

Chapter 2

The Endgame of the Reagan Doctrine: Democratic Transition in Nicaragua and Chaos in Afghanistan

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Introduction¹

This chapter examines what happened, during the waning years of the American-Soviet struggle, in two conflicts that were part of the “global Cold War.”² In both Afghanistan and Nicaragua throughout the 1980s, Soviet-supported Marxist regimes had fought American-aided insurgencies. The United States’ support to the Afghan and Nicaraguan guerillas was central to what became widely known as the “Reagan Doctrine,” a term coined by columnist Charles Krauthammer in 1985 and which he defined as “overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution.”³

While President Reagan became associated in many people’s minds with the American counter-offensive against Marxist regimes, it fell to Reagan’s vice-president and successor in the Oval Office, President George H.W. Bush, to preside over the endgame of the “Reagan Doctrine.” The following analysis demonstrates three major things about the Bush administration’s record in that regard. First, in the midst of continuing competition with the Soviet Union, the Bush administration wanted settlements to the wars in Nicaragua and Afghanistan, preferably with the departure of the Soviet-aligned governments in those countries. Second, during the Bush administration’s term—which ran from January 1989 until January 1993—there was a narrowing of ideological differences between the superpowers when it came to “regional conflicts,” with Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet Union sharing similar ideas to the United States about the need for political settlements and even democratic elections as the way to end proxy wars. Third, despite a reduction in superpower ideological competition and efforts to reach mutual American-Soviet understandings—most notably in regard to

Afghanistan—a narrowing of superpower differences was not enough to guarantee a cessation of all regional conflicts. While the war in Nicaragua concluded with a political settlement and a democratic transition in 1990, the war in Afghanistan raged on, leaving the country to become a failed state and the source of new post-Cold War threats.

After providing an overview of American support to the anti-communist insurgencies in Afghanistan and Nicaragua, the heart of this chapter examines the Bush administration's policy approach towards the two countries and shows how events in them played out in markedly different ways. The conclusion reflects upon why the Nicaraguan and Afghan wars followed distinct trajectories during the closing stages of the Cold War.

An Overview of American Support to the Afghan and Nicaraguan Insurgencies

By the close of the 1970s, as Hal Brands writes, “the Cold War was frequently feared to be tilting in Moscow’s direction, amid a major Soviet military buildup and a string of Kremlin advances—and American defeats—in the Third World.”⁴ The year 1979 was truly disastrous for the United States.⁵ In January, the American-aligned Shah of Iran was deposed by a revolution. In July, the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista National Liberation Front seized power in Nicaragua by overthrowing another U.S. ally, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whose family had ruled that country repressively since 1936. In November 1979, Iranian hardliners took 52 Americans hostage in Tehran. On December 24, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Kremlin embarked on that venture to change the leader of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and more broadly to shore up the party’s rule.⁶ The communist PDPA had seized power in an April 1978 coup but, by the following year, its position was imperiled by widespread domestic opposition and infighting between its own factions.⁷

Several days after Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, U.S. President Jimmy Carter signed a covert action “finding”—an approval required by American law for such operations—that authorized the CIA to “provide lethal military equipment either directly or through third countries to the Afghan opponents of the Soviet intervention in Afghani-

stan.”⁸ By the time Carter left office in January 1981, the United States had provided the Afghan resistance with approximately \$30 million, in nominal dollars, of military assistance.⁹ The CIA provided weapons and materiel to Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), who passed them along to the Afghan mujahedin.¹⁰ That anti-Soviet resistance movement was a fragmented one; seven political leaders were based in Peshawar, Pakistan, while numerous commanders led the war effort in Afghanistan.¹¹

Under Ronald Reagan, the years between 1981 and 1984 saw the United States contribute a steadily increasing quantity of weaponry and other support to the mujahedin. The year 1985 was a watershed, however, because from then on the United States dramatically ramped up both the scale and the technological quality of its assistance.¹² Overall, from December 1979 until the USSR’s departure from Afghanistan in February 1989, the United States provided around \$2 billion in support to the mujahedin, in nominal dollars, equivalent to over \$4 billion today.¹³ One reason why the Afghan resistance received so much material aid was because the effort enjoyed bipartisan and wide-ranging support among U.S. policymakers and politicians.

The same was not true of the Reagan administration’s support for the Nicaraguan contras, which precipitated a huge political fight in Washington D.C. In their successful quest for power in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had benefitted from Cuban assistance. They had also allied with a broad coalition that was drawn from across Nicaraguan society and that included private sector representatives as well as moderate political groups that opposed the Somoza regime.¹⁴ Once in power, the Sandinistas pushed many members of that coalition aside.¹⁵ Additionally, they began providing arms to Marxist guerillas in El Salvador.¹⁶ On December 1, 1981, President Reagan authorized the CIA to aid an armed opposition movement, writing in his diary that “we’re proceeding with covert activity in Nicaragua to shut off supplies to the Guerillas in El Salvador.”¹⁷ Initially, the anti-Sandinista rebels—who became known as the “contras,” short for *contrarevolucionarios*—numbered only around 500 fighters, most of whom were former soldiers from Somoza’s military.¹⁸

The Reagan administration’s goals expanded over time. In September 1983, the president stipulated, as part of a new covert action “find-

ing,” that American support for the contras would continue until the Sandinista regime demonstrated “a commitment to provide amnesty and nondiscriminatory participation in the Nicaraguan political process by all Nicaraguans.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, the contras’ ranks also grew; by 1987, they had around 18,000 fighters, compared to the 70,000-strong Sandinista army.²⁰ Reflecting their numerical inferiority, the contras waged an insurgency. They used camps in Honduras, from where they could deploy into Nicaragua to conduct guerilla operations, and the United States provided them with weapons and training suited to that style of warfare.²¹

From late 1982 onwards, the U.S. Congress took numerous votes on whether to continue aiding the contras. In 1984, congressional opponents of supporting the rebels—led by Representative Edward Boland, a Democrat and chairman of the House Intelligence Committee—passed a ban on helping the contras. President Reagan signed it into law because it was attached to a critically-important piece of legislation.²² After the president’s November 1984 re-election, Reagan’s administration began efforts to persuade Congress to rescind the prohibition, including by linking the contras’ war with those of other anti-communist insurgencies. In his February 6, 1985 State of the Union address, Reagan declared that:

We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.²³

Several weeks later, Secretary of State George Shultz delivered a speech in which he argued that the United States had a “moral responsibility” to support “popular insurgencies against communist domination.”²⁴ Peter Rodman, who served in Shultz’s State Department, later noted that the president’s and secretary of state’s remarks represented “an attempt to get the glow of the popular cause (the Afghans) to rub off onto the unpopular one (the Contras).”²⁵ Within that context, in April 1985, Charles Krauthammer coined the term “Reagan Doctrine.”²⁶

In June 1985, Congress voted to restore aid to the contras—albeit of an expressly non-lethal form. The decision followed a good Republican performance in the 1984 elections, which frightened some political-

ly-vulnerable Democrats into backing the contras, as well as increasing evidence about the Sandinistas' repression and close links to the USSR.²⁷ One year later, in June 1986—following Sandinista military operations against rebel camps inside Honduras and after concerted lobbying by the administration—Congress even approved a resumption of lethal aid, totaling \$70 million, to the contras.²⁸

The administration's Nicaragua policy, however, soon became mired in scandal. After a series of press revelations, in late November 1986 the U.S. attorney general made a stunning announcement. Earlier that year, while a congressional ban on lethal assistance was still in effect, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North of the National Security Council (NSC) staff had funneled some proceeds from secret arms sales to Iran to the Nicaraguan rebels.²⁹ In the aftermath of the "Iran-contra" scandal and the 1986 elections—when Democrats won control of both legislative chambers—Congress would never authorize additional lethal support to the contras. The insurgents did benefit, however, from the military assistance that had been passed in 1986 prior to the scandal and that aid allowed them to prosecute their war with renewed vigor during late 1986 and 1987.³⁰

By the late 1980s, the wars in both Afghanistan and Nicaragua were strategically deadlocked. American aid to the insurgents contributed to those stalemates, but it was far from the sole cause.³¹ Those battlefield deadlocks, combined with burgeoning superpower cooperation towards "regional conflicts," helped set the stage for important agreements in 1988.³² In early February of that year, the U.S. House of Representatives voted down an administration proposal to give the contras new aid. At the time of that vote, a Central American peace effort led by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias seemed to be making headway and the Democrat-controlled House was not about to fund further military efforts.³³ Consequently, the contras were left seriously short of supplies and in March 1988 they entered into a ceasefire.³⁴ For their part, the Sandinistas signed that measure because, although they were still receiving aid from the Soviet bloc, that assistance was lagging behind Nicaragua's economic requirements.³⁵ After the ceasefire, the U.S. Congress voted new non-lethal aid to the contras; its purpose was to hold the contras together, in an attempt to ensure that the Sandinistas entered into a permanent settlement and allowed free-and-fair elections.³⁶

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's leadership was committed to a withdrawal from Afghanistan from late 1986 onwards, having concluded that it could not win a military victory there. As General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev described the matter at a Politburo meeting in November 1986: "we have been fighting in Afghanistan for already six years. If the approach is not changed, we will continue to fight for another 20-30 years."³⁷ The Soviet exit subsequently unfolded over a period that exceeded two years—in Artemy Kalinovsky's phrase, it was "a long goodbye."³⁸ In April 1988, the Soviet Union accepted the Geneva Accords, under which it would depart, and by February 15, 1989 all of its forces had left Afghanistan.

While the 1988 agreements related to Nicaragua and Afghanistan constituted important steps in de-escalating the global Cold War, they did not settle what longer-term political arrangements would exist in those countries. Of particular importance to the United States, when the Reagan administration left office on January 20, 1989, Soviet-aligned regimes remained in power in both Nicaragua and Afghanistan, led by Daniel Ortega and Mohammad Najibullah respectively.³⁹ The incoming American administration of President George H.W. Bush would endeavor to produce lasting settlements in those countries, preferably ones that included the departure of the incumbent regimes.

The Bush Administration and the Finale of the Reagan Doctrine

The Endgame in Nicaragua

Secretary of State James Baker's prepared talking points for the first Cabinet meeting of the Bush administration, held on January 23, 1989, included a section on Central America. The first point simply read: "Decade of frustration." The section noted that the contras' non-lethal aid, passed by Congress after the March 1988 ceasefire in Nicaragua, would run out by the end of March 1989. Baker was due to tell the Cabinet that "in a sense, we may have an opportunity because the present result is so unsatisfactory" and he added the comment "work with Congress" to his talking points by hand.⁴⁰

In mid-February 1989, at a meeting of Central American leaders—the latest stage in Oscar Arias’ peace process—the Sandinista president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, promised to hold presidential and legislative elections by February 25, 1990 and to allow external election observers into the country.⁴¹ The same agreement also called for the demobilization of the *contras*. Consequently, American congressional supporters of the rebels worried that they would have to disband, only to see the Sandinista regime renege on its promises.⁴² President Bush stated publicly that he was determined to avoid that outcome.⁴³

Secretary Baker, alongside Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, engaged in painstaking talks with Congress to forge a bipartisan approach towards Nicaragua. Baker later wrote the following about the challenging dynamics the administration faced on Capitol Hill:

The diehards on the right wanted to force a vote on military aid, calculating that its preordained failure would give them an excuse to blame the liberals for the death of democracy in Nicaragua. They viewed the very idea of a bipartisan approach as a secret ploy by the President and me to appease the Sandinistas. Conversely, the liberals thought it was nothing less than a plot to save the *contras* through some semantic trickery.⁴⁴

Following three weeks of onerous negotiations, on March 24, 1989, the administration and congressional leaders announced a “Bipartisan Accord” on Central America. Among its provisions, the United States would give the *contras* \$66 million in non-lethal aid during the period between then and the Nicaraguan elections in February 1990.⁴⁵ The *contras* had to refrain from offensive military operations, otherwise they risked losing that aid.⁴⁶

The essence of this bipartisan approach was coercive diplomacy in pursuit of democracy. The United States would help to hold the *contras* together as a cohesive movement, thereby keeping the pressure on the Sandinistas to hold a free-and-fair vote. American policy included an implicit threat: if the Sandinistas failed to permit a real election, the *contras* would still exist and might be able to resume their war. At the beginning of May 1989, the Bush administration spelled out the strategy in National Security Directive 8, which stated that:

We will maintain as far as possible the Nicaraguan Resistance as a viable entity. The Resistance should not be demobilized and voluntarily reintegrated into Nicaraguan society unless democratic conditions have been established which guarantee their physical safety and safeguard their political rights.⁴⁷

The prospect of a competitive election was enhanced in June 1989 when fourteen political parties from among Nicaragua's unarmed opposition—organizationally distinct from the armed contras—established the Nicaraguan Opposition Union (UNO) and united behind a single presidential candidate: Violeta Chamorro.⁴⁸

Chamorro was the publisher of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, a role she had inherited following the political assassination of her husband Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, whose murder in January 1978 had helped catalyze widespread protests against Somoza.⁴⁹ When the Sandinistas initially took power in July 1979, Violeta Chamorro had been one of the moderates who entered government with them, but she resigned in 1980 out of dismay with the Sandinistas' radical trajectory.⁵⁰

In September 1989, President Bush signed National Security Directive 25 (NSD 25), which clarified U.S. policy towards the Nicaraguan elections. The directive stated that “there shall be no covert assistance to political or other groups in Nicaragua in the upcoming election campaign [emphasis in original].” At the same time, the U.S. was to work for a genuine democratic election through open means. As NSD 25 put it:

The Department of State shall undertake a vigorous overt program to support a free and fair election process. Every effort will be made, consistent with U.S. law, to assist the democratic opposition to compete effectively with the Sandinista regime [emphasis in original].⁵¹

In his memoir, James Baker recalled some of the ways in which the State Department carried out this instruction. For example, the department “convinced the Congress to provide voter registration and other support through the National Endowment for Democracy” and Baker explained that the State Department “pressed the OAS, the United Nations, the Carter Center, the European Union, and many others to flood Nicaragua with election observers.”⁵²

While the United States worked for a democratic election in Nicaragua, the Soviet Union also encouraged the Sandinista government to allow such a process to take place.⁵³ This Soviet stance was driven in significant measure by the views of Mikhail Gorbachev. As Svetlana Savranskaya elaborates, from 1988 onwards Gorbachev's overriding objective regarding regional conflicts was to resolve them.⁵⁴ In the Soviet Union itself, Gorbachev introduced meaningful—even if not completely open—elections and they took place in March 1989. As William Taubman emphasizes, “the Soviet regime was transformed when mostly free elections were held for the first time in more than seven decades, and a genuine, functioning parliament replaced the rubber-stamp Supreme Soviet.”⁵⁵

Consistent with the introduction of elections at home, the Soviet Union incorporated the same process into its conceptual approach for settling conflicts in the “Third World.” This was a key way in which American and Soviet views regarding regional conflicts began to converge in the final years of the Cold War, even while the two sides remained aligned with their own preferred parties on the ground. Pavel Palazhchenko, a contributor to this volume who was an aide and interpreter to both Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, later wrote in his memoir that “I am not sure whether he [American Secretary of State James Baker] knew how much pressure the Soviet Union was putting on the Sandinista government in Nicaragua to hold a really free and clean election and to accept its outcome.”⁵⁶

When election day arrived in Nicaragua on February 25, 1990, several thousand foreign observers were at work in the country and they played a critical role in ensuring the integrity of the process.⁵⁷ Turnout was around 86% and 54.7% of voters cast their ballot for Violeta Chamorro, while only 40.8% did so for the Sandinista candidate, Daniel Ortega.⁵⁸ The next day, President Bush spoke with Oscar Arias and told him that “UNO's victory is also your victory and a victory for the peace process.” The American president remarked that “there is no need for the contras to be fighters any more.”⁵⁹

Daniel Ortega transferred power peacefully to Violeta Chamorro in April 1990. Despite all of the political divisiveness in Washington D.C. over the previous decade, the United States had witnessed, in the end, a democratic election in Nicaragua and the Sandinista regime's exit.

The costs of attaining that outcome had been very high, most especially for the people of Nicaragua—tens of thousands of lives had been lost during the 1980s—and also, to a lesser extent, for the American political system. The American deputy national security advisor at the time, Robert Gates, later summed up the result: “The United States had not won in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas just lost.”⁶⁰

The Endgame in Afghanistan

Regarding Afghanistan, the Bush administration set out its policy through National Security Directive 3 (NSD 3), which was issued on February 13, 1989, two days before the last Soviet soldier left Afghan soil. NSD 3 established the following objective:

With the departure of Soviet forces, the United States should encourage the establishment of a stable Afghan government, representative of and responsive to the Afghan people. We should support a peaceful political succession that will promote the reconstruction and recovery of Afghanistan and the return of Afghan refugees from neighboring countries.⁶¹

NSD 3 indicated that the United States wanted to see Mohammad Najibullah’s regime leave office. At the time, it was widely assumed that the Afghan government’s remaining days would be few in any case. A CIA intelligence assessment from October 1988 had reported that “the Afghan regime probably will collapse within six to 12 months following the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.”⁶² In late February 1989, Pakistan’s foreign minister, Yaqub Khan, told President Bush that “the resistance would soon tear apart the existing Afghan government.”⁶³ Many senior Soviet officials also doubted the Afghan leader’s staying power after the Soviet troop departure.⁶⁴

Predictions of a rapid military victory for the mujahedin, however, were shattered in March 1989 when they suffered a debacle during their attempt to take Jalalabad. Anne Stenersen notes that it was the mujahedin’s “first attempt to seize a major city from the Afghan Communist regime.”⁶⁵ As former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel explains, the battle showed that “the mujahedin were simply not ready to conduct a conventional military siege against an enemy with artillery, tanks, Scud missiles, and air power.”⁶⁶ The Afghan regime remained well-armed because, even though the USSR had removed its ground troops, it

continued to supply the regime with a bountiful supply of weaponry.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the United States continued to work with Pakistan to provide significant military aid to the mujahedin.⁶⁸

The United States also tried to achieve the Afghan regime's departure by engaging in discussions with the Soviet Union regarding a political settlement. During a September 1989 Oval Office meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, President Bush said that "we should be able to find a solution to the Afghan problem."⁶⁹ Shevardnadze subsequently held two days of meetings with Secretary of State Baker close to the latter's ranch in Wyoming. At the conclusion of those meetings, as part of a joint statement, the U.S. and USSR said:

The two sides agreed on the need for a political settlement in Afghanistan on the basis of national reconciliation, one that ensures the peaceful, independent, and nonaligned status of Afghanistan. While their approaches differ over how to translate these principles into reality, they, nevertheless, agreed that a transition period is required, as well as an appropriate mechanism to establish a broad-based government.⁷⁰

At the Malta summit meeting, on December 3, 1989, Shevardnadze proposed addressing the situation in Afghanistan by working towards "free elections to be monitored by the UN."⁷¹ President Bush indicated that the mujahedin would not accept any political settlement that failed to change Afghanistan's leader. As Bush put it:

Najibullah is a major hang-up. About that the resistance groups are united. They all say that reconciliation is impossible with him there.⁷²

When Secretary Baker visited Moscow in early February 1990, he again stressed to Gorbachev that the United States wanted a political settlement in Afghanistan. But Baker also explained that "we really have limited influence on the Mujahaddin."⁷³ American influence upon the mujahedin was constrained, at least in part, because the resistance groups were receiving significant support from other sources, notably including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Baker argued that, if an arrangement could be found that would culminate in Najibullah's departure, then that could help to get the

mujahedin, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia to support such a political process.⁷⁴ In response to Baker's comments, Gorbachev expressed a sense of exasperation with Afghanistan, commenting: "maybe we ought to just let them boil in their own juices." Baker agreed: "we have a saying in America," he exclaimed, "that we don't want any cheese we just want out of the trap."⁷⁵

In early March 1990, Pakistan's ISI supported a coup attempt against Najibullah. It was launched by defectors from the PDPA regime and supported by mujahedin fighters from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction. Najibullah quashed the coup within two days.⁷⁶ Two weeks after that, on March 20, 1990, James Baker and Eduard Shevardnadze met again. During the part of their conversation that addressed Afghanistan, the American secretary of state returned to the theme of elections, remarking that:

It occurs to me that there may be some common ground on the issue of elections—though the circumstances in Afghanistan are not the same as they were in Namibia or in Nicaragua. I would be interested at some point in hearing your ideas on how you see elections working in Afghanistan. I know that in constructing a process that at some point we would get to the issue of whether Najib would take part as a candidate in the elections. We've never said someone ought not to run for office—we would never exclude anyone from running for office. But we don't think we can produce the Mujahaddin in a process where Najib could still be in power. That is not a political position—that is really just a statement of reality.⁷⁷

Later in the conversation, Baker offered a suggestion for how to handle Najibullah's political future:

What would you think of the idea of asking him [Najibullah] to abide by the results of elections, go along with it, but have him agree that he would not run in the first election, but he would be eligible for any election after that. There could even be a PDPA candidate in that first election.⁷⁸

The Soviet foreign minister was not impressed, replying that "I think that we could talk to Najib but it wouldn't get us very far if we were to talk to him in a fashion that you suggested."⁷⁹ Secretary Baker sent a

cable to President Bush the same day giving him a readout of the discussion. Baker recounted what he had told the Soviet foreign minister about the practicality of holding UN-supervised elections in Afghanistan and Baker added an additional comment for Bush's consideration:

I said the mujahedin would never accept it if Najib could run in he [sic] elections. It was not a case of being right or wrong, this was simply the reality. He asked if we would think more about the elections approach. Frankly, I have got to say, there is something paradoxical and indefensible about us opposing elections that are free and fair. If the mujahedin won't participate in such elections, how can we justify continued support for them?⁸⁰

President Bush recognized that his secretary of state had fastened upon a problem and he wrote a comment in the margin next to Baker's observation. Bush's comment simply read: "Brent?? good point."⁸¹

When he met with Gorbachev at Camp David on June 2, 1990, Bush told the Soviet leader that, regarding Afghanistan, "we would like to cut loose" and Bush asked "how does Najilbah [sic] feel about elections?" Shevardnadze responded that "he favors a Nicaragua-type solution, with a group charged with developing elections." At an abstract level, a political solution modelled on Nicaragua should have been appealing to the United States given the democratic transition achieved there. In response to Shevardnadze's comment, Secretary Baker gave general approval to the approach, but again explained how the mujahedin posed an impediment:

It is difficult for us to argue against the Nicaraguan model. Our problem is with the Resistance. We need something for them to show that elections would be fair, that supervision would be neutral, and that the outcome would be observed. What about Najibullah taking a head of state role during this period to demonstrate that a transition authority would conduct the election and provide security.⁸²

In response to a query from Gorbachev, Baker clarified that what he had in mind was Najibullah serving as a type of "interim acting president during the election" with "something less than full authority." Gorbachev responded: "we must think about it."⁸³

With discussions about a political settlement having failed to influence events on the ground appreciably, the Bush administration focused increasingly on how to “cut loose” from Afghanistan. During the fall of 1990, American State Department official Robert Kimmitt worked with the Soviet ambassador in Washington D.C. to negotiate an agreement under which both the U.S. and the USSR would cease arming their respective Afghan partners—a step that was termed “negative symmetry.”⁸⁴ The plan was for Shevardnadze and Baker to announce such an agreement when they met in December 1990. In the end, however, Shevardnadze declined to agree to a date by which Soviet and American weapons supplies would have to cease.⁸⁵ Vladimir Kriuchkov, head of the KGB, almost certainly opposed a negative symmetry agreement and Shevardnadze was probably also tepid about such a deal because he believed that Najibullah should not be forced out of power.⁸⁶

As another strand of its efforts to extricate itself from involvement in Afghanistan, from mid-1990 onwards the United States allowed the United Nations to play the foremost role in trying to reach a political settlement.⁸⁷ On May 21, 1991 the UN Secretary General, Pérez de Cuéllar, released a five-point framework for achieving a settlement. The plan called for a ceasefire in Afghanistan, the cessation of outside military support to combatants, and the organization of “free and fair elections, in accord with Afghan traditions.”⁸⁸

Following the failure of the August 1991 coup attempt in the Soviet Union—which was led by Kriuchkov and supported by other strong backers of the Najibullah regime—the USSR’s Afghan policy shifted once more.⁸⁹ The United States and the USSR now returned to discussions about a negative symmetry agreement and, in mid-September 1991, Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin and Secretary Baker announced that both powers agreed to “discontinue their weapons deliveries to all Afghan sides,” with the mutual cessation going into effect by January 1, 1992. The same statement called for the UN to “work with the Afghans to convene a credible and impartial transition mechanism whose functions would include directing and managing a credible electoral process.”⁹⁰

By the start of 1992, the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, the United States had ended its aid to the mujahedin, and the UN was now responsible for trying to effect a political settlement in Afghanistan.

But, among the mujahedin's political leaders, there was hardly much enthusiasm for taking part in a UN-overseen political process.⁹¹ Pakistan also had little time for the UN effort. Peter Tomsen, who served as the Bush administration's special envoy to the Afghan resistance, explains how Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who entered office in November 1990, agreed with his military's preference for seeking a victory in Afghanistan through the forces of mujahedin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. At the same time as backing that approach, Sharif was, in Tomsen's words, "disingenuously endorsing the UN political settlement process."⁹²

Having lost critical pillars of support for his regime within Afghanistan, Najibullah fled the presidential palace in mid-April 1992 and sought refuge at the UN compound in Kabul.⁹³ For the next several years, the various parts of the mujahedin movement pursued power by waging war against one another, leading Afghanistan to become a failed state.⁹⁴

The Taliban movement emerged in late 1994. It swept across Afghanistan and it seized control of Kabul in September 1996. The movement's leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, had been a mujahedin commander during the 1980s, but many Taliban fighters had not been part of the anti-Soviet resistance. Instead, the Taliban's ranks included numerous war orphans and former PDPA personnel.⁹⁵ Its ascendancy was propelled by the movement's success in imposing order within the territory it held.⁹⁶ Support from Pakistan also contributed to the Taliban's strength.⁹⁷ Once it had achieved power, the Taliban regime provided sanctuary to an extremist with audacious ambitions: Osama Bin Laden. Having participated in the anti-Soviet war—mainly as a financial backer of the resistance—Bin Laden had founded the al-Qaeda organization in 1988 and then left Afghanistan in 1990 to return to his homeland, Saudi Arabia.⁹⁸ In 1991, Bin Laden moved to Sudan, where he remained until May 1996 at which point Sudan's government evicted him as a result of international pressure.⁹⁹ After that, the Taliban offered a safe haven to Bin Laden. Afghanistan became the headquarters of al-Qaeda, which demonstrated its global reach through bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, its attack against the USS Cole in 2000, and the atrocities of September 11, 2001.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion—Why did the Nicaraguan War End While the Afghan Conflict Raged On?

The George H.W. Bush administration's strategies towards Nicaragua and Afghanistan were similar; the United States continued to provide support to rebels as part of an effort to secure political settlements that would see the incumbent governments leave power. Additionally, as shown above, by the time the Bush administration was in office, the Soviet Union, like the United States, saw a role for elections in the settlement of civil conflicts. Notwithstanding that narrowing of ideological differences between the superpowers, the Nicaraguan war culminated in a democratic transition in February 1990, while the conflict in Afghanistan continued and produced considerable chaos. What accounted for the distinct outcomes?

We can identify multiple factors that combined to produce the divergent results. Regarding Nicaragua, after a decade of heated political debate in Washington D.C., from 1987 onwards there was very little chance that Congress would ever approve any more lethal support for the Nicaraguan insurgents. At the same time, however, there was bipartisan backing for helping the contras to hold together as a means to pursue democratic elections in Nicaragua.¹⁰¹ The Nicaraguan contras were also very dependent on American support. Thus, after Congress refused to provide them any additional lethal assistance, they were left with little choice but to enter a ceasefire.

The endgame in Nicaragua, and the democratic transition it produced, was also critically shaped by the regional peace plan spearheaded by Oscar Arias, who made democracy a major component of that process. Additionally, there was a viable unarmed opposition in Nicaragua and it managed to coalesce behind an effective candidate, Violeta Chamorro, who believed in a democratic process. As political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan demonstrate, when armed rebellions are victorious they often do not lead to democratic governance, including because insurgents often continue to practice the violent and exclusionary strategies to which they have become accustomed.¹⁰² The existence of a credible and *unarmed* opposition in Nicaragua, in addition to the contras, contributed to the democratic transition that occurred.

On the other side of the conflict, the dire state of the Nicaraguan economy by the late 1980s created incentives for the Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega, to accept a ceasefire in 1988 and to permit elections in 1990; allowing such a process offered a way to end American support to the contras for good. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union was also encouraging the Sandinistas along the same path. Furthermore, Ortega probably believed that he could win the 1990 election, which turned out to be a fateful miscalculation.

Afghanistan was a very different war and myriad factors combined to produce a much less satisfactory endgame to the Reagan Doctrine in that country. In contrast to American support for the contras, U.S. support to the mujahedin was politically uncontroversial while Soviet forces were in Afghanistan. After the USSR exited Afghanistan, some American legislators began to question the wisdom of continuing to aid the mujahedin.¹⁰³ Despite the voicing of such sentiments, however, there was never a political groundswell to cease aid to the mujahedin rapidly in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. Unlike what happened with the contras, therefore, U.S. domestic politics never applied a strong restraint against continued military action by the insurgents. Additionally, the mujahedin's strongest backers in the United States made very clear that they opposed any negotiated settlement that countenanced Najibullah's continuation in office.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, in contrast to the Nicaraguan insurgents, the mujahedin were less dependent on American aid. They also received support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which meant that the United States' ability to control the mujahedin's actions was, in any event, weaker than in the case of the contras.

The United States' partners in the Afghanistan operation also had goals that were very different to American ones during the endgame. Various mujahedin leaders had no interest in entering into a negotiated political settlement with Najibullah; instead, they preferred to pursue power for themselves and to use violence to attain it, against opponents both within and outside the mujahedin movement. Pakistan had its own strongly-held interests, foremost of which was to put a reliably pro-Pakistan government in control of Afghanistan. In the period after the Soviet troop withdrawal, even while the highest levels of the American and Soviet governments were discussing a potential political settlement in Afghanistan, Pakistan prioritized installing its most-favored mujahedin leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in power through force. As

Peter Tomsen later wrote, the Soviet exit from Afghanistan produced a “fundamental shift in Pakistan’s Afghan policy from a defensive to an offensive strategy.”¹⁰⁵

Overall, many factors accounted for the divergent outcomes in Nicaragua and Afghanistan at the Cold War’s end. Several of those determinants were integral to local and regional dynamics, rather than related to the interactions between the two global superpowers. Consequently, although a growing alignment of ideas between the U.S. and USSR about how to defuse the global Cold War helped to end the Nicaraguan war, the same development was insufficient to stop the conflict in Afghanistan. Among the tragedies of internationalized civil wars is that outside involvement can exacerbate their intensity and increase the bloodshed they cause. Yet another tragedy is that even a thawing of relations between outside competitors will not necessarily guarantee the end of such wars.

Notes

1. I thank my SAIS colleagues, as well as other contributors to this volume, for the helpful feedback I received on an earlier draft. This chapter builds upon case studies of the United States' support to the Afghan and Nicaraguan insurgencies in the author's doctoral dissertation. See John-Michael B. Arnold, "Supporting Rebellion: Liberal Democracy and the American Way of Proxy War" (Ph.D., Princeton University, 2018).

2. The term "global Cold War" was coined by Odd Arne Westad. For his detailed history of how the Cold War competition was waged across the "Third World," see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, Kindle Edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. Charles Krauthammer, "The Reagan Doctrine," *Time*, Vol. 125, No. 13 (April 1, 1985). In late 1985, President Reagan also gave his approval for the supply of lethal assistance to the UNITA rebels in Angola. For an excellent overview and analysis of the policy-making process in the various "Reagan Doctrine" cases, see James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

4. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U. S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6. Bruce O. Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014), pp. 22-23.

7. For a good overview of the background to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the rationale for the Soviet decision to intervene, see Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*, Kindle Edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 37-81.

8. "Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, As Amended, Concerning the Operations in Foreign Countries Other Than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection," December 28, 1979, in Folder 'SCC 240—Iran/Afghanistan, 12/28/79,' National Security Council Institutional Files (H Files), 1977-81, Box 107, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

9. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

10. Riedel, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

11. Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

12. Riedel, op. cit., pp. 117–22; Alan J. Kuperman, “The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (1999): 219–63.

13. Scott, op. cit., pp. 34–35; “CPI Inflation Calculator,” accessed April 18, 2019, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

14. William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 17–32.

15. Stephen Kinzer, *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2007), p. 79.

16. As one example of the U.S. government’s assessment that the Sandinistas were arming guerillas in El Salvador, see “Memorandum, Nicaragua-Cuba: Support of Central American Revolutionaries,” 28 September 1979, CIA National Foreign Assessment Center, in Folder ‘Nicaragua: 7-9/79,’ Records of the Office of the National Security Advisor, Country Files (NSA 6), Box 56, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

17. “Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, As Amended, Concerning the Operations in Foreign Countries Other Than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection,” December 1, 1981, Signed by President Ronald Reagan, https://www.brown.edu/Research/Understanding_the_Iran_Contra_Affair/documents/d-all-45.pdf; Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Harper-Collins, 2007), p. 52.

18. Duane R. Clarridge, *A Spy For All Seasons: My Life in the CIA* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997), p. 200.

19. “Finding Pursuant to Section 662 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as Amended, Concerning Operations Undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency in Foreign Countries, Other Than Those Intended Solely for the Purpose of Intelligence Collection,” September 19, 1983, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/1-Reagan%20Finding%209-19-83%20\(IC%2000203\).pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/1-Reagan%20Finding%209-19-83%20(IC%2000203).pdf).

20. “National Intelligence Estimate, Nicaragua: Prospects for Sandinista Consolidation,” August 1987, Available from CIA CREST, pp. 4 & 6, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP89M00699_R002201790008-1.pdf.

21. Clarridge, op. cit., pp. 199–202; Abigail T. Linnington, “Unconventional Warfare in U.S. Foreign Policy: U.S. Support of Insurgencies in Afghani-

stan, Nicaragua, and Iraq from 1979-2001” (Ph.D., Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), 2013), pp. 174–78.

22. LeoGrande, *op. cit.*, pp. 343–46.

23. Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” February 6, 1985, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-5>.

24. George P. Shultz, “America and the Struggle for Freedom.” Address before the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco. Re-Printed in State Department Bulletin, April 1985. (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., February 22, 1985).

25. Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1994), pp. 270–71.

26. Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine.”

27. LeoGrande, *op. cit.*, pp. 426–28; Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 373–85.

28. Robert A. Pastor, “The War Between the Branches: Explaining U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua, 1979-89,” in *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid*, ed. Richard Sobel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), p. 232.

29. Jack Nelson and Eleanor Clift, “Poindexter Resigns, North Is Fired: Leave as Meese Says Contras Got Iran Arms Funds: Not Fully Informed About Initiative, Reagan Asserts,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1986, http://articles.latimes.com/1986-11-26/news/mn-15596_1_shipment.

30. Linnington, *op. cit.*, pp. 211–12; Kagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 523–26.

31. In Afghanistan, the Red Army faced a formidable insurgency that was highly-motivated, enjoyed significant popular support, and made adept use of the country’s terrain. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista’s own policies bred considerable opposition among many peasants, who buoyed the contras’ ranks. See Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali, “Conclusion,” in *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujabideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, 10th Anniversary Edition* (Quantico, VA.: U.S. Marine Corps, Studies and Analysis Division, 2005); Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

32. For an examination of the Soviet Union’s policies towards the “Third World,” and the increased emphasis placed upon resolving “regional conflicts” from 1988 onwards, see Svetlana Savranskaya, “Gorbachev and the Third World,” in Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Sergey Radchenko, eds., *The End of the*

Cold War and the Third World: New Perspectives on Regional Conflict (London; New York: Routledge, 2011).

33. LeoGrande, op. cit., pp. 530–32.

34. Kinzer, op. cit., p. 368.

35. As a CIA analysis from June 1988 reported, reviewing the previous decade, “while Soviet Bloc aid has increased, it has not kept up with Managua’s needs.” See “Nicaragua: Prospects for the Economy,” 24 June 1988, CIA, Available from CIA CREST,” p. 1, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP04T00990R000100650001-9.pdf>.

36. LeoGrande, op. cit., p. 539; Kagan, op. cit., pp. 595–96.

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38. Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

39. Najibullah was previously known as Mohammad Najib, but having become president of Afghanistan in 1986 he subsequently added “ullah” to his last name in an effort to demonstrate his religiosity. See Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, vol. 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), p. 227.

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41. Lindsey Gruson, “Latin Presidents Announce Accord on Contra Bases,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/15/world/latin-presidents-announce-accord-on-contra-bases.html>.

42. Kagan, op. cit., p. 633.

43. George H.W. Bush, “Remarks on Afghanistan and a Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters,” February 16, 1989, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-afghanistan-and-question-and-answer-session-with-reporters>.

44. James Addison Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), p. 53.

45. Kagan, op. cit., p. 638.

46. To make that stipulation credible, four committees in Congress were granted the right to review the implementation of the plan in November 1989, and any one of them would have been able to halt further non-lethal aid to the contras at that time. LeoGrande, op. cit., p. 555.

47. "National Security Directive 8, May 1, 1989, U.S. Policy Toward Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan Resistance," Available from George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd8.pdf>.

48. Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), p. 233.

49. Scott, op. cit., p. 153.

50. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, op. cit., p. 233.

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52. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, op. cit., pp. 59–60.

53. LeoGrande, op. cit., p. 558.

54. Savranskaya, op. cit., pp. 30–35.

55. William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2017), p. 427.

56. Pavel Palazhchenko, *My Years with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze: The Memoir of a Soviet Interpreter* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 171.

57. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*, op. cit., p. 258.

58. LeoGrande, op. cit., p. 562.

59. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Bush and President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, February 26, 1990, Available from the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-02-26--Arias.pdf>.

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61. "National Security Directive 3," February 13, 1989, Available from George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd3.pdf>.

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63. Memorandum of Conversation, President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, February 24, 1989, 4:51-5:22 p.m., American Ambassador’s Residence, Tokyo, Japan, Available from George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1989-02-24--Bhutto.pdf>.

64. Artemy M. Kalinovsky, “The Failure to Resolve the Afghan Conflict, 1989-1992,” in Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Sergey Radchenko, eds., *The End of the Cold War and the Third World: New Perspectives on Regional Conflict* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 140.

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67. Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 29.

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72. *Ibid.*

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74. Ibid.

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77. Memorandum of Conversation between Secretary Baker and Eduard Shevardnadze, Prepared by U.S. Department of State, Meeting on March 20, 1990, 6:00pm—9:30pm, Windhoek, Namibia, Available from the National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=5752902-National-Security-Archive-Doc-18-Memorandum-of>.

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid.

80. I am very grateful to Thomas Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, for telling me about the existence of this cable. “Memorandum for the President,” Sent via Cable, From James A. Baker III to George Bush, March 20, 1990, Subject: My Meeting With Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, Folder ‘Special Separate USSR Notes Files, Gorbachev Files,’ OA/ID 91126-006, Brent Scowcroft Collection, Bush Presidential Records, George HW Bush Presidential Library.

81. Ibid.

82. All the quotes are from the following document: Memorandum of Conversation, Bush–Gorbachev, Final Private Meeting, Camp David, June 2, 1990, 11:15 a.m.—12:59 p.m., and 3:00 p.m., Document No: 102, in Savranskaya and Blanton, *The Last Superpower Summits*, op. cit.

83. Ibid.

84. Tomsen, op. cit., p. 425.

85. Rubin, op. cit., p. 109.

86. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, op. cit., pp. 194–95.

87. Tomsen, op. cit., p. 397.

88. Ibid, p. 435.

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93. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, op. cit., pp. 206–8.
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99. Ibid, pp. 57 & 63.
100. Ibid, pp. 68–70, 190–91, 348–50.
101. Kagan, op. cit., pp. 723–24.
102. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 205–16.
103. See, for example, Representative Lee Hamilton’s comments at the following congressional hearing: Hearing before the Subcommittees on Europe and the Middle East and Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, March 7, 1990, United States Policy Toward Afghanistan (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990).
104. Scott, op. cit., pp. 74–75.
105. Tomsen, op. cit., p. 322.