

Anatomy of a Victory: CIA's Covert Afghan War

\$2 Billion Program Reversed Tide for Rebels

First of two articles

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

A specially equipped C-141 Starlifter transport carrying CIA director William Casey touched down at a military airbase south of Islamabad in October 1984 for a secret visit to plan strategy for the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Helicopters lifted Casey to three secret training camps near the Afghan border where he watched *mujaheddin* rebels fire heavy weapons and learn to make bombs with CIA-supplied plastic explosives and detonators.

During the visit, Casey startled his Pakistani hosts by proposing that they take the Afghan war into enemy territory—into the Soviet Union itself. Casey wanted to ship subversive propaganda through Afghanistan to the Soviet Union's predominantly Muslim southern republics. The Pakistanis agreed, and the CIA soon supplied thousands of Korans, as well as books on Soviet atrocities in Uzbekistan and tracts on historical heroes of Uzbek na-

tionalism, according to Pakistani and Western officials.

"We can do a lot of damage to the Soviet Union," Casey said, according to Mohammed Yousaf, a Pakistani general who attended the meeting.

Casey's visit was a prelude to a secret Reagan administration decision in March 1985, reflected in National Security Decision Directive 166, to escalate sharply U.S. covert action in Afghanistan, according to Western officials. Abandoning a policy of simple harassment of Soviet occupiers, the Reagan team decided secretly to let loose on the Afghan battlefield an array of U.S. high technology and military expertise in an effort to hit and demoralize Soviet commanders and soldiers. Casey saw it as a prime opportunity to strike at an overextended, potentially vulnerable Soviet empire.

Eight years after Casey's visit to Pakistan, the Soviet Union is no more. Afghanistan has fallen to the heavily armed, fratricidal *mujaheddin* rebels. The Afghans themselves did the fighting and dying—and ul-

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timately won their war against the Soviets—and not all of them laud the CIA's role in their victory. But even some sharp critics of the CIA agree that in military terms, its secret 1985 escalation of covert support to the *mujaheddin* made a major difference in Afghanistan, the last battlefield of the long Cold War.

How the Reagan administration decided to go for victory in the Afghan war between 1984 and 1988 has been shrouded in secrecy and clouded by the sharply divergent political agendas of those involved. But with the triumph of the *mujaheddin* rebels over Afghanistan's leftist government in April and the demise of the Soviet Union, some intelligence officials involved have decided to reveal how the covert escalation was carried out.

The most prominent of these former intelligence officers is Yousaf, the Pakistani general who supervised

the covert war between 1983 and 1987 and who last month published in Europe and Pakistan a detailed account of his role and that of the CIA, titled "The Bear Trap."

This article and another to follow are based on extensive interviews with Yousaf as well as with more than a dozen senior Western officials who confirmed Yousaf's disclosures and elaborated on them.

U.S. officials worried about what might happen if aspects of their stepped-up covert action were exposed—or if the program succeeded too well and provoked the Soviets to react in hot anger. The escalation that began in 1985 "was directed at killing Russian military officers," one Western official said. "That caused a lot of nervousness."

One source of jitters was that Pakistani intelligence officers—partly inspired by Casey—began independently to train Afghans and funnel CIA supplies for scattered strikes against military installations, factories and storage depots within Soviet territory.

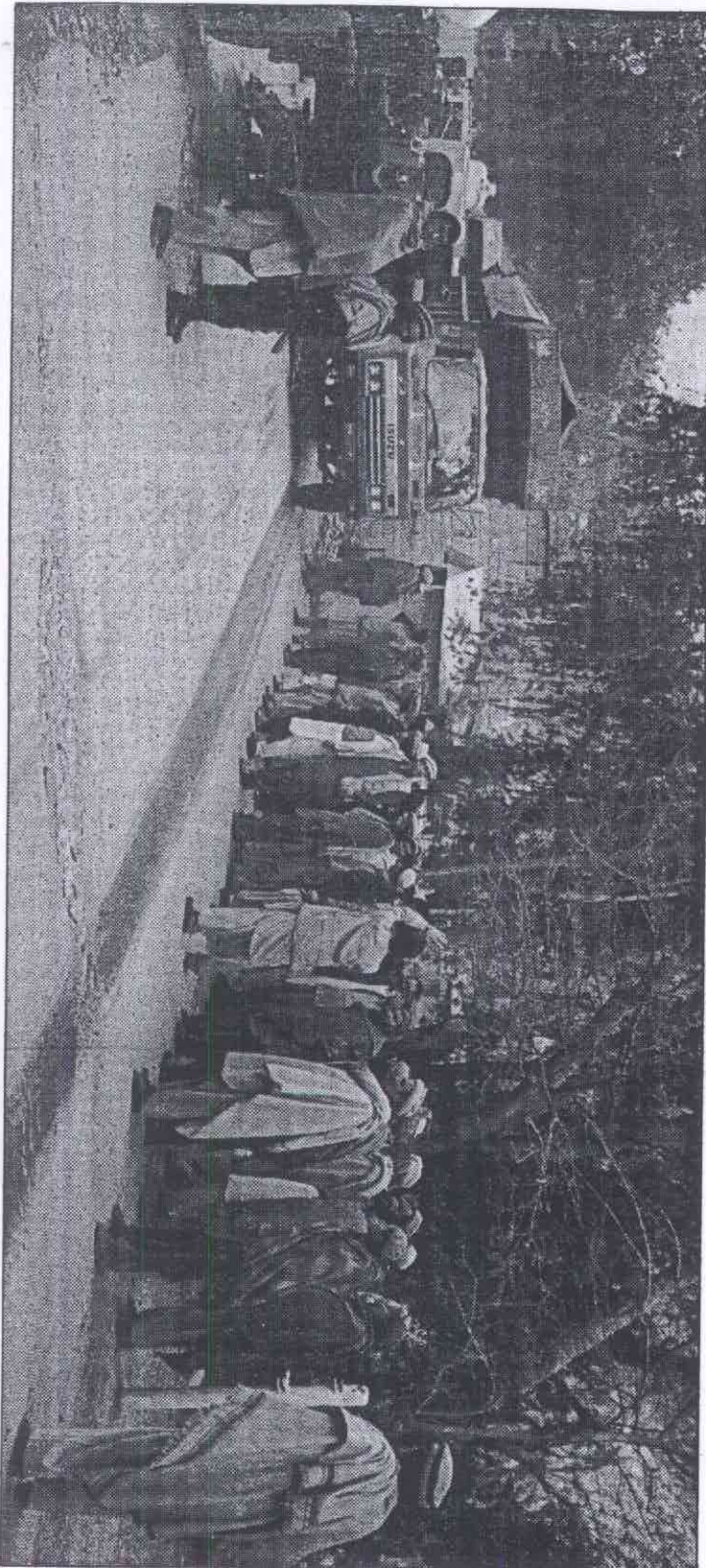
The attacks later alarmed U.S. officials in Washington, who saw military raids on Soviet territory as "an incredible escalation," according to Graham Fuller, then a senior U.S. intelligence official who counseled against any such raids. Fearing a large-scale Soviet response and the fallout of such attacks on U.S.-Soviet diplomacy, the Reagan administration blocked the transfer to Pakistan of detailed satellite photographs of military targets within the Soviet Union, other U.S. officials said.

To Yousaf, the Pakistani brigadier general and intelligence officer who managed the Koran-smuggling program and the guerrilla raids inside Soviet territory, the United States ultimately "chickened out" on the question of taking the secret Afghan war onto Soviet soil. Nonetheless, Yousaf recalled, Casey was "ruthless in his approach, and he had a built-in hatred for the Soviets."

An intelligence coup in 1984 and 1985 triggered the Reagan administration's decision to escalate the covert program in Afghanistan, according to these Western officials. The United States received highly specific, sensitive information about Kremlin politics and new Soviet war plans in Afghanistan. Already under pressure from Congress and conservative activists to expand its support to the *mujaheddin*, the Reagan administration moved in response to this intelligence to open up its high-technology arsenal to aid the Afghan rebels.

Beginning in 1985, the CIA supplied *mujaheddin* rebels with extensive satellite reconnaissance data of Soviet targets on the Afghan battlefield, plans for military operations based on the satellite intelligence, intercepts of Soviet communications, secret communications networks for the rebels, delayed timing devices for tons of C-4 plastic explosives for urban sabotage and sophisticated guerrilla attacks, long-range sniper rifles, a targeting device for mortars that was linked to a U.S. Navy satellite, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and other equipment.

The move to upgrade aid to the *mujaheddin* roughly coincided with the well-known decision in 1986 to provide the *mujaheddin* with sophisticated, U.S.-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Before the missiles arrived, however, those involved in the covert war wres-



Monitoring the pipeline: CIA officers in Afghan garb stand with rebels as covert arms shipment is trucked to Afghan border post.

BY JAMES RUPERT—THE WASHINGTON POST

tied with a wide-ranging and at times divisive debate over how far they should go in challenging the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Roots of the Rebellion

In 1980, not long after Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to prop up a sympathetic leftist government, President Jimmy Carter signed the first—and for many years the only—presidential “finding” on Afghanistan, the classified directive required by U.S. law to begin covert operations, according to several Western sources familiar with the Carter document.

The Carter finding sought to aid Afghan rebels in “harassment” of Soviet occupying forces in Afghanistan through secret supplies of light weapons and other assistance. The finding did not talk of driving Soviet forces out of Afghanistan or defeating them militarily, goals few considered possible at the time, these sources said.

The cornerstone of the program was that the United States, through the CIA, would provide funds, some weapons and general supervision of support for the mujaheddin rebels, but day-to-day operations and direct contact with the mujaheddin would be left to the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI. The hands-off U.S. role contrasted with CIA operations in Nicaragua and Angola.

Saudi Arabia agreed to match U.S. financial contributions to the mujaheddin and distributed funds directly to ISI. China sold weapons to the CIA and donated a smaller number directly to Pakistan, but the extent of China's role has been one of the secret war's most closely guarded secrets.

In all, the United States funneled more than \$2 billion in guns and money to the mujaheddin during the 1980s, according to U.S. officials. It was the largest covert action program since World War II.

In the first years after the Reagan administration inherited the Carter program, the covert Afghan war “tended to be handled out of Casey's back pocket,” recalled Ronald Spiers, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, the base of the Afghan rebels. Mainly from China's government, the CIA purchased assault rifles, grenade launchers, mines and SA-7 light anti-aircraft weapons, and then arranged for shipment to Pakistan. Most of the weapons dated to the Korean War or earlier. The amounts were significant—10,000 tons of arms and ammunition in 1983, according to Yousaf—but a fraction of what they would be in just a few years.

Beginning in 1984, Soviet forces in Afghanistan began to experiment with new and more aggressive tactics against the mujaheddin, based on the use of Soviet special forces, called the Spetsnaz, in helicopter-borne assaults on Afghan rebel supply lines. As these tactics succeeded, Soviet commanders pursued them increasingly, to the point where some U.S. congressmen who

traveled with the mujaheddin—including Rep. Charles Wilson (D-Tex.) and Sen. Gordon Humphrey (R-N.H.)—believed that the war might turn against the rebels.

The new Soviet tactics reflected a perception in the Kremlin that the Red Army was in danger of becoming bogged down in Afghanistan and needed to take decisive steps to win the war, according to sensitive intelligence that reached the Reagan administration in 1984 and 1985, Western officials said. The intelligence came from the upper reaches of the Soviet Defense Ministry and indicated that Soviet hard-liners were pushing a plan to attempt to win the Afghan war within two years, sources said.

The new war plan was to be implemented by Gen. Mikhail M. Zaitsev, who was transferred from the prestigious command of Soviet forces in Germany to run the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the spring of 1985, just as Mikhail Gorbachev was battling hard-line rivals to take power in a Kremlin succession struggle.

The intelligence about Soviet war plans in Afghanistan was highly specific, according to Western sources. The Soviets intended to deploy one-third of their total Spetsnaz forces in Afghanistan—nearly 2,000 “highly trained and motivated” paratroopers, according to Yousaf. In addition, the Soviets intended to dispatch a stronger KGB presence to assist the special forces and regular troops, and they intended to deploy some of the Soviet Union's most sophisticated battlefield communications equipment, referred to by some as the “Omsk Vans”—mobile, integrated communications centers that would permit interception of mujaheddin battlefield communications and rapid, coordinated aerial attacks on rebel targets, such as the kind that were demoralizing the rebels by 1984.

At the Pentagon, U.S. military officers poured over the intelligence, considering plans to thwart the Soviet escalation, officials said. The answers they came up with, said a Western official, were to provide “secure communications [for the Afghan rebels], kill the gunships and the fighter cover, better routes for [mujaheddin] infiltration, and get to work on [Soviet] targets” in Afghanistan, including the Omsk Vans, through the use of satellite reconnaissance and increased, specialized guerrilla training.

“There was a demand from my friends [in the CIA] to capture a vehicle intact with this sort of communications,” recalled Yousaf, referring to the newly introduced mobile Soviet facilities. Unfortunately, despite much effort, Yousaf said, “we never succeeded in that.”

“Spetsnaz was key,” said Vincent Cannistraro, a CIA operations officer who was posted at the time as director of intelligence programs at the National Security Council. Not only did communications improve, but the Spetsnaz forces were willing to fight aggressively and at night. The problem, Cannistraro said, was that as the Soviets moved to escalate, the U.S. aid was “just



Taking aim:

Afghan rebel, left, aims a high-tech Stinger anti-aircraft missile skyward.



COURTESY LEO COOPER, LONDON

Pakistani point man:

A book by Pakistani Gen. Mohammed Yousaf details the covert U.S. war effort.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

enough to get a very brave people killed" because it encouraged the mujaheddin to fight but did not provide them with the means to win.

Conservatives in the Reagan administration and especially in Congress saw the CIA as part of the problem. Humphrey, the former senator and a leading conservative supporter of the mujaheddin, found the CIA "really, really reluctant" to increase the quality of support for the Afghan rebels to meet Soviet escalation. For their part, CIA officers felt the war was not going as badly as some skeptics thought, and they worried that it might not be possible to preserve secrecy in the midst of a major escalation. A sympathetic U.S. official said the agency's key decision-makers "did not question the wisdom" of the escalation, but were "simply careful."

In March 1985, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 166, and McFarlane signed an extensive annex, augmenting the original Carter intelligence finding that focused on "harassment" of Soviet occupying forces, according to several sources. Although it covered diplomatic and humanitarian objectives as well, the new, detailed Reagan directive used bold language to authorize stepped up covert military aid to the mujaheddin, and it made clear that the secret Afghan war had a new goal: to defeat Soviet troops in Afghanistan through covert action and encourage a Soviet withdrawal.

New Covert U.S. Aid

The new covert U.S. assistance began with a dramatic increase in arms supplies—a steady rise to 65,000 tons annually by 1987, according to Yousaf—as well as what he called a "ceaseless stream" of CIA and Pentagon specialists who traveled to the secret headquarters of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) on the main road near Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

There the CIA specialists met with Pakistani intelligence officers to help plan operations for the Afghan rebels. At any one time during the Afghan fighting season, as many as 11 ISI teams trained and supplied by the CIA accompanied the mujaheddin across the border to supervise attacks, according to Yousaf and Western sources. The teams attacked airports, railroads, fuel depots, electricity pylons, bridges and roads, the sources said.

CIA and Pentagon specialists offered detailed satellite photographs and ink maps of Soviet targets around Afghanistan. The CIA station chief in Islamabad ferried U.S. intercepts of Soviet battlefield communications.

Other CIA specialists and military officers supplied secure communications gear and provided training to Pakistani instructors on how to use it. Experts on psychological warfare brought propaganda and books. Demolitions experts gave instructions on the explosives needed to destroy key targets such as bridges, tunnels and fuel depots. They also supplied chemical and electronic timing devices and remote control switches for delayed bombs and rockets that could be shot without a mujaheddin rebel present at the firing site.

The new efforts focused on strategic targets such as the Termez Bridge between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. "We got the information like current speed of the water, current depth of the water, the width of the pillars, which would be the best way to demolish," Yousaf said. In Washington, CIA lawyers debated

whether it was legal to blow up pylons on the Afghan side of the bridge as opposed to the Soviet side, in keeping with the decision not to support military action across the Soviet border, a Western official said.

Despite several attempts, Afghan rebels trained in the new program never brought the Termez Bridge down, though they did damage and destroy other targets, such as pipelines and depots, in the sensitive border area, Western and Pakistani sources said.

The most valuable intelligence provided by the Americans was the satellite reconnaissance, Yousaf said. Soon the wall of Yousaf's office was covered with detailed maps of Soviet targets in Afghanistan such as airfields, armories and military buildings. The maps came with CIA assessments of how best to approach the target, possible routes of withdrawal, and analysis of how Soviet troops might respond to an attack. "They would say there are the vehicles, and there is the [river bank], and there is the tank," Yousaf said.

CIA operations officers helped Pakistani trainers establish schools for the mujaheddin in secure communications, guerrilla warfare, urban sabotage and heavy weapons, Yousaf and Western officials said.

The first anti-aircraft systems used by the mujaheddin were the Swiss-made Oerlikon heavy gun and the British-made Blowpipe missile, according to Yousaf and Western sources. When these proved ineffective, the United States sent the Stinger. Pakistani officers traveled to the United States for training on the Stinger in June 1986 and then set up a secret mujaheddin Stinger training facility in Rawalpindi, complete with an electronic simulator made in the United States. The simulator allowed mujaheddin trainees to aim and fire at a large screen without actually shooting off expensive missiles, Yousaf said. The screen marked the missile's track and calculated whether the trainee would have hit his airborne target.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of such training and battlefield intelligence depended on the mujaheddin themselves; their performance and willingness to employ disciplined tactics varied greatly. Yousaf considered the aid highly valuable, although marred by persistent supplies of weapons such as the Blowpipe that failed miserably on the battlefield.

At the least, the escalation on the U.S. side initiated with Reagan's 1985 National Security Directive helped to change the character of the Afghan war, intensifying the struggle and raising the stakes for both sides. This change led U.S. officials to confront a difficult question that had legal, military, foreign policy and even moral implications: In taking the Afghan covert operation more directly to the Soviet enemy, how far should the United States be prepared to go?

NEXT: Questions about assassination



WILLIAM CASEY
CIA director
"We can do a lot of damage to the Soviet Union."

Dec. 1979: Soviets invade Afghanistan to prop up a Marxist government that is collapsing under a popular rebellion. Moscow believes it can win a quick victory against poorly armed guerrillas.

1984: Soviets, frustrated at years of costly stalemate, decide to try winning the war within two years using helicopter assaults. In October, CIA Director William Casey asks Pakistan to help U.S. promote subversion, through Afghanistan, in the Soviet Muslim republics.

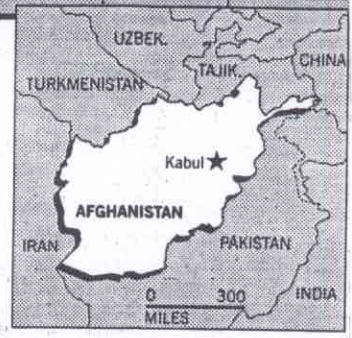
1986: In January, Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) goes to China and Pakistan, wins their support for supply of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Stingers arrive in the summer and begin downing the assault helicopters key to Soviet strategy.



ORRIN G. HATCH
Republican senator, Utah
"Secretly visited China to enlist help for Afghan rebels."

1980: The Carter administration quietly offers light arms, many bought from China, to help Afghan rebels "harrass" Soviet forces; China and Saudi Arabia chip in, and Pakistan handles direct contact with the rebels.

1985: New Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agrees to Soviet escalation, sends Gen. Mikhail Zaitsev to supervise it. Reagan administration decides to seek defeat of Soviets, send high-tech weapons to rebels.



SOURCES: News reports; Pakistani, U.S., Western intelligence officials

1988: With the war still a costly quagmire, Moscow agrees to pull out. In April, Afghanistan and Pakistan sign U.N.-sponsored accord including Soviet forces' departure.

1989: In February, Moscow pulls out the last of its estimated 115,000 Soviet troops but continues key supplies of money, food, gas and weapons. Rebels remain fractious, fail to form a cohesive alternative government or to capture any key Afghan cities.



MIKHAIL GORBACHEV
Soviet president
Afghanistan defeat may have helped him by hurting Kremlin hardliners



1991: As the Soviet Union collapses, Moscow ends financial support of Najibullah's government. It agrees with United States to halt the two nations' arms shipments to Afghanistan by Jan. 1992 and to cooperate with a U.N. plan for a new government there.

1992: In March, Najibullah agrees to transfer power to a U.N.-sponsored interim government and defections accelerate. In April, rebels take capital continue infighting while trying to establish a government.



MIKHAIL M. ZAITSEV
Soviet general
Put in charge of Soviet war in Afghanistan in the spring of 1985

BY JOHN ANDERSON-THE WASHINGTON POST