REVEALED: Ukraine is a Repeat of Afghanistan | Prof. David N. Gibbs

Today I'm talking again to Dr. David Gibbs, a Professor of History at Arizona University. We talked before on this channel but he recently made me aware of a noteworthy comparison, namely the striking similarities that today's Russo-Ukrainian war has with the Soviet-Afghanistan war. At the time when the 1979 invasion took place, it was viewed in the West as completely unprovoked and a sensational threat to Western security. That's the topic of discussion today.

#M3

But I think, again, the idea of a proxy war in Afghanistan became the model for Ukraine. That's also a proxy war. Americans aren't dying; it's Ukrainians and Russians who are dying. A real source of excitement for CIA officials during the '80s was that they were killing Russians indirectly—not Russian-backed forces in Angola or elsewhere, but they were actually killing Russian soldiers. That was very exciting for the CIA, as I'm sure it's very exciting for U.S. officials now. They're killing Russians directly. You might say it's a little bit disturbing to have such glee in killing people, but that is how the thinking goes.

#M2

Hello everybody, this is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking again to Prof. David N. Gibbs, a professor of history at the University of Arizona. We talked before on this channel, but he recently made me aware of a noteworthy comparison, namely the striking similarities that today's Russo-Ukrainian war has with the Soviet-Afghanistan war. At the time, when the invasion took place in 1979, it was viewed in the West as completely unprovoked and a sensational threat to Western security. So that's what we want to talk about today. David, welcome back.

#M3

Thank you for having me again, Pascal.

#M2

It's great that you pointed out the way in which there are so many similarities, not only in how the propaganda works, but also in how this war was fought. Can you maybe start a bit with the historical background of Afghanistan and why you think it resembles so much what's happening in Ukraine today?

#M3

Well, what you had was Afghanistan had been a neutralist country for most of the Cold War. In 1978, there was a coup in which a leftist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, took power. It resulted in a complex civil war between the Afghan left and a disparate, unconnected group of Islamist guerrillas, collectively referred to as the Mujahideen. Then, on December 24th, 1979, the Soviet Union, which had been supporting the leftist government, forcibly removed the communist leader in Afghanistan and essentially invaded the country, establishing a puppet government under the Soviets. They occupied Afghanistan for nine years, exiting in 1989. This was a watershed event in the last phase of the Cold War.

It was a time when the United States had relatively low levels of military spending, and many people spoke as if maybe the Cold War would eventually become a thing of the past. Military spending was at the lowest level since the beginning of the Cold War, and the U.S. was suffering from what some had called the Vietnam Syndrome. I've discussed this previously on your show: the defeat in Vietnam was a traumatizing experience for the U.S. elite. I should add it was even more traumatizing for the Vietnamese, but let's leave that aside. It was a defeat in war, and that damaged America's ability to intervene overseas. A lot of the foreign policy establishment, particularly led by the neoconservatives, wanted to reverse this and were very frustrated that they didn't have the opportunity to do so.

Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan offered them the opportunity to do so. At the time, the invasion of Afghanistan was perceived as one of the most sensational threats to Western security in history. Afghanistan was portrayed as one of the most strategically vital countries on the planet. And I said nobody had ever heard of Afghanistan before, but nevertheless, suddenly it became the linchpin of international politics. President Carter said the Soviet invasion was the biggest threat to world peace since World War II. Under the Carter Doctrine, he threatened nuclear war against the Soviets if they made any further expansion beyond Afghanistan. There was a complete reversal of the more moderate policies that had prevailed through most of the decade, and there was a great increase in military spending.

There was an ending to détente, the more moderate policies between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. And it seemed as though this was an unprovoked invasion. This was hammered away, just like with very similar... The comparisons here are very striking to Ukraine, beginning with the fact that it was an unprovoked invasion. We heard this again and again, and a country that was strategically vital. This anticipated much broader generalized expansion by the Soviet Union, threatening Western security in the most basic way. The neoconservatives claimed that this was an effort by the Soviet Union to essentially take over the whole globe. They used very sensational language to emphasize their points, just as today there are claims the Russians will not stop at Ukraine. They'll march on to the rest of Europe.

They'll march all the way to the Atlantic if we let them do so. And you hear this sort of thing all the time from European leaders, at least from the foreign policy establishment in the United States. And the comparisons here are not abstract or hypothetical; they're concrete. At the time of the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Hillary Clinton, speaking, I suspect, for much of the foreign policy establishment, said what the United States wants to accomplish in Ukraine, what we should accomplish in Ukraine, is what we accomplished in Afghanistan: that we basically established defeat against the Soviets, making up for America's defeat implicitly in Vietnam, and contributed to the breakup of the Soviet Union, with the implication this might bring about the breakup of the Russian Federation.

There was a clear anticipation of a parallel here. Of course, it didn't work out that way in Ukraine. But nevertheless, I think that was what the American foreign policy establishment and much of the European counterpart wanted to accomplish in Ukraine, looking again at the precedent of Afghanistan. We did it in Afghanistan, so therefore, we can do it in Ukraine as well. Let me see if you want to interject anything before I go on.

#M2

You know, you're pointing out things that, especially in our circle of neutrality studies, we've been talking about a lot because there were these two options, right? Either Ukraine becomes the Austria of Eastern Europe, or it becomes the Afghanistan. And we've been saying for a long time, Afghanization cannot be a goal. But Hillary Clinton actually said that, and people said that. And Afghanistan was, of course, also viewed as a way to pay back the Soviet Union for how they supported North Vietnam and ultimately defeated the United States.

So there's a sick kind of thinking going on that leads them to support military aid for the regime that then battles the other great power. That's why we still talk about both of them being proxy wars. But one thing, can you talk a bit more about the way the invasion started in Afghanistan? There are some significant differences, but also in Afghanistan, it had to do with a rapid change of governments and even cousins and so on killing each other. And then there was an invitation, wasn't there, toward the Soviets by the communist government? But there was also a betrayal involved. Can you go into that a bit?

#M3

If you don't mind, I'd first like to start with the issue of Afghanistan's role before the crisis, essentially, which is this: Again, the claim was made repeatedly during the crisis that the Soviets invaded Afghanistan because it was one of the most strategically important places on planet Earth, and that's why they invaded it. This clearly was going to be a stepping stone to further aggression, probably in the Persian Gulf, or possibly a push towards the Indian Ocean to open up a warm water port, a historic goal of the Soviet Union. It was one of those two objectives. And from there, the

world, basically, was how it was presented. Again, Afghanistan was... This was hammered away. Nobody contested it except George Kennan.

In the New York Times, George Kennan contested it, but nobody contested the idea that Afghanistan was strategically vital. I think one of the problems you had here is that there's hardly any information on Afghanistan because there are no Afghan specialists, and the few that there were very likely, I suspect, were working for the CIA. It's just a guess, but that's how it seemed to me. But the bottom line is that we now have a lot of documents. We have declassified U.S. government documents. We also have a lot of the Soviet documents, which have been declassified during the early '90s and translated into English, I should add, and are available through the Woodrow Wilson Center electronically. And they present a very different picture of the prehistory of the crisis and the crisis itself.

And the prehistory, if you look at the declassified documents, shows that Afghanistan had been regarded as strategically worthless by the U.S. foreign policy establishment over decades, through the '50s and '60s. Things like CIA estimates and State Department documents overwhelmingly said Afghanistan is of no strategic importance to the United States. It's too backward—"backward" is the word they often used back then—lacking infrastructure, its great distance from the sea, its distance from the Persian Gulf; all of these things suggest it's of no importance. It did note that it's important to the Soviets only because it's on Soviet borders, and the Soviets are always concerned about everything on their borders. But to the West, it's of no importance. There was a CIA National Intelligence Estimate, I think from 1956, which asked the hypothetical question.

It noted that the Soviets presented no threat of invasion, but it asked hypothetically, if the Soviets were to invade, what would the U.S. do? And the answer was basically nothing, because Afghanistan is of no strategic importance. It noted that we could protest at the UN, we could protest through the embassies, and that would be about it because it's not important. Afghanistan was a locus of Soviet foreign aid. It was one of the largest recipients of Soviet foreign aid.

The Soviets also trained Afghan military officers, and U.S. documents said that their aid programs were pretty good. They praised the programs and said they were pretty efficient. The Soviets seemed to have no interest in making Afghanistan communist. It was a neutral country in the Cold War, with something of a pro-Soviet tilt, a little like Finland. It was compared to Finland back in the day because Finland was also neutral, but with a little bit of a pro-Soviet tilt during the Cold War, as a legacy of the 1947 treaty with the Soviets that ended the occupation of Karelia. And...

#M2

And one more thing: Afghanistan was not part of the Second World War. It was neutral during the Second World War and survived that one as well.

#M3

And it resisted foreign occupation, famously defeating the British twice, not once, but twice in the 19th century. There was a kind of anti-colonial, proud tradition among the Afghans. Despite their poverty, they were proud of their independence. It's interesting to note, by the way, that one of the architects of the U.S. intervention there, a leading neocon, was a Columbia University professor named Zbigniew Brzezinski, later the National Security Advisor to President Carter. He played a key role in all this. He published extensively as a political scientist on international relations during the Cold War, and in all of his writings, he made virtually no mention at all of the country Afghanistan.

I was able to find only a single mention of Afghanistan in an extensive search of his writings through JSTOR and other sources. I found Afghanistan mentioned only once, just in passing, in terms of, you know, it enumerated all the countries that voted on a particular UN resolution, and it mentioned Afghanistan, underscoring that Afghanistan was of such trivial importance that Brzezinski didn't even mention it, or barely mentioned it. And, you know, later on, of course, he insisted it's strategically vital, it's one of the most strategically vital countries on the planet. He never seemed to notice it before. In 1973, there was a very rare case where a mainstream U.S. newspaper mentioned Afghanistan on the front page.

It was—let me see if I can find the title of this. Oh, yes, here we go. This is the title from the Wall Street Journal: "Do the Russians Covet Afghanistan? If So, It's Hard to Figure Out Why." The body of the article referred to Afghanistan as a vast expanse of desert waste of no strategic importance to anybody. That was the consensus view, and it was reflected in U.S. documents as well over decades. So the idea that Afghanistan was strategically important must be viewed as a propaganda invention that was convenient for the time to justify a policy they wanted to push through, despite Afghanistan's complete lack of strategic value.

#M2

You know, this is fascinating also because Afghanistan is traditionally a borderland and a typical buffer state. It was formed due to the opposition of the Afghans to the British invasion, occupation, and colonial control of India, which at the time included Pakistan, right? Pakistan and Afghanistan share this huge area of the Pashtuns, the Pashtun area, which is basically split in the middle. The thing is, Afghanistan also has very porous borders on all sides and has many ethnicities, including Tajiks and many others. These borders are also porous into other countries, including the Soviet Union. So, for the Soviet Union, it mattered quite a bit what happened in Afghanistan. Maybe you can talk about that a bit.

#M3

Well, this is very clear from the U.S. documents. The U.S. government documents noted that despite its lack of strategic value offensively, it's defensively important to the Soviets for the simple reason they have a large border, first of all, and the Soviets are always concerned about anything going on at their borders. And neutrality suits their interests. They want to keep Afghanistan neutral with

something of a pro-Soviet tilt, like Finland. Furthermore, as you noted, there are Uzbeks and Tajiks. They're not the majority group. The majority group is the Pashtuns, but they were a sizable minority group in the north. And further north, there's a Soviet, or what used to be Soviet, area with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which share a common language and, of course, the Islamic religion.

And there was a fear among the Soviets that destabilization of Afghanistan could, partly for ethnic and religious reasons, destabilize the southern frontier, particularly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On account of all those variables, the Soviet Union was very concerned with keeping Afghanistan neutral. The United States was perfectly okay with this for most of the Cold War and basically conceded Afghanistan as a Soviet country, as a very loose Soviet sphere of influence in the Cold War, because of all the reasons stated. Now, that began to change in 1973. And I think what changed it was the impending U.S. defeat in Vietnam.

And Henry Kissinger decided that in 1973, on account of the fact the U.S. had disengaged from combat in 1973 with the Paris Peace Accords of January, and he was fearful that with the Paris Peace Accords and the likelihood that eventually South Vietnam would go communist too, which obviously it did, the United States needed to make some dramatic demonstration of U.S. power somewhere in the world to demonstrate American power potency, if you'll forgive that phrase, that we are still capable of acting like an aggressive military power, despite our impending defeat in Vietnam. And so we arbitrarily chose two countries to stage aggressive covert operations.

One was Angola in 1974. The Portuguese were decolonizing, and as they decolonized, there were three different ethnic groups. Kissinger decided to have the CIA begin a civil war among the ethnic groups, just to show the U.S. could do it. It lasted over 10 years and probably killed hundreds of thousands. But, you know, obviously, Henry Kissinger would never let considerations like that get in his way. He was a very cold realist, you might say, with a very limited moral compass. I think that's fair. And the other one was Afghanistan. The idea was that Afghanistan's neutralist government needed to be intimidated. So he started a rebellion in cooperation with the Pakistani and the Shah of Iran's intelligence services, beginning a rebellion among Islamic extremist groups just to intimidate the government.

Then, having intimidated the government, Kissinger had the Shah of Iran use his enormous oil wealth to try and offer to outbid the Soviet Union in aid. Until now, the U.S. had always resisted this; they didn't want to outbid the Soviet Union because that would be destabilizing. But now Kissinger was willing to destabilize Afghanistan to show U.S. ability to use force to make up for Vietnam, as it did in Angola. As a result, the Shah of Iran offered a massive aid package to Afghanistan, which the Afghans accepted, to the chagrin of the Soviets. They also began training their military officers in Iran and Egypt, rather than in the Soviet Union, much to the chagrin of the Soviets, for tilting them away from the Soviets. As part of the deal, the tiny Afghan Communist Party, the PDPA, was to be gradually repressed in phases, which led to a coup in 1978. But I see you want to ask a question, so go ahead.

#M2

Yeah, because I didn't know about this. The history that I remember reading about Afghanistan and how this unfolded focuses solely on the internal dynamics of Afghanistan and how the king was ousted while on a trip to Switzerland, I believe. And then how the Communist Party internally started fighting with each other and how then at some point Brezhnev, who in '79 was already very old and very... I mean, the Joe Biden of his time, probably, then decided to invade. And that was a huge blunder. I remember that it is depicted as the Soviet Union's greatest blunder for no good reason, at least in the history books that I read. And you're telling me that, oh, no, there was a very strong CIA and U.S. involvement in destabilizing the country politically with this deal and covertly as well.

#M3

The book on this is "Out of Afghanistan" by Selig Harrison and Diego Cordovez. Selig Harrison was a man with exceptionally good connections in South Asia and in the CIA as well, I suspect. He was at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, very well, very mainstream. And Diego Cordovez was the UN-appointed mediator who brokered the Soviet exit from Afghanistan. The details I just gave you about the '73 covert operation come mostly from Harrison's account, which is very reliable. I should add, the book's been endorsed by, oh, let me see, I have it. It's been endorsed by top figures, including cabinet figures from this period in both the Reagan and Carter presidencies.

#M2

Let me guess, they're proud of it, right? There's no doubt. There's no doubt.

#M3

This is a source of great pride for American officials who were involved in this operation. And the pride just oozes out of their interviews and so on. It comes across again and again. This is a sensational success from their standpoint and their view.

#M2

Successfully destabilizing Afghanistan and ensuring that an invasion takes place.

#M3

That's right. That's in essence what happened. And they are indeed proud of their cleverness in achieving these objectives. But in any case, the destabilization of Afghanistan began with this '73 decision. I suspect that was mostly the brainchild of Henry Kissinger, with naturally a push by Richard Nixon, who was not a passive player at all, I'm sure. And, of course, the Shah of Iran and the Pakistanis were involved as well, but I suspect as second-tier players. In any case, what this led

to was increasing repression against the Afghan Communist Party, eventually an assassination of one of their top leaders and their full arrest in 1978, the appointment of a hardline interior minister in Afghanistan insisted upon by the Shah of Iran, before he was overthrown himself.

And this is what triggered the coup. The Afghan Communist Party contacted a well-connected Air Force colonel, and the Air Force colonel, who'd been trained in Moscow, launched a coup, basically, and overthrew the government and installed the PDPA in power. Now, the question, it was always assumed the Soviets engineered this coup, but the evidence presented by Harrison and Cordovez suggests the evidence weighs against this. The evidence that has now come out since the end of the Cold War suggests the Soviet KGB station and the embassy didn't really trust the Afghan Communist Party, particularly the faction that was in power. As you noted, there was a lot of factional fighting, violent factional fighting between the two.

That was never resolved. And the faction that was dominant, called the Khalq faction, was always deeply distrusted by the Soviets as too hot-headed, for lack of a better term, too impulsive, too unrestrained. The favored faction, called the Parcham faction, was subordinated to the Khalq faction. And so when they took over, it was the Khalq faction that was in charge. And the Soviets always had distrusted these people. Publicly, they endorsed the takeover as a revolution. They called it a revolution, which is a term of flattery, I suppose, from the Soviet standpoint. It was really more of a military coup, but they called it a revolution.

But behind the scenes, we now know, again, from both the Soviet documents and from the American documents, the U.S. had an embassy there, and they were reporting back to Washington. A lot of those embassy cables, I suspect, were actually CIA cables, but they're not identified as such. And what everything says is the Soviets really don't trust the people who are in power in Afghanistan. They're backing them because they feel they have no choice. In any case, the Afghan hotheads began implementing rapid social changes, including a land reform, which was very sloppily implemented. They also established equality of the sexes.

Which, again, these things are very good in principle, but it's clear the Afghan populace wasn't ready for them. There was also a literacy campaign. They sent hundreds of mostly university-educated, young women into the rural areas to start literacy classes, especially for women and girls who had been disfavored. Again, in principle, these are laudable objectives, but they were done very sloppily and with a lot of heavy-handedness. The result was a mass rebellion by the population on Islamist grounds, as these violated their Islamic principles. Again, their particular interpretation of Islam, I should say, which was deeply conservative.

Basically, many Afghans, as poor as they were, had access to World War I-style Lee-Enfield rifles, the standard British-issue rifle from World War I, that were sort of copied by gunsmiths in small workshops in Pakistan. Apparently, they were widely available in Afghanistan. The men pulled their Lee-Enfields, or Lee-Enfield copies, out of their storehouses and began shooting or killing the Afghan communists, often in very unpleasant ways, I should add. This was the beginning of a civil war. The

Mujahideen were never a single group; they were mostly disparate groups. There was very little unity among them, but they began killing the Afghan communists as they went in to implement their reforms.

#M2

Can you maybe also say something about the role of the king and his ouster, which happened a little bit before that, right?

#M3

Yes, there was a longstanding monarchy in Afghanistan. It was overthrown in a coup in '73, which installed a republic. The republic was headed by the king's cousin, so it was not much of a change. The CIA report on this said, "We don't expect very much change in the way Afghanistan is governed. Mostly, the central government has little influence in the rural areas, which mostly govern themselves. And we don't expect it to become any more or less pro-Soviet as a result of this." Basically, they suggested the coup was inconsequential for all practical purposes. And so, as the Soviets actually overthrew the cousin, the king was already overthrown in '78. The overthrow in '78 was violent. There were lots of executions, and it was a bloody affair. The cousin was executed along with a lot of his entourage, and the Soviets basically, as I said, then were mired in a civil war.

And in the process of the civil war, they did two things. First, they gave training and weapons to the Afghan army so they could fight the Mujahideen. They were very fearful of the Mujahideen taking over, destabilizing Afghanistan, and turning it in a radical Islamist direction, which they did not want. I think that was their main objective. At the same time, we now know, mostly from U.S. government documents, that the Soviets also began using the KGB and East German intelligence to try to intervene in the government, moderate its policies, introduce non-communists into the government to appease the Islamist rebellion, and call off a lot of the reforms to end or at least reduce the more overt atheistic content of the revolution. They were stymied at every opportunity.

The person who was really the key figure was not the president, but the foreign minister, Hafizullah Amin. He was deeply distrusted by the Soviets, firstly because he was seen as the leading radical, and they did not like the radicals who were destabilizing the country. They did not fully appreciate what he was doing. Also, he studied in the United States and at one point was involved in a CIA front group. In all probability, he was not CIA; I've seen no evidence to that effect by the time he was in power. But the Soviets suspected him of working for the CIA to destabilize the country. Their paranoia was growing by the day.

#M2

But as a communist, right?

#M3

Oh, yes, very much so, as a communist party leader.

#M2

Party leader and foreign minister. And it was the Soviets who tried to tell the Communist Party of Afghanistan, "Stop being so radically communist." Exactly. That's right.

#M3

The American documents are very clear on this. The Americans saw this as a sincere effort to moderate what was going on. The Americans felt the Soviets were not in control of the situation at all. Something else that comes out very strongly in the American documents, and even more strongly in the Soviet documents, is that again and again, over many months, the Afghan communists would beg the Soviets to send in regular Soviet forces because they said, "Our own forces are not reliable. They're not fighting effectively. Many of them are defecting to the Mujahideen. Could you please send regular Soviet forces?" And every single time, the Soviets refused, firmly refused.

There was an interesting event in March of 1979 where the Mujahideen rebellion became so serious that a full division of the Afghan army in the city of Herat, Afghanistan's, I think, second or third largest city at the time, defected to the Mujahideen with all their equipment. And it looked like the Afghan army was on the verge of complete breakdown. The Politburo met in an emergency session without Brezhnev, who, as you noted, was in kind of an alcoholic stupor and in very poor health during much of this period. But the top figures, including, I think, Ustinov, the defense minister, Andropov, the KGB chief, and Gromyko, the foreign minister, all the top figures below Brezhnev met.

Amazingly, we have the full minutes of the meeting. They concluded by saying that despite the risk, there was no way they were going to send in troops to Afghanistan because it would mean they'd have to start shooting civilians, as the Afghan army was unreliable. They'd start shooting civilians, and that would be a terrible look for the Soviet Union. It would mean the end of détente, and they evidently wanted to preserve détente, being very eager to do so. In all of the Soviet documents, there's no mention whatsoever that I've ever been able to find of Afghanistan as a stepping stone to the Persian Gulf or as a staging area for future aggression. All of the discussion is defensively oriented.

And it seems that this was something known to the Americans because this is what was also mentioned in the American documents. The Soviets didn't really want to invade, but they might not have had a choice in the end, according to what the Americans were saying, given why things were spiraling out of control. And the question is, what changed the Soviets' mind? Why did they eventually invade? There are two reasons. One is Hafizullah Amin. The Soviets were so desperate

that late in 1979, they had a plan to stage a coup against Amin to give full power to the president, whose name was Mohammad Nur Taraki. He was not very effective and a very weak figure, but they decided to use him as part of an effort to purge Amin and either kick him out of the party or maybe kill him.

It's not clear, but that was the plan. Amin got wind of the effort and staged a preemptive coup, killed Taraki, and purged the party in the other direction. The Soviets were very desperate at this point, with the man they distrusted now at full power. Furthermore, he began meeting secretly with American embassy officials behind the backs of the Soviets, who, of course, found out about this. He had an interview with the Los Angeles Times in which he said publicly that Afghanistan would no longer want to depend on a single foreign country for support, but would seek broader support from other foreign countries.

And everybody knew what that meant. And so it looked like Afghanistan was going to— the phrase I think that was often used was "pull a Sadat." Sadat had moved Egypt away from the Soviets to the United States, and the fear was Amin would do the same thing for Afghanistan on the Soviet borders, no less. And so that was a source of great fear to the Soviets. The Americans don't seem to have had any interest in backing Amin, who was really kind of a very unstable and bloodthirsty figure, and the Soviets didn't know this, right?

So that was problem one. The second problem was that on July 3rd, 1979, President Carter, at the recommendation of his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, signed what is called a CIA finding, meaning a presidential decision about covert operations, that ordered the supply of several hundred thousand dollars of "non-lethal aid" to the Mujahideen, in secret, of course. But it was only secret from the American public, and they must have realized the Soviets would find out about it. And that would, of course, increase the paranoia, and it seems that was the intention of this.

It seems the motive here, according to information supplied by Brzezinski, was to increase Soviet paranoia and increase the likelihood of an invasion. All right, this is a sensational claim I'm making here, and I'll go into the evidence for this in a moment, but I do want to note how this contradicts everything I'm saying here, which basically contradicts the public record 100%, because all along the claim was that Afghanistan is so strategically vital, any Soviet invasion would be a massive setback to Western security. But on the contrary, Brzezinski saw that as an asset; he saw it as a positive thing that he wanted to achieve.

And the claim was also made that Soviet arguments that the U.S. was intervening before they invaded were flat-out lies. I remember that very well. The Soviets made that claim, and nobody believed it. I didn't believe it at the time, but it was true. It was true. All right. And so it was the American public that was deceived, and the world public opinion was deceived. Well, the Soviets were not deceived. Generally speaking, covert operations are only secret to the public. They're not usually secret to the target country. That's a common theme during the Cold War.

#M2

And this is coming from declassified documents in the specific case of what I'm saying about Brzezinski.

#M3

That's an interview with Brzezinski at length and also an interview with his top military aide, Lieutenant General William Odom, who said the same thing. All right. And it is a sort of separate, parallel claim that points in the identical direction, which is the deliberate provocation of the invasion.

#M2

And provocation by nurturing the Soviet Union's fear of what is developing in Afghanistan.

#M3

The Americans wanted the Mujahideen to win. They were actively intervening in the conflict and lying about it. Combined with what Amin was doing and the fact that Amin had this arguably possible CIA background, of course, made them extremely paranoid. They probably exaggerated U. S. intentions. I don't think the U.S. intended to set up bases in Afghanistan; at least there's no evidence to that effect. But again, the Soviets didn't know any of this, but they did know the U.S. was intervening, that Amin had full power, and that he was talking about wanting to tilt Afghanistan towards the Americans. All of this set off the highest level of alarm bells in Moscow.

And so I think it was at that point in the fall, beginning in the summer, but even more so in the autumn after Amin's success in his counter-coup, that this caused the Soviets to decide on invasion despite the risks. And it does seem the Soviets did understand the risks were very high. The idea that this was a fully reckless operation on their part and a complete lack of concern and awareness about the risks, I think, overstates the matter. I think there was some concern. I think I've seen that in the Soviet documents. But they felt they had no choice, given the dire nature of the threat as they saw it, given the circumstances.

And again, all of this was not by accident, but by design. And the design was clearly Brzezinski. You know, this has to be emphasized. Brzezinski was kind of close to the neoconservatives. And the neoconservative logic here was a hyper-aggressive attitude towards the Soviets. Ending détente was very important to them, and evidently was important to Brzezinski too. And it was détente that was ended by the invasion of Afghanistan. I suspect Carter at this point had already swung behind the neoconservative line but was looking for a pretext to justify it. You see, the problem here is the United States still had elections. There was a democracy we were talking about.

The public was going to vote in 1980, and things were not looking good for Carter. One of the things the polls showed was that there was no appetite on the part of the public for increased military spending. There was an austerity budget, and Carter was cutting social programs. A lot of what he did at the domestic level anticipated what Reagan did. But the one thing that was about to increase was military spending. The problem was the public was not on board with that idea at all. One thing I saw at the archives at Stanford University was a key neoconservative group called the Committee on the Present Danger, which was intensively lobbying for increased military spending.

The head of that group, his name was Eugene Rostow, a Yale law professor. He basically talked about the need to find some Pearl Harbor event that was so sensational it would shock the American public into accepting the idea of increased military spending and putting aside détente despite the reservations. Well, that Pearl Harbor event was Afghanistan, clearly. And it wasn't just a coincidence it came. It was engineered that way. And again, the documentation on this is very clear. I want to give some details in the documentation. Before I do so, let me stop and see if you want to... No, please, please give the details.

#M2

I just need to add that this idea of Pearl Harbor is something that we now understand. The build-up to Pearl Harbor was well understood in the United States.

#M3

Well, there's a suspicion that basically the United States had clear indications the Japanese were planning some kind of an attack, and they must have realized that by forward positioning the naval forces at Hawaii rather than San Diego, where they'd been, there was some degree of vulnerability. There's always been some degree of suspicion. I myself still lean in favor of the idea that this was just incompetence and wishful thinking by Roosevelt, but you could make a case for it that this was sort of a baiting of the Japanese, perhaps.

#M2

It would take us too far away from this discussion about Afghanistan. But, you know, the importance of these key moments when you can pretend to be surprised and out of the blue, like the Gulf of Tonkin, and so on and so forth. These trigger elements that you can use.

#M3

There's always a pretext. You have to have a pretext. This is a democracy. Democracies need a pretext for aggressive military behavior.

#M2

Right. And there's this important difference, though. Some of these trigger events are minor things like the sinking of a ship, and some of these issues are major events. And when it comes to major events, the reluctance is much bigger to say, "Oh, no, this, I mean, nobody saw this coming, right? It was an unforeseen event." But actually, this invasion, as you're saying, was prepared since '73, or the goading of the Soviets. And now maybe speak to the evidence that you have for this, the documents.

#M3

The specific evidence is this: well, first of all, the very fact that Carter signed this finding, he must have realized that supplying aid to the Mujahideen under these circumstances would greatly heighten the possibility of a Soviet invasion. He must have realized that. That just logically follows. But the specific one is in 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski gave an interview with the French magazine Le Nouvel Observateur. It was translated into English. I had it published in an academic journal in 2000, and then it started getting some attention. It's an interesting interview in a number of ways. In it, basically, Brzezinski boasts that they did, in fact, deceive the public.

And while they claimed they were not intervening until after the invasion, the US intervention was before the invasion, six months before the invasion. He said again and again in multiple ways that he was trying to bait the Soviets into invading. I put the interview, translated into English, on my website, so those who are interested can find the entirety of the interview there. This was corroborated later on by Lieutenant General William Odom, who was the military advisor to Brzezinski while he was at the National Security Council under Carter. Odom was having a dinner with a Cambridge historian named Jonathan Haslam.

And during the dinner, he said, and Haslam later reported in his book, that he was the first one who briefed Brzezinski on the invasion when it occurred. And Brzezinski's first reaction was to pump his fist in the air in triumph and say, "They've taken our bait." That's very clear. They've taken our bait. I mean, what else could that mean? That is completely consistent, completely consistent with the more detailed account given in Le Nouvel Observateur, too, previously published. And a couple of points, I mean, a couple more points. Brzezinski did talk a bit about motive, and he talked about getting even for Vietnam. I'm sure that was indeed a motive. I suspect a larger motive was to give a pretext for reversing the policies of détente and low military spending.

Later on, I should add, right after this happened, the Washington Post reported how military contractors were absolutely delighted and were seeing profits like never before. And Air Force Magazine talked about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an opportunity to set American foreign policy on the right course. And so the military-industrial complex was pleased, as you might expect it would be. I mean, they expressed perfunctory regret about the invasion, but they also saw it as a positive, and no doubt it was, from their standpoint, a positive indeed. And so I think there were

multiple motives here going on. I think, again, reversing détente, I would see that as the most important motive. I'm sorry?

#M2

Yeah, reversing détente, you know, one of the peaceful highlights of the 1970s was '75, when you had the signing of the Helsinki Final Act and you had a hammering out of a grand arrangement and basic fundamentals of security thinking that we would use. And then that's the kind of thing that these figures actively fight against. It is so despicable.

#M3

You know, anecdotally, I remember it very well because I was in the Peace Corps during this time in West Africa, Niger, and I came back in 1980, and it felt like I was coming back right into the middle of a war scare. People were openly talking about war with the Soviet Union, and I'd never seen anything like it in my lifetime. I mean, I suspect the early '50s were a little bit like that, but that was before my time.

#M2

And so this was another one of these moments when, you know, a lot of the public policy rhetoric was actually directed towards the American population, right? To whip them back into line to support military spending.

#M3

That's exactly right. I think that was one. I would say that probably even more than getting even for Vietnam, the most important motive in doing this was to provide that Pearl Harbor moment. Again, I think that in the case of Pearl Harbor, it probably was coincidental and accidental. In this case, it was orchestrated. The Pearl Harbor was orchestrated. And Brzezinski says so. And he said it not once, but multiple times. I should ask you to look at his memoirs. He perfunctorily expresses regret, but then says that it vindicated his worldview, and he speaks in some degree of triumph, and was able to change U.S. foreign policy to a hardline view that he favored all along. And so, again and again, it comes back to this point. Let me say, by the way, that the Nouvel Observateur has come up for question.

Brzezinski, 12 years after it took place, implied he'd been misquoted, but I have to say, we should be very skeptical of that. The reason is he was severely criticized when this appeared in English. And the reason he was criticized was not so much for what I've just said, but in the context of the interview, he ridiculed the idea that Islamic extremism is a threat to American security and seemed to imply that, yes, we empowered Islamic extremism. He didn't deny that. He didn't deny that a lot of the groups we backed, the Mujahideen groups, evolved into the Taliban and al-Qaeda. He didn't

deny that at all, but said, what's the big deal? It's not a big deal. And so after the 2001 terrorist attacks, of course, that didn't look so good.

And so he was severely criticized publicly for this. I think that was a motive for him to deny it, and it took him 12 years to do so. Le Nouvel Observateur, for those who know the French intellectual scene, is one of the leading publications in France. It's very prestigious, like the New York Review of Books in the United States, which I think is the closest comparison. There's no doubt that what he said there was true and accurately reported, and it was corroborated by William Odom's statement, as reported by Haslam. So there's no doubt about it that he did, in fact, intentionally provoke this invasion and boasted about it later. So that's the evidence we have.

#M2

And now we have to make the comparison with Ukraine and the extent to which the catastrophe in Ukraine has been premeditated and is now also in the public record, right, through a lot of even New York Times articles, right? And this goading of the enemy or the significant other that you need in order to get your own militarist desires fulfilled. Can you make a couple of connections to Ukraine?

#M3

I just want to mention one more thing. I'll be brief here because we're running out of time. One more point that needs to be made. In the 1980s, we now know that the U.S. kept blocking negotiations. Diego Córdovez was appointed by the U.N. Secretary-General in 1982 to find some diplomatic solution. In his memoir, he basically said that by 1983, the Soviets were looking for a way out, and he was trying to find a face-saving way to get the Soviets out of Afghanistan and bring an end to the war. One of his major impediments was the Americans. The dominant view in Washington was what was called the "bleeding" view, that we should keep the war going as long as possible to bleed the Soviets, with the implication that we'd also bleed the Afghans, which didn't seem to bother anybody very much.

And so it took years longer, basically, for the policy to change. There was a shake-up in the Reagan administration for a variety of reasons. A lot of the hardliners had to exit the administration by the late '80s, and so eventually Diego Córdovez's efforts bore fruit, and the Soviets did exit in early 1989 under an agreement brokered by Córdovez. But Córdovez emphasizes and hammers away at the idea that this could have been done years earlier, but the U.S. did not want negotiations to succeed because they wanted the war to go on and on. That's a basic point here. No negotiations, really. It was really the American position to publicly give lip service to negotiations, but behind the scenes, torpedo them as much as possible. All right. That's, of course, another comparison.

#M2

Yeah, which is so reminiscent of what happened in 2022 and how the Russians and the Ukrainians almost, almost had a deal. They were so close.

#M3

Yep. And so, again, I think there was this goading of Russia, there's no doubt about it, with the breaking of the agreement not to expand NATO, refusal to allow Russia into NATO when they wanted to join, and the decision to keep expanding phase after phase, breaking one red line after another. There was basically a sabotaging of the Minsk agreement, a non-implementation of the Minsk agreement that could have prevented the war, and a refusal of the Russian demands offered at the last moment to prevent invasion if the U.S. would agree to a neutral Ukraine. All of these things. And Jens Stoltenberg said, in what must have been a Freudian slip, that one of the principal reasons the Russians went to war was to prevent NATO from expanding into Ukraine. So NATO officially admitted this was one of the main motives. And the question is, if that was one of the main motives for the Russians to invade, then why expand NATO and start a war when you don't have to?

#M2

It wasn't a Freudian slip because he said so, because he wanted to be gleeful about the fact that NATO expanded into Finland and Sweden, right? It's like, oh, we did it, you know, two for us, zero for Russia.

#M3

There's no doubt he was gloating, although he must have realized that what he was doing was undermining everything that NATO had claimed about that issue for years up till then, where the official claim was that the Russian invasion had nothing to do with NATO. That was a lie. When he admitted it had everything to do with the invasion, he contradicted years of NATO propaganda. Anyway.

#M2

The thing is that this propaganda uses contradictory logic as core pillars. On the one hand, claiming that NATO expansion has nothing to do with this and Russia is so weak anyhow. On the other hand, Russia is the greatest threat to NATO ever. Therefore, NATO needs to strengthen itself. This is purely contradictory. And these moments are then, of course, moments when they switch from one to the other narrative. The question then to me arises, how would states... I still view Russia as having made a mistake in 2022 because it was goaded into this. But then again, also what the Afghanistan case shows is you create situations not just where the uncertainty becomes unbearable, but also where you really push the red line. You push far beyond what you know the red line of the other one is. And if the other one wants to stay internally coherent and keep their own hardliners at

bay, what else are you going to do, right? Because you need to be consistent toward your own constituency as well, right?

#M3

Let me answer. I mean, I would see this Russian invasion as indeed a mistake in the sense that, basically, in my view, the only justification for war is clear-cut self-defense against an imminent threat to your national security. And the Russians weren't facing a threat that... The presence of Ukraine as a NATO state, with NATO bases, possibly with long-range missiles, would have weakened Russian security, but it wouldn't have been an imminent threat. I think the most important thing is that for the Russians not to have invaded would have meant NATO and the United States would have humiliated Russia.

And they were trying to avoid humiliation. There's no doubt in my mind the US, by the way, would have done the same thing. But fear of humiliation, in my view, is not a justification for invasion. So the Russians, in my view, should have accepted the humiliation and the somewhat weakened security, which wasn't really an imminent threat, but a more general long-range threat—not enough, in my view, to justify invasion—and just swallowed hard and accepted it rather than invaded. The problem is I can't imagine any Russian leader would have done that, or any American leader in a similar situation would have done that.

#M2

This is just not how they act. This is not how great powers act, and we know that. And the fear that these covert operations will be carried into your territory, there are various possible points of attack. The Northern Caucasus, right, would be an obvious one to try to start little rebellions and armed groups. I mean, this way of the United States fighting wars or conflicts by using these covert operations, of which there are now many books—there are many books on how the US has been doing this all over the place—is just so inherently dangerous. Not just dangerous, I mean, it's... Again, there are people, and we know, thanks also to you, who are happy with having a proxy war, right? They are happy to do this to destabilize countries.

#M3

That also is a legacy of Vietnam. Vietnam, of course, was regularly fought with combat forces. And the war was discredited, partly because 58,000 Americans died. And that discredited the whole idea of intervention for a time. So the solution was a proxy war: get other people to fight for us. And Afghanistan, of course, was the quintessential proxy war, where they just provided all the training they needed and all the weapons needed, light weapons in this case, and the Afghans did the dying. And that was, from the American standpoint, perfect. The Afghans didn't appreciate it, by the way, and eventually, I think by 1989 or 1990, the New York Times had an article, "Afghanistan: Now They Hate the Americans." All right. And so the Afghans didn't appreciate that in the end.

I'm sure eventually the Ukrainians, when they wake up from their stupor, will realize how much they were abused and manipulated by the Americans, even if they don't realize it yet. But I think, again, the idea of a proxy war in Afghanistan became the model for Ukraine. That's also a proxy war. Americans aren't dying; it's Ukrainians and Russians who are dying and being killed. A real source of excitement for CIA officials during the '80s was that they were killing Russians indirectly. Not Russian-backed forces in Angola or elsewhere, but they were actually killing Russian soldiers. That was very exciting for the CIA, as I'm sure it's very exciting for U.S. officials now. They're killing Russians directly. You might say it's a little bit disturbing to have such glee in killing people, but that is how the thinking goes.

#M2

This New York Times article that came out two weeks ago talks about the level of integration, operational integration, and how much the United States, as the article says, supported Ukraine. But it's very clear it's not just support; it is directly ordering where to shoot and which points would be hit with what kind of military equipment, right? And that's, again, this killing of Russians, and not just of Russians in Ukraine, of soldiers, but also of attacking infrastructure inside Russia. And all of these things are obviously known to the Russians because they told us so. Vladimir Putin said so.

There's no way that these HIMARS systems can be operated without the intelligence coming from the United States. Now we know the United States even pointed out how to use them and where. So, you know, at this point, we need a new name for this, because it's more than a proxy war at this point, because it's not the proxies fighting each other anymore. Much of the Cold War, maybe Afghanistan was the first time when this changed, when in the Vietnam War, we still had the proxies fighting each other instead of the Great Powers. And then we went to a moment when the Great Powers start directly killing the soldiers of the other one, and we have that more and more. Is that...

#M3

I think a comparison here is a certain recklessness, and this was pointed out in the '80s, that by killing Russian soldiers on the Russian frontier, the U.S. is playing with fire and risking nuclear war. There's no doubt the U.S. was taking that risk and was willing to take that risk evidently, and they got away with it in the end. And so we're doing that again in Ukraine. I have to emphasize, in Ukraine, the recklessness is at a far higher level to the extent that they're actually attacking inside Russia. It never got to the point in Afghanistan that the U.S. ordered attacks inside the Soviet Union. I think Pakistan, if I'm not mistaken, might have orchestrated one such attack, if my memory serves. But just once, and I think that was Pakistan, not the United States, that did it.

And it wasn't repeated. But what we're seeing now, or at least until recently, has been a willingness to move right up to the risk of nuclear war to the point that, at one point, the CIA estimated the risk of the Soviets—the Russians, I should say—using tactical nuclear weapons, I believe, at 50%. And

the U.S. didn't seem to be particularly bothered by that. There was no uproar in Congress or any of the major parliaments in Europe. Not much discussion in the media, just very casually. It was noted later, not at the time, it was 50%—50% risk of nuclear weapons being used. And that goes beyond anything that happened during the Cold War. There was never a time in the Cold War where that degree of recklessness and risk-taking was taken to that degree. So this goes even beyond what was done in Afghanistan.

#M2

It's unbelievable to me that this—I think recklessness is the right word—this kind of nonchalant way of dealing with the greatest threat to humanity ever is just being taken. And if you reversed the situation and just imagine what would happen if you knew that in Moscow, people are sending the plans in order to kill U.S. soldiers in Texas with the help of Mexicans, you know. I mean, the U.S. would obviously already have used nuclear weapons. I think there's no doubt.

#M3

I was very entertained when Timothy Snyder at Yale University, who recently relocated to Toronto, a major advocate for escalation, was ridiculing the idea that nuclear war is a big risk. And he said, besides, we can't give in to nuclear blackmail. They're using nuclear blackmail against us. And I thought, the only reason any country has nuclear weapons is to do nuclear blackmail. I mean, that's the main reason countries have nuclear weapons. That's the reason the U.S. has nuclear weapons. That's the reason France has nuclear weapons. It's nuclear blackmail. That's the whole purpose of nuclear weapons. So this was treated as if it was some novel idea, some unique feature to the evil Russians.

#M2

You know, this is where the analysis of Karaganov, one of the Russian hardliners, is actually correct. He said that the West has lost its fear of our nuclear weapons. And if you don't fear nukes anymore, then the MAD doctrine doesn't work anymore. It doesn't work. I mean, you will lose this deterrent because it's a deterrent in the mind, actually, more than it is one on the battlefield. I don't know what to do about this, but are there any more parallels that you can draw that can shed a little bit of light on Ukraine using the Afghan case? I'm sorry, say again? Do you have any more parallels that you see between the Afghan case and the Ukrainian case?

#M3

I do, actually. One of them is the role of the political anti-interventionist left in that Afghanistan was really the beginning of the left's acceptance of military intervention, the "good" interventions. I remember this very well. In the 1980s, the American interventions in Central America were strongly condemned. There was a lot of activism around that. In Afghanistan, there was virtually nothing or

active endorsement in some cases. I remember it really hit me when there was an event. It's defunct now, but it was a major event in New York, a yearly event called the Socialist Scholars Conference.

I attended it a number of times in the '80s as a graduate student. I remember the panels and all sorts of things, lots and lots of panels on Central America. They had one panel on Afghanistan, so I went, and it was a group of Swedes. I think there were four or five Swedes, and four of them were strongly advocating the CIA position, basically. It was indistinguishable from the CIA position that these are freedom fighters, we should back them, and it's very important that the freedom fighters prevail. The fact that the freedom fighters were Islamic extremists who oppressed women didn't seem to bother them very much.

And, you know, women's groups showed no interest, basically, in the Mujahideen's deeply misogynistic activities in many cases. And I was stunned by this. There was one Swede who was an exception, who objected to it. I should add, I was very surprised because, as an American on the left, I had a particular image of Sweden as a kind of, not just a neutral country, but one with a kind of progressive bent in its foreign policy. And these were Swedish Social Democrats here, adopting a position indistinguishable from that of the Reagan administration. That was in '83? '86, I think.

#M2

That was exactly the period when the whole submarine scare in Sweden was fomented.

#M3

That's right. Olle Thunander has written on this. And so, yeah, the submarine scare. That's right. I think there was a gradual effort to wean Sweden away from its neutralism, and it only today bore fruit. But what I want to say... I remember seeing this and sitting down thinking, I'm seeing something new here. I'm seeing a real sea change here. And that's exactly what it was, I think. You began getting a growth of a kind of pro-interventionist left that anticipated the idea of humanitarian interventionism. They didn't use that term then, but I think that was the idea.

And we're seeing that very much now. You know, people on the left are very exercised, and very rightly so, I should add, about the mass killings Israel is doing in Gaza and elsewhere, the horrific things that they're doing there. But there's almost no discussion at all about Ukraine or active endorsement of what's going on, what the U.S. is doing in Ukraine. Often, there's criticism of Trump, basically, that he's not following the correct policy and so on. And so this very much reminds me of what I saw in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

#M2

Yeah, the comparisons are striking. So the U.S., not just the U.S., sorry, this part of the establishment, and they also go hand in hand with their European counterparts in this Atlantic endeavor, really figured out how to create events and moments and entire stories that not only provoke wars but also help them sell to their own population, right? And whip even the anti-war left into line. And this is what we have now. The left and the peace movement through Ukraine have basically been dissolved. In Switzerland, several of these lefty peace groups started saying, no, this time we do have to support Ukraine, right? I mean, it's absolutely clear who the victim is. It was sold successfully; they dismantled their own pacifists and made them impossible.

#M3

That's quite right. That's exactly what happened in other countries, Germany in particular. I've mentioned the Green Party, the remarkable transformation of the Green Party over time. And so I think that, yes, this did begin in Afghanistan. So I see Afghanistan as having kind of a seminal influence here. And, you know, it's with us today. Unfortunately, again, there used to be an anti-nuclear war movement, and that's dissolved. There's nothing like it anymore. It's all gone.

#M2

Now we have to build a new one, a new peace movement and a new neutralist movement to work against it. But it's very important to understand these mechanisms, the psychological and tactical mechanisms, in order to play with war and the end of humanity. David, anything you want to add at this point, or shall we call it an hour?

#M3

Honestly, I think I've expended everything I have to say on the topic. Would you like to follow up with anything?

#M2

I will maybe invite my colleague and friend Nasser Andesha next time to the program, the Afghan ambassador. But I would like to thank you very much. This was very enlightening. Thank you, David.

#M3

Thanks for having me. Bye-bye.