ethnic violence, from which American troops would most likely be rapidly withdrawn. In their deep-seated anxiety about Bosnia, Americans remember the most fundamental lesson of Vietnam: no matter how much military force is brought to bear, governing legitimacy cannot be created for people by outside powers; they must create it themselves.

Public discord, dissent, and debate over the utility of military force in U.S. foreign policy remained the norm until 11 September 2001, when the long-held illusion of America as an impenetrable fortress imploded. Even though some voices still urged caution and conciliation, as the realities of American vulnerability to physical attack began to penetrate deeply into the collective psyche of the American populace, the ghosts of Vietnam were replaced by the haunting specter of terrorists armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. In response, President George W. Bush ordered an immediate military assault in Afghanistan, the primary geographic base of operations for Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist organization. Bin Laden's close ties with the Afghan Taliban regime and its refusal to extradite him to the United States created common-cause among most of the world's governments, which voiced support individually and in multilateral forums such as the United Nations for a U.S.-led counter strike. The rapid success of American military operations in this far-flung and inhospitable land put to rest any doubts of the global-reach of American military power. However, having conducted what a majority of both American and global citizens considered a just and legitimate war of retaliation against an enemy regime, the second Bush administration launched a new war against Iraq in 2003.

The American-led war in Iraq, dubbed Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, generated a great deal of domestic and international discord over the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, and again the ghosts of Vietnam have reemerged. After a stunningly swift and overwhelming military campaign that lasted a little over two weeks, Saddam Hussein's government was ousted from power by a force comprised almost entirely of American and British troops. Expected by Pentagon planners to be received as liberators by a Saddam-hating Iraqi populace, the allied forces quickly became embroiled in fighting a classic low-intensity insurgency made up of Saddam-loyalists and anti-U.S. Islamic extremists from neighboring countries. At the time of writing, the exact nature of these combatants and their ability to rally support from the Iraqi populace remains uncertain; however, if judged by the increasing lethality and regularity of their attacks during the first six-months after Saddam's fall, it is clear that the United States will be faced by a nation-building task on a scale and complexity not seen since its dramatic and tragic failure in Vietnam. As such, the ghosts of Vietnam, once thought buried a decade earlier by a previous president named Bush have risen to haunt the second President Bush.

The Impact of Afghanistan on the Soviet Union

The end of the Afghan War coincided with the end of the Soviet Union itself. However, it was not a coincidence, even though it certainly was a surprise. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the USSR was perceived by many statesmen and scholars to have increased its relative power and influence vis-à-vis the United States. Even though Eisenhower's apocalyptic domino effect did not materialize in Asia in the wake of the communist victory in Vietnam, the Soviet Union was able to achieve nuclear parity, and it maintained a modest numerical advantage in conventional weapons. In addition, the states conquered in Eastern Europe at the end of World War II remained chastened, and military and political ties with leftist or "socialist-oriented" states were strengthened in Africa, Asia, and Central America. However, it is clear now that by the mid-1980s, severe economic problems were developing in the Soviet Union—problems that coincided with a renewed challenge from Washington—and that cracks in the system were widening. The United States under Reagan had renewed the arms race for techno-military superiority. Protected by a well-armed NATO, a vibrant and wealthy European Community stood in stark contrast to the comparative poverty of the Eastern bloc, and many Third World revolutionary regimes began to buckle under the heavy burdens of internal corruption, civil war, and Western political pressure. In the late 1980s these cracks had become full-blown fissures that in 1989 destroyed the Warsaw Pact, and then in 1991 shattered the very existence of the USSR as a unified state.

What role did Afghanistan play in the downfall of the Soviet Union? Like the debate over the impact of Vietnam on the United States, this is a question that is not easily or simply answered. Most scholars agree that the war in Afghanistan certainly played some role in the Soviet collapse; however, the degree of its importance remains a topic hotly debated. A well-received book by Mark Galeotti concludes with the following emphatic assertion:

[T]o suggest that the defeat in Afghanistan doomed the USSR is patently unfounded, even if we accept the popular perception that the Soviet Union was defeated rather than the more clinical verdict that it failed to win much of a success. The events of 1991 were rooted, after all, in economic decay and the associated loss of legitimacy for a state which had long since abandoned ideology in favour of legitimation by managerial success. From a personal point of view, having spent years studying it, it would be satisfying to be able to identify the war as a pivotal event in late Soviet history: the cause of *perestroika*, the last gasp of Sovietised Russian imperialism, the final nail in the USSR's coffin. Yet, of course, it was none of these things. It was part and parcel of the catastrophes, blunders, tensions, and crises which brought the Soviet system down, from Chernobyl to food queues, the Tbilisi massacre to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Perhaps, at most, it added a particularly sanguine red

hue and some dramatic imagery to the collage.²⁰

Galeotti's conclusion is representative of many mainstream Soviet and Russian area studies specialists: Afghanistan played only a minor part in the collapse of communism. Despite some empathy with his conclusion, I believe Galeotti goes too far in undervaluing the importance of Afghanistan. While I do not believe that Afghanistan was the only important factor in the myriad of elements that combined to bring down the communist regime, I do think that its role influencing events cannot be degraded to the level of insignificance that he expresses. In making my case for the importance of the Afghan experience, I will turn to a discussion of political legitimacy and the important role that Afghanistan had in undermining the Soviet state's own of legitimacy within the context of Gorbachev's reform policies. I believe that the departure from Afghan soil by the last Soviet combat soldier on 15 February 1989 represented a significant and crucial event in the rapid ideological, foreign, and domestic policy reforms undertaken by President Gorbachev. Further, concurrent with the repudiation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, the withdrawal from Afghanistan marks the first significant example of Gorbachev's reforms in Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet withdrawal was important internationally because it bolstered the existing forces for reform in the Soviet bloc. In essence, I argue that Afghanistan was the first "domino" in the systematic collapse of the pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe, and in the fall of the supreme domino itself—the Soviet Union.

Afghanistan: Communism's First Domino

Like the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan was firmly rooted in domestic factors. However, unlike the Vietnam War, the primary pressure for a change in policy did not emanate from the domestic population. Rather, the decision to leave Afghanistan was made at the highest level of Soviet politics—within the leadership cadre of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's change in policy on Afghanistan was embodied by his sweeping ideological programs of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). The revolution from above began with the intent to strengthen the Soviet Union through what was perceived as imperative internal reform measures. However, the Cold War presented Gorbachev with a difficult predicament. His plans for domestic revitalization were seen as being indefensible to conservative criticism from within the Communist Party while the Soviet Union was confronted by powerful enemies in a hostile international environment. Therefore Gorbachev launched his reform agenda first in the realm of foreign policy with the belief that when international peace and cooperation were obtained, the regime could turn to rebuilding socialism at home. From Gorbachev's perspective, withdrawing from Afghanistan was the logical first step toward revitalizing détente with the USSR's global competitors, the United States and China, which had become significantly more confrontational after the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. Thus, the withdrawal from Afghanistan was perceived as part of a larger strategic plan to achieve domestic political and economic goals.

Although the direct economic impact of Afghanistan is difficult to judge, the war was clearly one of the most significant components of the multiple foreign policy expenditures draining Soviet coffers. Beginning with Khrushchev, one of the major tools of Soviet foreign policy had been to provide economic incentives to reinforce friendly regimes and, it was hoped, to buy nonaligned ones. Like American containment policies, Soviet foreign policy under the guise of Brezhnevian "internationalism" required massive outlays, usually in the form of exceedingly cheap weapons systems, overcompensation for exports from "fraternal" countries, low-interest or no-interest loans, and outright charity. However, the indirect costs were significant as well, as noted shortly after the intervention in a first critical report by Oleg Bogomolov, the director the Institute for Economics of the World Socialist System, a leading government think tank: "Our policy has evidently gone beyond the brink of confrontation tolerance in the 'Third World' as a result of the move to send forces into Afghanistan. The benefits of the action proved insignificant compared to the damage caused

to our interests. . . . Détente has been blockaded. . . . Economic and technological pressure against the Soviet Union has sharply grown. . . . The Soviet Union has now got to shoulder a new burden of economic aid to Afghanistan.”²¹ Although Bogomolov and others (including Evgennii Primakov, who would be Russia’s foreign minister under Yeltsin) were ignored at the time, their influence emerged when Gorbachev came to power. In his critique of the Brezhnev Doctrine, Gorbachev fully acknowledged the fact that Soviet national interests had been damaged. He stated “the foreign policy that served the utopian aim of spreading communist ideas around the world, had led us into the dead end of the Cold War, inflicting on the people an intolerable burden of military expenditure and dragged us into adventures like the one in Afghanistan.”²² The war itself cost the Soviet Union approximately 5 billion rubles a year, with a total direct cost of approximately 60 billion rubles. During the *glasnost* era, one of the major public criticisms of Gorbachev’s foreign policy was in regard to continued Soviet economic support for Afghanistan after withdrawal of the last troops in 1989. Many wondered why the state was spending money abroad when the average Soviet citizen was living so poorly at home. Like Americans, the Soviet masses clearly overestimated the burden of foreign aid as a percentage of overall government expenditures.²³ Nonetheless, in terms of political importance, absolute truth is often irrelevant. If Americans or Russians believe that their government is spending too much on foreign aid, the government must either act to change that perception, or pay the price in terms of the erosion of popular support.

In contemplating the withdrawal from Afghanistan, General Secretary Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were faced with credibility quandaries analogous to those that had plagued Nixon and Henry Kissinger in Vietnam. In both wars each country’s guiding ideology had provided the rationale and justification for intervention, but that same ideology became a great liability during the withdrawal process. Just as the U.S. containment doctrine had morally and philosophically committed the United States to any conflict in which communists were involved, Soviet foreign policy as driven by the Brezhnev Doctrine had raised the stakes in the Soviet response during any crisis in the socialist camp. Having drawn the Cold War battle lines around its clients, the USSR required these states to conduct their domestic and foreign policies within the confined space of Soviet consent. If any state failed to correct what Moscow deemed unacceptable behavior, military intervention became a probable solution. Although some ideological variation was tolerated in the Eastern bloc, Soviet prestige and international credibility demanded that decisive military action be taken if Moscow’s policies were openly defied. From the Kremlin’s perspective, any loss of prestige risked the spread of dissent in the Eastern bloc. If one state were to defy Moscow, they all might follow suit. Just as the United States feared the fall of dominos in Asia if a noncommunist South Vietnam was not preserved, the Kremlin feared the fall of dominos in Eastern Europe if any regimes under Moscow’s control were allowed to act as independent sovereign nations.

In the early 1980s, Poland’s communist leaders were confronted with a serious dilemma. Soviet intolerance of the increasing popularity of the independent Polish labor union, Solidarity, clearly showed the limits of their own power and independence. If the Polish authorities did not take action to repress Solidarity, the Soviets would most likely react as they had in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. In 1981 the threat of a Soviet invasion was very tangible. Before the declaration of martial law in Poland, Soviet theorist Oleg Bykov plainly restated the Brezhnev Doctrine in warning Poland that “no one should have any doubts about the common determination of the fraternal countries to protect the socialist gains of the Polish people from infringement by counter-revolution, internal or external.”²⁴ His warning was substantiated by a significant buildup and mobilization of Soviet forces on the border. As a result, the Polish military authorities heeded this omen and imposed martial law.

However, by the late 1980s the demands for ideological and political loyalty had changed dramatically. Gorbachev had determined that the Soviet economy was collapsing under the dual pressures of

overextended foreign commitments and inefficient internal organization. New policies on Afghanistan would begin the process of changing the nature of Soviet foreign commitments, and these changes would affect Poland. Shortly before the revolt against communism in the winter of 1989, the state-controlled Eastern European press agencies had provided routine coverage of the negotiations that led to the Geneva accords on Afghanistan, and the press had reported on the Soviet troop withdrawal from that country. According to a brief survey of the Czechoslovakian, Romanian, Polish, Bulgarian, and East German press conducted by Australian political analyst Robert Miller, Poland's news agencies provided the most complete and detailed coverage of events.

Trybuna Luda, for example, carried an only slightly abridged version of Aleksandr Prokhanov's article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* featuring the argument that the Afghan adventure had been a grievous mistake, which would have "painful after-effects" on the USSR, its culture, internal politics, social conditions and the life of a significant part of a whole generation of Soviet citizens. In reporting the meeting between Gorbachev and Najibullah in Tashkent on 7 April, *Trybuna Luda*, like other Eastern European papers, noted . . . "the problems of Afghanistan and their solutions are Afghanistan's own business and no one else's," to be solved by that country as an "independent, non-aligned, neutral state."²⁵

Perhaps the most significant coverage occurred in the Polish weekly, *Polityka*, which acknowledged the "electrifying effect" of the news of the Soviet withdrawal, citing the "many open questions" on the past, present, and future of Afghanistan.²⁶ Clearly, the authors of these articles were raising in the minds of Polish citizens suggestive questions that, with little imagination, could be extended to Poland's own relationship with the USSR and the role that military force had played in coercing Polish fealty toward Moscow since World War II. As Miller notes, "the implications of this formulation for the autonomous forces in Eastern Europe were obvious, but no one seemed inclined to mention them."²⁷ However, even after making this perceptive statement on the possible implications of the Soviet withdrawal, Miller concludes that "it was clear that different rules applied to Soviet allies in the second world, namely, the members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization."²⁸ Clearly, with the benefit of hindsight his initial analysis of the potential impact of these news stories was correct; yet, like the majority of Western scholars at that time, Miller's cautious conclusion on Gorbachev's willingness to extend the Afghan model to Eastern Europe was in error.

Despite variations in the degree of coverage and in accuracy in the Eastern press, it is clear that the knowledge of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from an occupied country was not withheld from the masses of Eastern Europe. It is true that the impact of these press reports is hard to ascertain, and it cannot be said with certainty that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had a direct causal impact in spurring on the Eastern European revolutions. Yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that the revolutionary wave that exploded throughout Eastern Europe emerged only after reports that Soviet troops had actually pulled out of Afghanistan.

Further empirical evidence exists that more substantially connects these two events. Writing from prison, Adam Michnik, one of Poland's leading political dissident writers, declared in 1982, "They have no program; they have no principles; they have no respect; they have only guns and tanks."²⁹ However, Michnik was also one of the first to recognize the potential changes that Gorbachev's reform policies had initiated. In 1987 and 1988 Michnik and others in the Polish opposition began to assert increasingly that there was a growing disparity between the pace of reform in the Soviet Union and that in Poland.³⁰ Once Gorbachev's reform policies began to be accepted as genuine, the Polish military government became the first in Eastern Europe to test seriously the limits of *perestroika* and *glasnost* as they applied to Soviet foreign policy and the Brezhnev Doctrine. During the last month of the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, Solidarity was declared a legal trade union by General Wojciech Jaruzelski's government, and six months

later, in June 1989, Solidarity candidates stunned the Eastern bloc by capturing 99 of 100 open seats in Poland's first partially free parliamentary elections.³¹ When the results of the election were allowed to stand both by the Polish military and, more important, by the Soviet Union, the rules of power politics had explicitly changed in Eastern Europe. In Afghanistan, the Soviets had first abandoned one of their allied communist regimes. By not forcing the Polish military to crack down on internal dissent as it had on all previous occasions since World War II, the Soviets had clearly revoked the Brezhnev doctrine in Eastern Europe.

The more direct connection between the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Eastern European revolution is made by Czech President Vaclav Havel in the preface of a book in which he states: "Many journalists and scholars will look for the correlation of that chain of spectacular transformations that changed as if at one blow, the fates of tens of millions of individuals and hitherto firm bipolar picture of the modern world. I believe this book will be one of the first important impulses in that direction."³² One of the contributing authors to the book clearly states that Havel's "one blow" was first struck in Afghanistan. Andrei Piontkowsky, an active participant in the "Democratic Russia" movement and adviser to the liberal Inter-Regional Group in the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, wrote:

The experience in Afghanistan was crucial in stimulating this rethinking. Afghanistan showed the limitations of military power very clearly and convincingly. Even the most hard-line generals and political and military analysts in the Kremlin understood this message. So it would be fair, if a little surprising to Europeans, to say that it was not so much thinkers in the corridors of the Kremlin as the Mujahadin in the hills of Afghanistan who were the real liberators of Eastern Europe.³³

Perestroika and *glasnost*, the new Soviet policies that made these changes possible, would have been made morally bankrupt if any military action had been taken in Eastern Europe. In December 1988, during the final months of the Afghan withdrawal, Gorbachev announced in a speech at the United Nations that the USSR would unilaterally withdraw some of its military forces from Eastern Europe, without insisting on a *quid pro quo* from Washington and NATO. It was a particularly candid expression of Moscow's sincere intent to retreat from the globalist/imperialist posture that had characterized its foreign policy in Eastern Europe since World War II. In a speech in Italy in September 1989, Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennediy Gerisomov said that the USSR has "replaced the Brezhnev Doctrine, which exists no longer and perhaps never existed, with the Frank Sinatra Doctrine from the title of one of his famous songs, 'I did it my way'."³⁴ Thus Gorbachev's new policies, which had been received with much skepticism in the West in 1987, had become institutionalized in Soviet foreign policy by 1989. The Brezhnev Doctrine, which had justified the deaths of thousands in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan, was officially laid to rest with a light-hearted quip from Gerisomov.

There is no question that the multiple political, social, and economic forces that fueled the democratic movements in Eastern Europe had been slowly multiplying since the beginning of the Cold War. Nor is there a debate that parts of Eastern Europe had been sovereign between the two world wars, and the dissident movements that led the 1989 revolution had continued to operate underground even in the most oppressive periods of Soviet-backed totalitarian rule. Gorbachev's abandonment of the Brezhnev Doctrine contained a critically important political message: the Soviet Union would no longer defend its allied regimes against populist uprisings by their own peoples. As noted in the case of Poland, it was a message not lost on either government officials or their domestic opponents, and throughout the rest of Eastern Europe, domestic grassroots opposition to the Stalinist-modeled one-party statist regimes coalesced quickly among the general population. In Hungary and Poland the less rigid communist regimes reached out to the rapidly germinating democratic elements, and within a year were peacefully replaced in power by the democratic forces. In Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria, and Romania the communist regimes

resisted change more forcefully, with the Romanian democratic revolution being marked by significant bloodshed. However, the result was the same—the communist governments were all overthrown, in large part because of their inability to disassociate themselves from their past connection with the Soviet Union. In the case of Afghanistan, the regime of Najibullah had little choice but to fight on. The somewhat surprising 3-year survival of Najibullah’s government was assisted by the historic fissure in Afghan politics, which quickly invoked infighting among the tribal-based groups after Soviet forces were withdrawn in 1989. However, as different as they may appear to be at first glance, the countries of Eastern Europe and Afghanistan shared the common fate of having been invaded and occupied by Soviet troops when their internal political situations threatened perceived Soviet national interests. Because of this shared trauma, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was a signifier of hope. Actions in Afghanistan were the first concrete sign to the rest of the “socialist commonwealth” that Moscow was willing to match the rhetoric of *perestroika* with action. Even though Eastern Europe’s predisposition for revolution existed long before the late 1980s, the actual expression of any people’s revolution occurred only after Gorbachev’s removal of troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent affirmations by Gorbachev that the Red Army would not again be used to support the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Afghanistan was the first place where this revolution in foreign policy took place. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was a harbinger of the fall of the communist “dominos” in Eastern Europe. In 1992 this sequential reality was confirmed by *perestroika*’s foremost patron in foreign policy. Former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze makes the final connection by declaring, “*The decision to leave Afghanistan was the first and most difficult step. . . . Everything else flowed from that.*”³⁵

End of Force—End of Union

From the founding of the Soviet state in 1917, the declared enemies of socialism were either imprisoned, forced into exile, or shot. State violence was used extensively in order to maintain complete political control over Soviet society. When the Soviet Union expanded its sphere of influence after the Second World War, military and secret police forces were the primary tool used to maintain Soviet dominance in the outer empire. The need to use force, fear, and terror to Sovietize most of Eastern Europe demonstrated the primary weakness of the Soviet system, and once force had been used to keep its titular “allies” in line, the USSR became largely dependent on force to remain in control. At its core, military force was the key ingredient in holding both the outer empire and the internal union together. Ironically, Gorbachev’s grand strategy for breaking this dependence on force led to the destruction of the entire system. The last communist “domino” to fall in the wave of democratic political reform that swept the Eastern Block in the dramatic period of 1989-1991 was the Soviet Union itself.

By 1988 the Soviet public had become much more attuned to the problems of Afghanistan. On the domestic level, Gorbachev was faced with growing public dissatisfaction with the war as the human costs became increasingly tangible over the years. Like the United States in Vietnam, the Soviet military’s inability to win the Afghan War decisively brought home the negative aspects of the war: battlefield deaths, POWs and MIAs, wounded veterans, mentally and physically ill veterans, and veterans with drug addiction. Veterans of the Afghan War, all conscripts, rotated home at periodic intervals, which permitted the travails, frustrations, self-doubts, and horror stories of the common soldier to be shared by the entire population. The problems exposed in the wartime army soon became a microcosm for the internal weakness of the society as a whole. According to one study:

The messages of doubt were military, political, ethnic, and social. In the end they were corrosive and destructive. One needs only review the recently released casualty figures to underscore the persuasiveness of the problem. Soviet dead and missing in Afghanistan amounted to almost 15,000

troops, a modest percent of the 642,000 Soviets who served during the 10-year war. Far more telling were the 469,685 other casualties, fully 73 percent of the overall force, who were wounded or incapacitated by serious illness. Some 415,932 troops fell victim to disease, of which 115,308 suffered from infectious hepatitis and 31,080 from typhoid fever. Beyond the sheer magnitude of these numbers is what the figures say about Soviet military hygiene and the conditions surrounding troop life. These numbers are unheard of in modern armies and modern medicine and their social impact among the returnees and the Soviet population was staggering.³⁶

Because of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, press reports on the Afghan War were also being printed that did not simply promote a glossy official line, thus increasing public awareness and dissatisfaction with the war. During the Brezhnev years, there had been no war at all—Soviet soldiers were simply helping the Afghans, who welcomed them with open arms. Under Andropov and Chernenko some fighting was reported; however, most reports simply glorified the prowess of the Soviet fighting machine. Under Gorbachev the extent of coverage widened rapidly, with stories of veterans' experiences being used to enhance the reform process, undermine conservative critics inside the Communist Party, and outflank the ossified bureaucracy. At the 27th Party Congress in February 1988, Gorbachev had called the war a "bleeding wound," a statement that inspired members of the Soviet press to steadily test the limits of *glasnost*. Politically Gorbachev wanted the war to be linked to the failed foreign and domestic policies of the Brezhnev era. Any opposition to the Afghan withdrawal was therefore linked to support of the previous regime. Gorbachev perceived that the battle to restructure Soviet society at home could only be helped by ending the war in Afghanistan and by unmasking its dark side by freeing censorship in television, movies, music, art, and literature. On all levels, in various forms and degrees, reports on the horrors and heroism of Afghanistan extensively penetrated the cultural space of Soviet society.³⁷ The political sphere was penetrated directly as well. After a remarkable series of heated debates between dissident Andrei Sakharov and various conservative members of the legislature, the Supreme Soviet declared in December 1989 that the Afghan War had been an immoral act in violation of international human rights standards and illegal under international law. No similar declaration of guilt has ever been adopted by the U.S. Government regarding Vietnam. In 1990 the Soviets continued to confess old sins, apologizing for the invasion of Czechoslovakia and going so far as to declare the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact illegal, thus opening a Pandora's box of territorial legal questions and fanning the long-smoldering embers of Baltic independence into open flame.

In an interview on the granting of independence to the Baltic states, Alexander Karpjenko, a Soviet veteran wounded in Afghanistan, cites the importance of Afghanistan in the destruction of the Soviet empire. "Afghanistan was a crucial link in the chain. Our failure in Afghanistan and Gorbachev's decision to introduce *glasnost* raised questions about the proper role of the Soviet army. Russian mothers began insisting that their sons be brought home."³⁸ Once Gorbachev broke the ideological constructs of the "socialist commonwealth" and denounced the use of force to maintain Soviet influence, there was little else to hold the empire together. Internally, the empire crumbled because violent force was no longer seen as a legitimate and effective tool of state power. Military force was used to keep the Baltic States in line from 1988 to 1991. However, when Soviet soldiers refused in late August 1991 to obey the coup leadership's orders to crack down in Moscow, the independence movement was destined to succeed. By removing Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Gorbachev had set in motion a tide of social forces that eventually destroyed the Soviet Union as a unified state.

In April 1992 the last Soviet-installed leader of Afghanistan, President Najibullah, surrendered power. Oddly, Afghanistan, where the end of Soviet hegemony was initiated, was the last Soviet-backed regime to fall, surviving longer than its patron. In commenting on Najibullah's departure, Robert B. Oakley, U.S. ambassador to Pakistan (1988-91), summarized Afghanistan's importance: "The unraveling of the Cold War

began there. When the Soviet people asked why their leaders were wasting lives and treasure in a remote, backward country in a time they were facing massive domestic problems, it was the beginning of the end for the whole Soviet experiment.”³⁹ Oakley’s view was echoed by Afghanistan’s first post-communist president, Sibghatullah Mujaddidi. During the ceremony that officially transferred power from Najibullah’s regime to the Islamic rebels, Mujaddidi claimed credit on behalf of the Afghans for the Soviet Union’s demise. “No one believed that our resort to arms would destroy a superpower and destroy communism. But we believe God is the only superpower.”⁴⁰ Mujaddidi’s words are revealing, if somewhat exaggerated. The Afghans’ resort to arms was one of many factors that led to the destruction of a superpower. However, Soviet communism was finally destroyed after its leaders renounced the use of force by arms to maintain power and, once fear of arrest or execution had dissipated, the citizenry rebelled.

In addition to the linkage between the breaking of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Afghanistan and the revolution in Eastern Europe, the Soviet/Afghan experience has more direct generative linkage to the final days of the Soviet state. As widely narrated in newspaper and television reports from the makeshift blockades in the streets of Moscow, the vast majority of anti-coup forces were young men between the ages of 20 and 40, most of whom had military experience under the Soviet system of universal conscription. Veterans of the Afghan War were present in large numbers and were largely responsible for guarding the Russian Republic parliamentary building during the critical hours of the aborted coup in Moscow. Artyom Borovik, a Soviet journalist and author of *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, helped to man the barricades while reporting for the American television network CBS’s highly acclaimed *60 Minutes* program. After numerous interviews, he reported that Afghan War veterans were committed to the internal reforms started by Gorbachev and would die before allowing a return of the old leadership that had sent them to Afghanistan.⁴¹ Clearly, many Afghan War veterans in Moscow were willing to lie down in front of tanks to protect the reform process symbolized by Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament building. After having personally experienced the failure of Brezhnev’s socialist internationalism in Afghanistan, opposing the coup was of paramount importance to these veterans. Two of the three men killed on the night of 20 August 1991, Dmitri Komar and Iliya Krichevsky, were Afghan War veterans.⁴²

On the other side of the barricades, the legacy of Afghanistan was also at work. Soviet generals who had served in Afghanistan were involved in carrying out the coup, and many of their soldiers were veterans of the Afghan War. However, in the final test of loyalties, three of the last commanders in Afghanistan, Aleksandar Rutskoi, Pavel Grachev, and Boris Gromov, joined with Yeltsin’s forces. Both Grachev and Gromov had been involved in coup plans to storm the Russian parliament building, but, during the second day of the coup, Grachev and Gromov refused to give orders for the attack when it became apparent that a massive loss of life would result. Gromov took a series of steps that effectively sabotaged the coup by informing his fellow Afghan War veterans inside the building that an attack was being planned. Grachev was responsible for urging the Russian leadership to summon as many supporters as possible because “the attacking forces will not dare open fire on the people.”⁴³ Rutskoi, who had been shot down by a Stinger missile on one of his 428 combat missions in Afghanistan, had become on his return from service a leading champion of parliamentary democracy and a major figure during the August coup.

Elite Soviet KGB troops of the celebrated Alpha group also refused to participate. Many Alpha members were Afghan War veterans and had been responsible for the death of Amin during the storming of the presidential palace in Kabul in December 1979. Anatoly Savelev, one such member, stated, “Everyone is free to act as his conscience determines. But I personally will not take part in a storming of the White House.” His words were echoed by General Grachev, who informed Yeltsin, “I am a Russian and will never allow the army to spill the blood of my own people.” Yeltsin was informed also that Grachev was so

committed to stopping the coup that he had arranged plans to bomb the Kremlin if coup leaders attempted to storm the building. Yeltsin rewarded Grachev's loyalty by appointing him minister of defense in his new government; Rutskoi became Yeltsin's vice president; and Gromov, the "Lion of Afghanistan," remained a deputy commander of ground forces after the coup, even though he had run for president against Yeltsin in 1991 and at one time was seen as one of Yeltsin's many rivals.⁴⁴ Thus, on many levels; international, cultural, and individual, Afghanistan proved to be a critical turning point in Russian history.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most important lesson that can be derived from this comparison has to do with our understanding of political legitimacy in the domestic polities of the United States and the Soviet Union. Both superpowers ended their interventions because of domestic pressures, although in the United States it was pressure from the masses and in the USSR it was pressure from within the government. In the United States, President Johnson was driven from politics because of his inability both to win the war and to fulfill his strategic vision of a Great Society for all Americans. Although the Tet offensive in 1968 was a military disaster for communist forces located south of the 17th parallel—a defeat from which they never fully recovered—it was the turning point in the war's legitimacy crisis in the United States, where the ruling political elite were willing to continue the war, but the population increasingly was not. Americans had been given numerous promises and assurances that their sons and daughters would be home soon, that the war was being won, that South Vietnam was a bastion of democracy, and that the United States had always pursued the war in accordance with the laws and ideals of American society. Thus, the very fact that the communist's Tet offensive could happen at all came as a great shock to Americans. The trauma of Tet began to peel away the multiple layers of naive trust that Americans held in their government—or, perhaps more accurately, Tet ultimately revealed the façade of Cold War illusions that the government had fabricated around an overly trusting public.

Ironically, Tet also undermined the legitimacy of the communist forces in the South, which were rendered militarily destitute by their near destruction by the U.S. and GVN forces. From 1956 to 1968 the war was fought in the South by members of the local population supported by those in the North. However, from 1969 to 1975, primarily soldiers from the North who infiltrated South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail fought the war in South Vietnam. As for the American commitment to fight on behalf of Vietnam, the war was essentially over after Tet, in no small part because of its influence on the 1968 election in the United States and President Johnson's decision to end his otherwise brilliant political career. Nixon was elected in large part because of his promise to end the war in Vietnam while keeping America's international credibility and honor intact.

Although Nixon fulfilled this promise, he too was driven from office. Why? In the politics of the United States, the ends do not always justify the means—especially if the means violate the sources of legitimacy in American politics. Due process, the separation of powers, and constitutional legality are the fundamental sources of political legitimacy in the American political system. Nixon eventually ended the war in Vietnam, but in doing so he violated the lawful boundaries of the office of the American presidency.

Both Nixon and Johnson were ruined in part because they violated the accepted norms of American politics. Both presidents were caught in half-truths, deception, and outright lies regarding various aspects of the war. This behavior was unacceptable, especially in the context of a war that would cost 58,000 American lives, over a million Vietnamese lives, and uncounted billions of dollars in national treasure. Further, once the process began, Americans wanted to know what other forms of duplicity had been perpetuated upon them. Deception regarding the war, including its origins in Vietnamese history; U.S.

original support for Ho Chi Minh during the Second World War; Eisenhower's abrogation of the democratic elections promised in the Geneva accords of 1954; and Kennedy's involvement in the coup d'état that killed President Diem were some of the major dishonorable acts dredged up for U.S. citizens to consider. They did not (and do not) enjoy the flavor of this slice of American history.

Nevertheless, despite being shaken to its core, the American constitutional system remained intact and mostly legitimate in the view of the American people. American democracy, like all modern democratic regimes, has a number of self-correcting mechanisms, primarily in the form of elections, but also in the form of laws for the removal of figures from high office. Hence when the rational-legal authority of the modern state is violated, the state itself—the “system”—has the ability to survive by addressing its shortcomings through legislation. The system may in fact have flaws, but individuals are usually seen as the cause for failures of the system. Individuals are replaced during elections, and the system is tinkered with, but the basic constitutional structure remains the same. The greatest damage of strategic failure in Vietnam was to the attitudes of Americans toward their government, themselves, and their place in the world. However, perhaps even here a silver lining can be discerned. In the wake of Vietnam, Americans once again became willing to question their leaders. Only after Vietnam had destroyed the self-righteous illusions and myths that Americans had constructed around themselves after World War II did Americans remember that blind trust in their leaders was a potential recipe for disaster. Vietnam was a searing experience for the nation, but at some level, perhaps, the United States emerged improved from the experience. For a time, the hubris of superpower was humbled, and I suspect that until the last generation of Americans who lived through the Vietnam War passes into history, the United States will not again be involved in a war in which its citizens fail to keep close tabs on what their government is doing, both in rhetoric and in reality.

There were no Tets for the Soviets in Afghanistan; there was no similar battlefield crisis to foment a legitimacy crisis in Soviet society comparable with the Tet offensive's impact on the United States. The Mujahideen, unlike the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam, never attempted to overthrow the Soviet forces in a single, coordinated, country-wide military assault and popular uprising. In all likelihood, such a unified effort was impossible in Afghanistan, simply because it would have required the cooperation and coordination of too great a number of disparate political groups that, although unified in the struggle to oust the Soviet army, were not unified under a single umbrella of Afghan nationalism to the extent seen in Vietnam. In political terms, however, the Soviet Union perhaps did experience something of its own Tet offensive in the form of the crisis of legitimacy caused by Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which were first rendered into tangible policy acts in Afghanistan. Like Nixon, Gorbachev pulled out of Afghanistan to achieve objectives that he perceived as crucial to the national interests of the Soviet Union. Like the Tet offensive, the message to the Soviet people was delivered primarily through decreasing controls on the press, which became the vehicle for promoting change. Still, the fate of the Soviet Union stands in sharp contrast to the final fallout of Vietnam on American society. In making his reforms, Gorbachev employed a public relations strategy that, instead of strengthening the Union, ultimately destroyed it entirely. Why?

During the Soviet era, the authority of the state was *officially* portrayed in rational-legal terms, and the regime had all the accoutrements of rational-legal authority that characterize modern states: a written constitution, an elective legislative body, an executive bureaucracy, and regular elections. Viewed collectively, the various drafts of the Soviet constitution all *officially* guaranteed the Soviet citizens an extensive complement of civil, political, and economic rights, often exceeding those of Western democracies. Likewise, elections and voting took place on the national, regional, and local levels. However, in reality, all aspects of Soviet politics—from the construction of the organs of the state, to relations among the fifteen republics, to the rights and obligations of the average citizen—were contingent on the monopoly

on power held by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although political parties are often considered to be a characteristic of modern, rational-legal politics, in the Soviet case power and legitimacy in the Communist Party was characterized by a peculiar amalgam of charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal sources of authority. For example, charismatic elements were seen in the “cult of personality” that sprung up around each successive Soviet leader. The longer any individual leader served in the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party, the more that person began to accrue the absolute power of the Czar, as the office and the person merged. Continuity with traditional sources of legitimacy was best expressed by the use of military force and police terror to maintain the state. Rational-legal elements of legitimacy existed in form, but lacked true substance in comparison to the other sources. Despite Gorbachev’s reforms, the rule of law never was able to free itself from the rule of the Party during the Soviet era.

In a broader historical context, then, we can perhaps best understand the Soviet Union as a transition regime between what political sociologists describe as premodern and modern states. In the Czarist order, power, authority, and legitimacy were deeply embedded in traditional and charismatic elements, and these remained vibrant in the Soviet era. In essence both Czars and commissars justified their monopoly of absolute power on a very narrow set of criteria. At the foundation of the Czarist order lay tradition, orthodox mysticism, the divine right of aristocratic rule, and coercive military power as the final arbiter of rule. At the foundation of the Soviet regime lay a superior ideology, the principal role of the Party to propagate and to guarantee the survival of that ideology, and coercive military power as the final arbiter of rule. As such, both regimes based their ruling legitimacy on claims of superiority, the guardianship of truth, basic infallibility, and fear. When challenged by internal dissent, both Czarist and Soviet regimes remained in power through the extensive use of military force, state violence, and terror. As discussed above, during both the Czarist and the Soviet era, war loss challenged the basic legitimacy of the state and resulted in structural reforms. The claim of superiority and infallibility could only be maintained in time of military success. In defeat, the state was seen as unreliable and possibly inferior to its worldly opponents. Only in times of war loss, when a regime had fallen into a condition of proven fallibility, did political change ever take place in Russia.

The crucial importance of repressive means of control for the survival of these regimes is perhaps best illustrated in its absence. The end of the Soviet empire would not have occurred in the period of 1989-91 without Gorbachev’s rejection of the use of force as enshrined in his *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies. In an ideal sense, these policies were a strategic attempt to reform the Soviet Union by abandoning traditional authority asserted from within the Communist Party by institutionalizing a more genuine form of rational-legal authority and the rule of law. In true rational-legal authority, democracy can be authentic only if people can choose their political leaders. Elections can be genuine only if they are free from manipulation by the state. Due process can be certain only if the rules apply to everyone equally. However, despite Gorbachev’s desire to reform the Communist Party, the ruling regime could not be separated from the instruments of power upon which it relied. The “ways” of control essentially defined the legitimacy of the Soviet system. Once Gorbachev had renounced the use of force to maintain Communist Party dictatorship, there was very little left to make the government legitimate in the minds of the population. End of force resulted in end of empire and end of union.⁴⁵ Although he clearly did not intend for the Soviet Union to collapse, in a transcendent sense Gorbachev succeeded in creating a more modern rational-legal democracy in Russia. In the wake of Vietnam, Americans learned again to beware of unsupervised power. In the wake of Afghanistan, Russians and others living in much of the territorial space of the old Soviet empire have been provided with a similar opportunity as part of the ongoing evolution of politics in the newly democratized states.

Throughout history war has always been the ultimate test of a state’s ruling legitimacy, and the

superpowers' experiences in Vietnam and Afghanistan reaffirm this age-old truth. Vietnam is the only war that the United States ever completely lost, and Afghanistan is the only war that the Soviet Union ever completely lost. The strategic formulation choices in both cases ended in great stress and discord in one country, and outright disaster (from a regime-survival point of view) in another. From a comparative perspective, it is clear that Afghanistan's impact on the ultimate fate of the Soviet Union was much greater than Vietnam's impact on the United States. The United States survived Vietnam, and the Soviet Union did not survive Afghanistan. Therefore, despite multiple layers of analogy, in comprehensive terms Afghanistan was not the Soviet Vietnam; and mercifully, Vietnam was not the American Afghanistan.

Notes - Chapter 10

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