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CHRONICLE

The new Afghanistanism

When the U.S. government began a covert operation to send weapons to Afghanistan last year, it hit on a novel way to keep the operation secret: it told the press. Most reporters were unable to confirm initial leaks about weapons supplies and did not report on them. Others confirmed them, printed them, and moved on to other issues. Within months, the weapons story had all but vanished. Instead, press accounts largely portrayed Afghan insurgents as battling Soviet tanks and aircraft with, as described in a UPI interview with a rebel leader in May 1980, "axes and gasoline bombs made from Coca-Cola bottles." By the first anniversary of the Soviet invasion on December 27, when many papers reviewed the situation in Afghanistan, almost all failed to mention U.S. weapons supplies. Those that did minimized their importance.

The first accounts of the U.S. decision to aid the resistance in Afghanistan appeared soon after the Soviet invasion. On January 5, 1980, William Beecher reported in *The Boston Globe* that the administration had made a "hush-hush decision . . . [to] do everything possible to slip weapons to the Moslem insurgents." He wrote further that the supply operation was to be coordinated with China and with Egypt, which had agreed to contribute some of its anti-aircraft missiles if the U.S. would replace them. The operation was intended to tie down Soviet troops in a prolonged confrontation.

Additional details soon emerged in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The CIA had been assigned to carry out the operation and would supply the Afghans with Soviet-made rifles and anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles. The venture was characterized by the *Times* as the CIA's "first of this nature and magnitude since the Angolan civil war ended" four years earlier.

The existence of the operation was indirectly substantiated by other press reports. In February, Egypt's minister of defense said his country was training Afghan rebels and planned to arm them and send them home; Egypt was also reported by the *Times* to be receiving a new generation of American anti-aircraft missiles (suggesting that perhaps the bargain reported by Beecher was being

carried out). Afghan insurgents near the borders of Pakistan and China were said to have mortars, heavy machine guns, and Soviet rifles. By April 6, 1980, Tad Szulc in *The New York Times Magazine* was discussing the CIA's supply operation in considerable detail.

That same day, *60 Minutes* broadcast "Inside Afghanistan," a report on Dan Rather's journey across the Pakistan border. By relying almost entirely on the statements of Afghan rebels and a Pakistani information officer, Rather managed to consolidate popular misconceptions about the war into one high-impact, coast-to-coast broadcast. He accepted at face value claims that, in the words of the Pakistani, "no country is providing arms and ammunitions to Mujahadeen, freedom fighters." The officer's statement was understandable given Pakistan's fear of Soviet retaliation. Rather's credulity was not.

The broadcast seemed to mark a watershed. In a survey of news accounts (including those carried by the *Times*, the *Post*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*), close to three-quarters of the articles appearing through April presented the U.S. as planning to provide, or already providing, aid to the rebels. After April, the proportion was reversed: about three-quarters of the articles reviewed either stated that the U.S. was not giving aid or played down such assistance as inadequate or of the wrong type.

At the same time, the press failed to connect mounting evidence of a significant weapons supply in Afghanistan with previous reports of American involvement. There was, for instance, a story in the *Times* citing reports of Egyptian and Chinese weapons in Afghanistan. State Department officials announced that they were helping the rebels in every way they could — including ways they said they could not talk about. Further, the rebels were reported in the *Times* to possess anti-aircraft guns and anti-aircraft missiles, causing the Russians to lose planes and as many as fifteen helicopters a month.

As the first anniversary of the invasion approached, one might have expected thorough assessments of possible U.S. involvement. Instead, the "axes and gasoline bombs" theme took over in full force. Many print outlets, including *The Wall Street*

probably most accurate, explanation is given by those reporters, like Michael Getler of *The Washington Post*, who originally reported the planned covert operation. "The lid went on very tightly, afterwards," Getler said, adding that other Washington reporters, unable to confirm those reports independently, could not repeat the story second-hand indefinitely.

Another consideration is the difficulty of getting into Afghanistan. "I can't think of a scene that reminded me in as many ways of [Evelyn Waugh's] *Scoop* as these journalists who go to Peshawar and sit around in the Intercontinental Hotel filing stories based on what religious groups tell them," says Carnegie Endowment senior associate Selig Harrison, author of a forthcoming study of the Afghanistan situation, who traveled to Pakistan last year. "The kind of work that would lead you to find out what foreign help is going in there, no one is doing to my knowledge."

Some reporters may also be inhibited by a reluctance to give succor to the Soviets, who have been banging the drum of CIA interference in Afghanistan since long before their own invasion. When asked about *Newsweek's* January 5 story, Fred Coleman, one of several reporters contributing to the article, observed that "obviously, people on this side don't want to give credence to [the Soviet claim], so that makes it sensitive."

Five years ago significant U.S. assistance to Afghanistan — or the lack of it — would have been a major news story. But today many hard questions are not being asked. Among them is whether, in fact, the U.S. wants the Soviets out of Afghanistan, or prefers to make the country Russia's Vietnam. It could be that we are deliberately furnishing just enough aid to keep the insurgency alive but short of victory. In that case, the Afghans are paying a heavy price for their role in the global balance of power.

The Reagan administration will no doubt review the situation. Maybe the press should too.

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