

TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

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WHEN AMERICA GOES to war, Americans ask a historical question: How did we get ourselves into this? Doves usually answer: imperialism. If we didn't do such nasty things around the world, we wouldn't be attacked. But as I tried to show last week, the connection between our misdeeds and their attacks can be rather tenuous. And so more sophisticated doves offer a more sophisticated answer: "blowback." Our foreign policy doesn't just create enemies in a general sense, it creates them in a very specific sense: We fund and train the people who later attack us. During the Panama invasion, doves gleefully noted Manuel Noriega's ties to the CIA. During the Gulf war, they gleefully noted America's semi-support for Saddam as a counterweight to Iran. And today antiwar commentators instruct us that the CIA, through its support for the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, created Osama bin Laden.

At first glance, blowback might not seem like a good historical argument for doves to make. After all, by condemning the U.S. for getting into bed with Noriega and Saddam and bin Laden in the past, doves acknowledge that they are worthy of condemnation—which might suggest that America should atone for its past wrongs by opposing them now. But doves aren't making a point about America's enemies; they are making a point about America. The assumption behind blowback is that the U.S. *can't* atone—that as long as it intervenes around the world, it will foster evil. To go to war against bin Laden today will only create more bin Ladens tomorrow.

Which makes it of more than mere historical interest that, as applied to the United States and Afghanistan, the blowback theory is dead wrong. American intervention in the Afghan war didn't create Osama bin Laden. In fact, if the United States bears any blame for bin Laden's terrorist network today, it's because in the 1980s and '90s, we didn't intervene in

Afghanistan aggressively *enough*.

As bizarre as it may sound to the antiwar left, the CIA was deeply wary of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The Agency didn't think the mujahedin rebels could beat Moscow, and it feared that if it ran the war, it would take the blame if things went awry. As Vincent Cannistraro, who led the Reagan administration's Afghan Working Group from 1985 to 1987, puts it, "The CIA was very reluctant to be involved at all. They thought it would end up with them being blamed, like in Guatemala." So the Agency tried to avoid direct involvement in the war, and to maintain plausible deniability. For the first six years following the 1979 Soviet invasion, the U.S. provided the mujahedin only Eastern-bloc weaponry, so the rebels could claim they had captured it from Soviet troops rather than received it from Washington. And while America funded the mujahedin, it played barely any role in their training. To insulate itself, the U.S. gave virtual *carte blanche* to its allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to direct the rebel effort as they saw fit.

This is where bin Laden comes in. After Moscow invaded, he and other Arab militants went to defend Afghanistan in the name of Islam. The Pakistani government allowed them in, and the Saudis gave them money, hoping to foster a Sunni Islamist network to counter the Shia network of rival Iran. Riyadh thought the network would espouse the monarchy's brand of conservative, rather than revolutionary, fundamentalism. And that idea seemed less naive in the 1980s when bin Laden was still a loyal Saudi subject, and before Islamist rebellions had broken out in Algeria and dramatically intensified in Egypt.

Had the U.S. been present on the ground in Afghanistan, it would have known about this. And it probably would have tried to stop it—if only because the Arab volunteers were aiding a virulently anti-Western Afghan rebel leader named Abdul Rasul Sanyal, who opposed not only the Soviets, but the Western-backed mujahedin as well. But the U.S. wasn't present on the ground, and it had only the vaguest knowledge of the Arabs' presence and aims. In retrospect, that might seem hard to believe. But remember, contrary to bin Laden's later boasts, the Arabs were few in number (most came *after* the war, once bin Laden's network was established) and played virtually no military role in the victory over the Soviets. And the skittish CIA, Cannistraro estimates, had less than ten operatives acting as America's eyes and ears in the region. Milton Bearden, the Agency's chief field operative in the war effort, has insisted that "[T]he CIA had nothing to do with" bin Laden. Cannistraro says that when he coordinated Afghan policy from Washington, he never once heard bin Laden's name.

And if U.S. disengagement contributed to the formation of bin Laden's network during the war, it contributed to it after the war was over as well. In 1992 the Communist regime in Kabul finally fell. Afghanistan needed foreign aid to reconstruct its shattered infrastructure, and an intense diplomatic effort to force its fractious mujahedin leaders to lay down their arms. The logical source of that financial assistance and political intervention was the U.S., which enjoyed the goodwill of many mujahedin leaders. But by all accounts, once Afghanistan's troubles lost their cold war significance, the Bush père and Clinton administrations paid them virtually no high-level attention. Neither administration tried seriously to negotiate a truce between the parties, and U.S. aid, which had totaled roughly \$3 billion in the 1980s, dropped, by the end of 1994, nearly to zero.

For two more hideous years, mujahedin factions fought each other and preyed on an already brutalized population. Had ordinary Afghans not been desperate for the civil war to end, and for a leadership with at least some moral code, they would not have backed the Taliban, the religious students coming from the Pakistani border. And had Afghanistan not faced a political vacuum, Pakistan would not have armed those students in the hope that through them, it could dominate its neighbor to the northwest.

America's abandonment of Afghanistan was of a piece with its abandonment of countries like Liberia, Somalia, and Congo, which also disintegrated after cold war dictators fell. In Liberia the resulting anarchy produced the murderous Charles Taylor. In Somalia it produced the murderous Mohamed Farah Aideed. In Congo it produced the genocidal Hutu refugee camps. And in Afghanistan it produced the Taliban. Except that the Taliban didn't just harbor tribal killers, they harbored Al Qaeda, which brought its savagery all the way to America's shores.

So the doves are wrong: There was no blowback. America's involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s didn't help create Osama bin Laden; Saudi Arabia's involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s helped create Osama bin Laden, in large part because the United States was too timid to direct the war itself. Similarly, it wasn't America's intervention in Afghanistan in the 1990s that created the Taliban; it was Pakistan's intervention and America's non-intervention. Doves might consider this as they counsel the U.S. to respond to September 11 by leaving the rest of the world to its own devices. After all, it was leaving the rest of the world to its own devices that got us into this in the first place.

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