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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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Deputy Director for National Foreign Assessment

NFAC #2668-80/1
10 April 1980

NOTE TO: Director of Central Intelligence

5X1 Herewith the paper on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Aberration or Symptom prepared [redacted] The paper was requested from you by Brzezinski. It is solely the product of the NIO/USSR office and has not been further coordinated. I recommend that
5X1 you send this on to the White House. [redacted]

5X1 [redacted]

Bruce C. Clarke, Jr.

cc: DDCI

5X1 [redacted]

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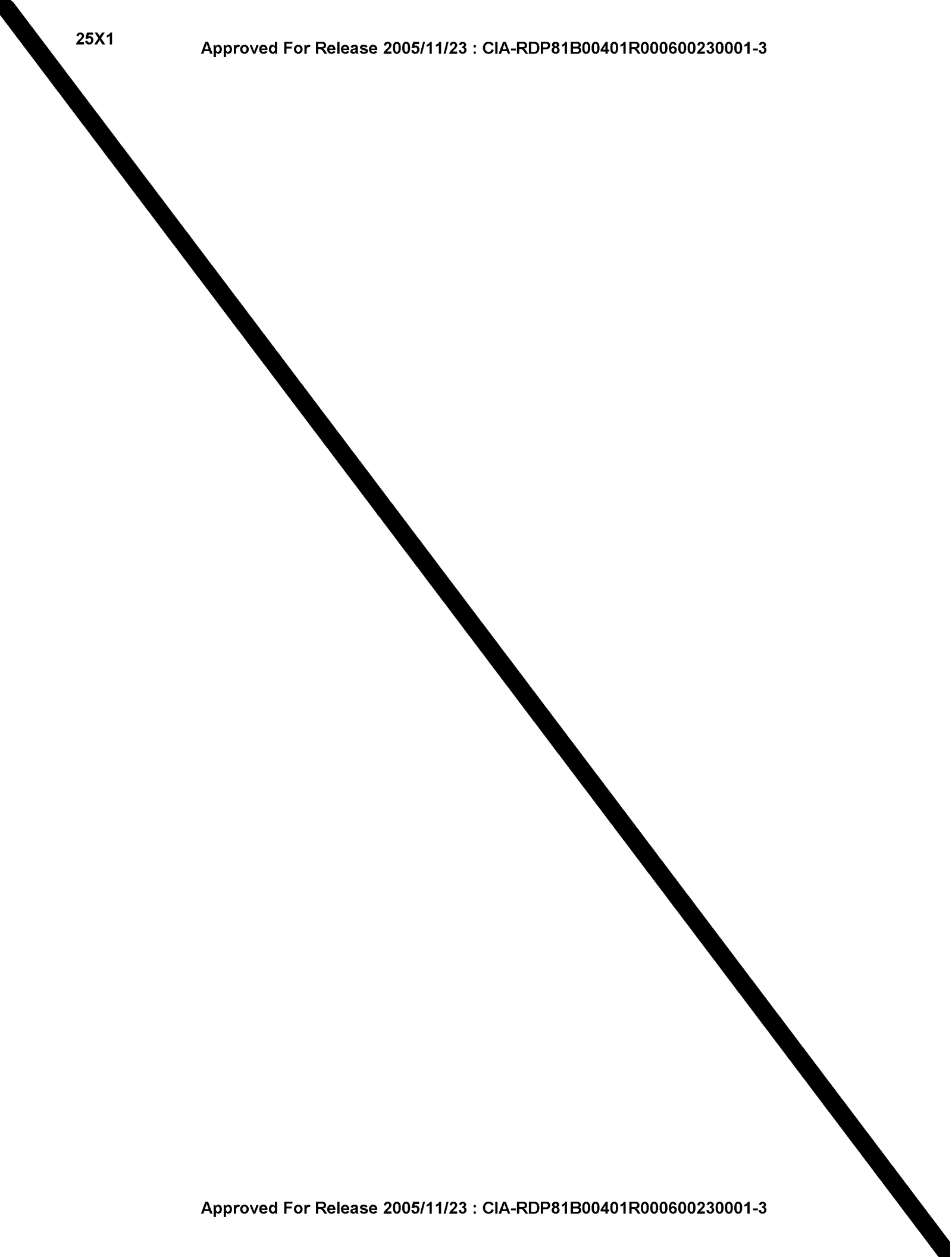

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10 April 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Aberration or Symptom?

SUMMARY

We believe that Afghanistan is neither an aberration which, when behind us, will see the Soviet Union revert to its previous pattern of behavior, nor a symptom of a new phase of adventuresome policy to which the Kremlin is already committed. We believe that future Soviet behavior will be more contingent, the result of conclusions the Soviet leadership reaches after an analysis of the costs and benefits of the invasion. A generally assertive Soviet policy will almost certainly continue, but whether it is more constrained in use of military force or not will depend importantly on the "lessons of Afghanistan": the outcome of the situation in that country, its impact on the region, and on US allies, but, above all, on Soviet perceptions of US reactions.

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Aberration or Symptom?

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has precipitated a sharp debate over its significance. On one side, some offer Afghan-specific explanations to argue that the move is an episodic aberration in an otherwise generally circumspect pattern of Soviet behavior. On the other side of the debate are those who hold that the invasion represents the opening of a new and more aggressive phase in what promises to be an escalating global competition.

Proponents of the first view concede that the invasion represents Moscow's first postwar use of combat forces outside the Soviet Bloc. But they emphasize Afghanistan's status as a Soviet client and ally and suggest that the invasion was the result of a reluctant decision by Moscow that it could not permit the collapse of a proto-socialist allied regime in a neighboring country which was an incipient bastion of anti-Communist Islamic fundamentalism, if not a potential client of the US or the PRC.

Proponents of the second view contend that the invasion is symptomatic of Moscow's growing willingness to play a worldwide interventionist role and to resort to the direct use of Soviet military force in the pursuit of otherwise unattainable ambitions. As these analysts see it, Moscow is convinced that "the correlation of forces" has shifted to its side, creating a situation in which actions that it would previously have rejected as "adventuristic" can now be confidently undertaken. Some analysts of this persuasion even argue that Moscow's new found confidence has led it to embark on a calculated plan to fill the unprecedented vacuum of power in Southwest Asia and consolidate a position of privileged access to Middle Eastern oil and control over oil supply routes. In this way, the Soviet Union would be assured of a solution to its own emergent energy problem, and also win immense leverage against the West -- leverage which, among other things, Moscow could utilize to forestall the sort of Western military buildup which could redress the currently favorable "correlation of forces".

Rather different policy implications flow from these alternative explanations and expectations of Soviet behavior. The first implies that if the Soviet Union can be induced to withdraw from Afghanistan in return for suitable "reassurances" it will revert to a more acceptable pattern of behavior and may even show a heightened appreciation of the value (and fragility) of "detente". According to this view, the present Soviet predicament is in large part the product of miscalculation which

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is now recognized as such. This has led to a situation in which the mutual interests of the West and the Soviet Union lie in fashioning a face-saving solution which will permit the resumption of normal relations.

The second view holds that the Soviet Union is determined to maintain a permanent military presence in Afghanistan and will use it to bolster its geopolitical position in the region, to bring pressure to bear on neighboring and nearby countries, to discredit or nullify Western security guarantees, and to highlight Western weakness and irresolution. With reference to detente, this view holds that the Soviets are prepared to write off for the time being what they already perceived before Afghanistan as unsatisfactory levels of US trade, credits and technology transfers. Simultaneously, Moscow will seek to preserve and extend its commercial relations with Western Europe, and Japan through what it believes can be a successful policy of "differentiated detente".

The relevance of the central and regional military balances for the Soviet decision to intervene in Afghanistan is also at issue in these contrasting views of Soviet behavior. Members of the aberrationist school are inclined to believe that shifts in the military balance over the course of the last ten to fifteen years were essentially irrelevant with respect to the Afghanistan intervention. Given the identical set of circumstances, they contend, the Soviets would have intervened in Afghanistan ten or fifteen years ago, as they did in Hungary in 1956. In contrast, those who view the invasion as reflecting a higher Soviet propensity to take risks hold that it was precisely the shift in the military balances of the past ten to fifteen years that emboldened the Soviets for the first time to employ military force directly against a non-bloc state. As these analysts see it, the shifting strategic balance has created a military environment in which Soviet recourse to force became both physically possible and politically attractive.

We believe that each of these divergent viewpoints captures important aspects of reality, but that each also omits important considerations. If taken alone, each has potentially misleading policy implications. Like those who view the intervention as an aberration, we believe it was triggered by Afghan-specific events and did not in itself stem from or reflect a conviction that the time was ripe for a global offensive, let alone from a belief that it was a necessary (or even a very sensible) first step in the pursuit of warm water ports or control of Middle Eastern oil. Like the aberrationists, we also believe that the timing of the Soviet decision to intervene was critically affected by fear of an imminent, and possibly irreversible, disintegration of the established Kabul regime and its replacement by a regime which might even prove susceptible to hostile external influence. In addition, we share the aberrationists' belief that the invasion of Afghanistan was defensive in the sense that it was motivated by fear that the loss of a country from within the Soviet sphere of influence would have an extremely adverse effect on Moscow's credibility as a power determined to brook no challenge to the integrity of its empire or to the irreversability of "socialist" gains.

We are also inclined to agree with some of the arguments of those who see the invasion as an expression of a more fundamental shift in global Soviet policy. We believe it is probably the Soviet perception that their enhanced military posture, especially in the strategic area, has created a more permissive political environment for the conduct of foreign policy. It has lowered the perceived risk of Soviet exploitation of political and social instability in the Third World, and of a more assertive foreign policy that has included the use of military force, either directly or through proxies, in some Third World countries. Growing Soviet military aid efforts have served as the main conveyor of Soviet influence -- in Angola, Ethiopia, Yemen, etc. The calculations that informed the invasion of Afghanistan, therefore, were not without precedent. Afghanistan involved the crossing of an important threshold, and was recognized as such by the Soviet leadership. But, as we have also pointed out, it was preceded by a gradual, decade-long escalation in Soviet political-military involvement in the Third World.

The decision to solve the Afghanistan problem by an unprecedented massive military intervention in a "Third World" country is a culmination of this process. It reflects a confidence that the shift in the global military balance, as the Soviets perceive it, guaranteed the USSR immunity from Western military retaliation, and has created new possibilities to demonstrate the apparent inability of the West to deter Soviet self-assertiveness. The possibility that Afghanistan represents a qualitative turn in Soviet foreign policy in the region and toward the Third World is one to be taken seriously. The Soviets recognize that the issue of super-power involvement in a region that stretches from Morroco to the Indian subcontinent remains the vital question informing the posture and policies of the nations in the region.

On balance, we tend to disagree with the argument that ascribes the USSR's Third World involvement and its involvement in Afghanistan largely to Soviet feelings of insecurity. We would argue that such behavior is more the product of confidence in a potentially enduring shift in the balance of power -- a stronger sense of being a superpower and being perceived by others as such. This status and self-image has become an important determinant of Soviet behavior; a superpower would not let an "allied" regime in a bordering country go down the drain. At the same time, from the Soviet point of view, Afghanistan probably appeared an extremely low risk venture precisely because it was preceded by numerous ventures which, though they did not involve the direct use of large-scale Soviet forces, did involve an active Soviet military presence in countries remote from the borders of the Soviet Union, and located well within traditional Western spheres of influence. The Soviet ability to carry out these ventures without incurring drastic costs enhanced Moscow's confidence that it could intervene with relative impunity in Afghanistan. Perhaps to Moscow's surprise, this intervention did finally precipitate the sort of Western reaction that the Kremlin may well have feared, but tended to discount in view of the relatively passive reaction to its earlier involvements elsewhere.

Even if those who see the invasion as an aberration were completely correct in their explanation, there would be grounds for skepticism about the policy implications they often tend to draw: namely, that if the USSR can terminate its Afghan adventure in relatively short order and without an undue loss of face, it is unlikely to try to expand its influence elsewhere in Southwest Asia or to challenge Western Third World interests militarily. However, unlike the symptomists, we do not take it to be an almost foregone conclusion that the invasion of Afghanistan will be followed by comparable acts of Soviet military self-assertiveness. Like the aberrationists, we consider it possible that the termination of the Afghan adventure will leave the Soviet Union willing and eager to resume the process of detente. However, as was true before the invasion, the Soviets will continue to interpret detente as permitting active military and quasi-military challenges to Western Third World interests.

The real issue of this discussion -- whether the Afghanistan invasion represents an aberration or a trend in Soviet policy -- is the degree of restraint which has governed Soviet policy toward opportunities in the Third World, the nature and sources of that restraint, and changes in it. Some would acknowledge that while Soviet policies since the mid-1970's have been more assertive and probing, such policies also reflect caution and risk-avoidance, imposed in part by Moscow's desire to preserve its detente and arms control relationships with the US. While a combination of these motives contributed to the Soviet decision to invade, one can only explain that decision in the broader context of Soviet perceptions of a more favorable global military position and a greater latitude for risk. If one subscribes to the idea that the Soviet propensity to take risks is higher, however, one must realize that an ongoing cost-benefit analysis will continue to shape Moscow's policies toward the Third World.

While we disagree with those who argue that the Soviets are henceforth irrevocably committed to the direct use of their own military force to aggrandize power in the Third World, we agree with them that Afghanistan could be a precedent if the Soviets conclude it was an appropriate solution to the Afghan problem, if they perceive that it places them in a position from which they can exert pervasive leverage in Southwest Asia, and if they conclude that the West is either incapable or unwilling to frustrate the effort or to oblige the Soviet Union to pay a counterbalancing military or political price elsewhere. In short, the answer to the question of whether or not Afghanistan is a harbinger of things to come will depend importantly on the "lessons" that are drawn from the Afghan experience by the present incumbents in the Kremlin and the successors who will shortly replace them.

In sum, we believe that Afghanistan is neither an aberration which, when behind us, will see the Soviet Union revert to its previous pattern of behavior, nor a symptom of a new phase of adventuresome policy to which the Kremlin is already committed. We believe that future Soviet behavior will be more contingent, the result of conclusions the Soviet leadership reaches after an analysis of the costs and benefits of the invasion. A generally assertive Soviet policy will almost certainly continue, but whether it is more constrained in use of military force or not will depend importantly on the "lessons of Afghanistan": the outcome of the situation in that country, its impact on the region, and on US allies, but, above all, on Soviet perceptions of US reactions.