

“Outside Forces”: Reagan’s Myth of Self-Determination in the 1980’s Afghan-American Relations

On March 21, 1988 American President Ronald Reagan began his address in the proclamation of the annual ‘Afghanistan Day’ by stating, “March 21st marks the beginning of a new year in a bitter decade for the people of Afghanistan.” Through each of the 35 years that have since followed this address, his remark unfortunately remains true. Reagan’s 1988 speech anticipated the impending end of the Soviet-Afghan war that plagued the nation of Afghanistan for most of the 1980’s. Yet despite the anticipation of the end of said war coming to fruition in the following year 1989, the turmoils that were being faced by the citizens of Afghanistan were nowhere near to coming to cessation. In fact, at the end of the 1980’s Afghanistan was propelled into decades of oppression, chaos and political violence as the emergence of extremist Islamic terror groups shrouded the nation’s victory against the Soviets. For obvious reasons, Reagan’s 1988 speech (See Appendix) does not discuss these issues as the ominous emergence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were still discreetly concealed. Yet Reagan’s speech still holds much significance in its narration of the ‘American side’ of the story by outlining the USA’s role in the conflict. As such, the analysis of this speech in a current context reveals many implications of the US’s intervention in Afghanistan and its subsequent effects on both countries.

To understand the significance of this speech, it is useful to first understand what as Reagan rightfully referred to as “a bitter decade” really entailed within Afghanistan. This bitterness was a mere aftertaste of the ongoing Soviet-Afghan war at the time. Despite being allies with the Soviet Union, the Afghanistan government in 1979 became interested in fostering international relations with the United States (Baker, 2019). The prospect of this relationship and closer ties with the West was strongly opposed by the Soviet Union and was viewed as a threat to the relationship between them and Afghanistan. As a result, in December of 1979 amidst ongoing internal instability within the Afghanistan government Soviet troops invaded the country, assassinated the President and replaced him with a Soviet-allied Afghanistan leader (Knapp, 2017). In his speech, Reagan referred to this government as “an illegitimate, unrepresentative, and discredited regime” and in many ways, this was an honest remark. Most of the civilian population in Afghanistan were opposed to the newly-appointed Soviet government and perceived it as a result of “a foreign invader, an extremist communist dictatorship” (Riedel, 2014, p.40). Despite their religious and cultural differences, the Afghanistan population were able to unite under a shared goal- to oust the Soviet regime from their country. As such, the Mujahideen emerged, composed of the many tribal Islamist groups that existed within Afghanistan. The group was mentioned several times in Reagan’s speech as he expressed his support for “the brave Afghan Mujahidin” and described them as “the true voice of the Afghan people.” Reagan’s affectionate tone was not merely a matter of friendly admiration, but rather evidence of the very important relationship between the United States’ government and the Mujahideen fighters.

The United States’ support of the Mujahideen was mainly rooted in their support of anti-communist movements as elucidated by the Reagan Doctrine. According to the U.S Department of State Archives (2019), “The ‘Reagan Doctrine’ was used to characterise the Reagan administration’s (1981-1988) policy of supporting anti-Communist insurgents

wherever they might be.” In this sense, it is obvious how the relationship between the U.S and the Mujahideen came about, as they proved to be a strategic avenue to curtail Soviet expansionism while also an opportunity to extend US relations. In his speech, Reagan says, “I am proud of the strong support provided to the Afghan cause over the past 7 years by my Administration, by the United States Congress, and by the American people.” However, the U.S’ support did not extend only to verbal comradery as the United States actually played a key role in the ultimate success of the Mujahideen in defeating the Soviets by providing them with weaponry and military training. It was reported that during that period, the U.S spent around 3 billion dollars in their support of the Mujahideen which prompted Academic Fred Halliday to describe it as the “largest covert operation in the history of the CIA” (Parenti, 2001.)

Towards the end of the 1980’s the Mujahideen’s success became increasingly apparent and Soviet forces began gradually withdrawing from Afghanistan. In his 1988 speech President Reagan stated, “This may well be a climactic year, and we hope with the Afghan people that it will see the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops and self-determination for the people of Afghanistan.” The former half of this statement was relatively accurate as Soviet forces began to leave Afghanistan in 1988 and were completely removed by 1989. However, the latter part of Reagan’s statement proves to be more contentious and highlights an important aspect of American foreign policy during that period. The issue lies particularly in Reagan’s description of “self-determination” in Afghanistan.

“At its most basic, the principle of self-determination can be defined as a community's right to choose its political destiny. This can include choices regarding the exercise of sovereignty and independent external relations (external self-determination) or it can refer to the selection of forms of government (internal self-determination).”
(Danspeckgruber and Gardner, 2021)

With the guidance of this definition in mind, the irony of Reagan’s hope for self-determination becomes increasingly obvious. In one sense, the irony lies in both the United States’ and Soviet Union’s intervention within Afghanistan with more emphasis on the US as the Soviet’s did not claim any mythical hope of self-determination for the country (Hartung, 2016). To understand the irony, consider this theoretical question, ‘Would the US have intervened in the Afghan-Soviet war if there was not a theoretical (anti-communist) or practical (colonialist) means of gain for them?’ Many would agree that the answer to this question would be a firm ‘no’, as the main aim of the US’ support of the Mujahideen was to prevent Soviet expansionism rather than being a vessel of morality hoping to bring forth ‘self-determination’. In another sense, the irony of Reagan’s sentiments of ‘self-determination’ also exists within the events that followed Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, as the emergence of extremist groups (most of whom previously formed the Mujahideen) faced military opposition by the United States, despite the fact that their existence can be perceived as a form of ‘self-determination’ (Goodson, 2002).

In his speech Reagan stated, “Some 120 members of the United Nations have voted year after year for self-determination in Afghanistan, recognizing that the present government in Kabul does not represent the Afghan people but is a direct result of outside interference.”

While this statement may be true in the sense that the Soviet-allied government in Afghanistan was largely opposed by most of the population, the statement also highlights the hypocrisy of the American government's foreign policy. The Soviet Union is criticised for their interference within Afghanistan for their own benefit while the United States can be said to have done the same with their support of the Mujahideen. In this instance, the situation does not become a matter of which party is wrong and which is right, as the historical evidence would maintain that the interference of both the US and Soviet Union were detrimental to the future of Afghanistan as a nation.

In his speech Reagan continues,

“Our commitment to the freedom of the Afghan people will not end should the Soviets withdraw. We will join other nations and international organisations to help the Afghans rebuild their country and their institutions; millions of men, women, and children will be returning to a country devastated by Soviet aggression.”

Interestingly, the use of the word ‘freedom’ here proved to be contradictory. The assumption that Reagan's use of ‘freedom’ is related to his use of ‘self-determination’ as previously discussed, may proffer his intention in that statement to mean freedom in a physical sense (no longer under Soviet-military attack) but also ideologically and politically. The latter part of this analysis is where the contradiction lies, as upon the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the Mujahideen firmly grasped this notion of ‘freedom’ and ‘self-determination’ but were met by severe opposition from the United States (Hartung, 2016). The Mujahideen fractured significantly after the Afghan-Soviet war causing separated faction groups like the Taliban to emerge. The Taliban were generally supported by the Afghan people, who believed their promises of ‘peace’ and who were exhausted by the years of instability and violence within the country (News Desk, 2014). In many ways, the Taliban did exactly what Reagan stated in his speech by, “rebuilding their country and their institutions” as previous to Afghanistan's relationship with the Soviet Union, women's rights were non-existent and a dictatorial monarchy ruled the nation. As so was said, so was done, as the Taliban banned women's right to employment and to education which was previously introduced by the Soviet Union and employed the use of public executions to enforce their law (Malejacq, 2017). It is understandable why Reagan's administration would not recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political group. The point of this argument is not to determine the Taliban's legitimacy or their right to ‘self-determination’ as they were undoubtedly a morally unobliged group. Instead, this argument focuses on the USA's contribution to their existence, specifically in their relationship during the 1980's and the insufficiencies of American Foreign Policy that lead to the furthering demise of the Afghanistan nation.

In his article in the Turkish Journal of International Relations, esteemed academic Sankaran Krishna explores the US's lacklustre approach to foreign policy by stating, “Americans regard themselves as reluctant and inexperienced imperialists, if they see themselves as imperial at all – whereas the best that can be said is that they are certainly the most inarticulate and unself-reflexive of the tribe.”(Krishna, 2002, p.71) This quote very accurately describes the themes highlighted throughout Reagan's speech. The support and glamorisation given to the Mujahideen was short-sighted and naive and proved that Reagan's support of the Mujahideen was rooted in a self-servient goal of curtailing Soviet

expansionism and not necessarily for the long-term benefit of the Afghanistan people. Reagan's policy lacked a critical assessment of Afghanistan's history as a nation and the ideologies of the Islamist groups that they chose to support and resultantly launched themselves and the people of Afghanistan who they claimed to be protecting into decades more of violence and political unrest.

However, it can be argued that this lack of critical assessment could be considered a sort of intentional ignorance. When the American National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was asked if there was any regret in the funding and support of what would later become the Taliban, he responded, "'What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of central Europe and the end of the cold war?'" (Norton-Taylor, 2011) This statement brings forth the questioning of the USA's relationship with the Mujahideen, was the US government ignorant to the possibilities of the Mujahideen or were they indifferent to it?

In his speech Reagan said, "We will rejoice with them when true peace is achieved and Afghanistan once again takes its rightful place in the community of nations. Let us pray and strive to make sure that this moment of liberation will come soon." Reagan's use of terminology like "once again", alludes to a scenario that Afghanistan was once a country that would be accepted by the United States, yet as has been discussed before, in a general sense this is untrue. These inconsistencies in his speech solidify Brzezinski's statement that the eventual emergence of the Taliban and subsequent murder of millions of Afghanistan people was a necessary evil to secure the end of communism. It can be construed that Reagan was saying what needed to be said, to secure this future regardless of the outcome for the Afghanistan people.

In the absence of further knowledge on the topic, President Reagan's 1988 speech could be perceived as an earnest and diplomatic approach to a suffering nation in need. Its facade provides a view of progress as the hegemonic USA provided its support to a country like Afghanistan existing in the overlooked and exploited Global South, inhabited by a large and diverse Islamic population. However, upon further inspection and more critical analysis, this well curated facade can be found to be misleading. Reagan's speech brings to light the serious issues of American Imperialism and the Neo-Liberal approach to anti-communist movements in the US' government's foreign policy. The speech reveals the many inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the US's 'well-intentioned' intervention in Afghanistan and in a current context, highlights the effects of this interference on the nation of Afghanistan for the decades that followed. Afghanistan serves as an unfortunate reminder of the viciousness and dangers of international relations especially with the United States and provides a disheartening illustration of the myth of 'self-determination' in a politically polarised world in which hegemonic powers ultimately have the final say in political and economic matters. Despite the many misleading quotes in Reagan's speech, this line holds true to this very day and serves as a fitting end to this argument,

"Let us take this occasion, therefore, to remember the sorrow and to salute the heroism of the Afghan people. They have fought valiantly and against heavy odds to free themselves from the yoke of oppression - from assaults on their liberty, their sovereignty, their dignity, their lives, and their very way of life"

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Appendix

- Ronald Reagan's 1988 'Afghanistan Day' Speech:

March 21 marks the beginning of a new year in a bitter decade for the people of Afghanistan. This may well be a climactic year, and we hope with the Afghan people that it will see the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops and self-determination for the people of Afghanistan. For more than 8 years, the courageous Afghans have suffered and died under the boot of the Soviet Army, which invaded to prop up an illegitimate, unrepresentative, and discredited regime. Let us take this occasion, therefore, to remember the sorrow and to salute the heroism of the Afghan people. They have fought valiantly and against heavy odds to free themselves from the yoke of oppression -- from assaults on their liberty, their sovereignty, their dignity, their lives, and their very way of life.

It now appears possible that the tenacity and tremendous sacrifices of the Afghan people will bear fruit in the coming period. The Soviet leadership seems to have finally recognized that the will of the Afghan people to be free cannot be broken. Indications of Soviet willingness to withdraw are an important step forward, though their seriousness can be proven only by the actual, and total, removal of Soviet troops from Afghan soil. To be acceptable, Soviet withdrawal must be complete, irreversible, and verifiable.

Our objectives have been and remain: prompt and complete withdrawal of Soviet forces; restoration of Afghanistan to an independent, non aligned status; self-determination for the Afghans; and return of refugees in safety and honour. I reiterated this commitment and our support for the brave Afghan Mujahidin in my meeting last November with Afghan Alliance leader Yunis Khalis. I said the same to General Secretary Gorbachev last December.

The United States Government has also repeatedly told the Soviet leadership that any guarantees of noninterference that they and we would undertake must be symmetrical. An agreement at Geneva must not serve as a pretext for continued Soviet military support to the discredited minority Kabul regime. Some 120 members of the United Nations have voted year after year for self-determination in Afghanistan, recognizing that the present government in Kabul does not represent the Afghan people but is a direct result of outside interference. The Mujahidin and the refugees are the true voice of the Afghan people.

I am proud of the strong support provided to the Afghan cause over the past 7 years by my Administration, by the United States Congress, and by the American people. Our commitment to the freedom of the Afghan people will not end should the Soviets withdraw. We will join other nations and international organisations to help the Afghans rebuild their country and their institutions; millions of men, women, and children will be returning to a country devastated by Soviet aggression.

The United States has consistently supported the Afghans in their long ordeal. That support will continue. We will rejoice with them when true peace is achieved and Afghanistan

once again takes its rightful place in the community of nations. Let us pray and strive to make sure that this moment of liberation will come soon.

Now, Therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim March 21, 1988, as Afghanistan Day. I call upon the people of the United States to observe this day with appropriate ceremonies and activities.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this 21st day of March, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twelfth.

Ronald Reagan