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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 114 · Number 2 · Summer 1999

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Political Science Quarterly

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The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan

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Like much cold war history, the landmark 1986 decision by the United States to arm the Afghan Mujahedin¹ with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles—purportedly the first time American-made weapons were supplied to kill Soviet troops—has been distorted by opposing political forces. On one side, and winning the public-relations battle, are conservatives who claim the weapon had a decisive military impact, hastening Soviet withdrawal and the eventual collapse of communism, thereby vindicating their longstanding hawkish approach to the cold war. Opposed are liberals who argue not only that the Stinger did not drive the Red Army out of Afghanistan, but that it actually prolonged the occupation by denying the Soviets an earlier face-saving withdrawal, thereby vindicating their more dovish approach.

The dispute continues, in part because the complete story of the Stinger decision and its impact on the Soviet withdrawal never has been told. Large chunks have emerged in press clippings, investigative reports, and scholarly excavations of the Soviet archives, but they often have been mixed with misinformation and never assembled into a coherent whole. Because of the withholding of key documents by the governments of the United States and Russia, a total picture may not come to light for many years. However, it recently has become possible to tell this fascinating and cautionary tale of cold war decision-making by piecing together and cross-checking earlier fragmentary reports, reviewing newly declassified documents, and consulting former government officials finally willing to speak on the record.

¹ The many accepted spellings of this term for the Afghan rebels are standardized in this text, including in quotations where alternate spellings appeared in the original, in order to avoid confusion.

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Repeated so often, the Stinger myth has entered political folklore.² The year is 1986: Soviet and Afghanistan government forces, utilizing their dominance of the skies, for six years have inflicted terrible punishment on the Afghan Mujahedin rebels and their civilian supporters. Relying on “a combination of scorched earth and migratory genocide,”³ the Soviets have depopulated large portions of the country, creating an estimated 4.5 million refugees, more than one-quarter of the pre-war population.⁴ In desperation, the Mujahedin and their supporters in the United States and Pakistan beg the United States to supply the rebels with an effective anti-aircraft weapon to help level the playing field. When the Stinger finally arrives in the fall of 1986, it is a “silver bullet.”⁵ Soviet and Afghan aircraft begin to fall from the skies as never before. Within two months the Soviet Politburo has set a deadline for withdrawal of its troops, and two years later the last Red Army soldier departs. In quick succession, communism is overthrown in Eastern Europe and, by 1991, the Soviet Union itself has dissolved.

While there is nothing factually incorrect in this chronology, it implies a much greater role for the Stinger than it actually played. It also downplays the Reagan administration’s major decision-making failures, which delayed delivery of the missiles for more than a year and led to worldwide Stinger proliferation that continues to haunt American security officials. Most importantly, this widely accepted caricature of history deprives U.S. policy makers of the real lessons of the Stinger experience, essential to avoiding similar mistakes in the future.

A CASE STUDY IN COVERT-ACTION DECISION MAKING

By its very nature, covert action is somewhat of a mystery. Decisions are made behind closed doors, memoranda and findings are classified “top secret,” and even budget levels are nominally classified, though often leaked to the press. An investigation of the Stinger case, however, reveals that covert-action decision making is not very different from more mundane political matters—replete with rival constituencies, fluid coalitions, legislative lobbying, and as-

² George Crile, producer, “Charlie Did It,” *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 30 October 1988. See also, Fred Barnes, “Victory in Afghanistan: The Inside Story,” *Readers Digest*, December 1988; David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989; Steve Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July and 20 July 1992; Michael Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992; Tim Weiner, *New York Times*, 24 July 1993; Peter Rodman, *More Precious Than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994); Marc Levin, series producer, *CIA: America’s Secret Warriors*, Blowback Productions, New York, televised on The Discovery Channel, 1997.

³ Major Joseph J. Collins, U.S. Army, quoted in Charles Mohr, *New York Times*, 13 April 1986.

⁴ Richard P. Cronin, “Afghanistan After Five Years: Status of the Conflict, the Afghan Resistance and the U.S. Role,” Report No. 85-20 F, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, January 1985, CRS-1.

⁵ Congressman Charles Wilson (D-TX), quoted in John Walcott and Tim Carrington, *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 1988.

sorted backbiting. In this regard, the case confirms Graham Allison's more complex models of governmental decision making, in which "large acts result from innumerable and often conflicting smaller actions by individuals at various levels of bureaucratic organizations in the service of a variety of only partially compatible conceptions of national goals, organizational goals, and political objectives."⁶

The saga begins in December 1979, with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. decision less than two weeks later to begin supplying weapons to the anticommunist rebels.⁷ President Jimmy Carter, who during his first three years in office had publicly denied that the Soviets harbored expansionist intentions, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, simply had had enough.⁸ He signed a finding drafted by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, authorizing the covert supply of weapons through Pakistan to help the rebels "harass" Soviet forces—the greatest goal then believed attainable by the ragtag rebels.⁹

Over the next few years, the Red Army gradually transformed inappropriate European-theater military tactics into a more successful counter-insurgency approach. While the rebels proved remarkably committed, they suffered a terrible physical beating under a strategy that took advantage of "virtually complete Soviet dominance in the air"¹⁰ to provide fire-power, reconnaissance, convoy security, tactical lift, mining, ambushes, and dismounted operations. Mujahedin air defenses generally were ineffective, limited to heavy machine guns and a small quantity of unreliable, Soviet-designed SA-7 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), obtained from defecting Afghan army troops or supplied covertly.¹¹

As early as 1983, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Ronald Spiers says he recognized the vital contribution the Stinger could make to the rebel cause. Knowing that the recently-developed U.S. missile still was in short supply, Spiers recalls, he sent a classified cable to Lawrence Eagleburger, undersecretary of state for political affairs, urging that "serious consideration" be given to supplying the

⁶ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 6.

⁷ Charles G. Cogan, "Partners in Time: The CIA and Afghanistan Since 1979," *World Policy Journal* 10 (Summer 1993): 76.

⁸ Robert Gates recently has argued that President Carter was not so naive about Soviet intentions. However, for the first two and a half years the Carter administration limited its covert action to minor propaganda campaigns within the Soviet Union itself. Until the Soviet invasion, covert aid to Afghanistan was limited to less than a million dollars of nonlethal support over six weeks in 1979. Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 142–149.

⁹ Rodman, *More Precious*, 216–217.

¹⁰ Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*, prepared for the U.S. Army (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, May 1988), 33.

¹¹ Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 84, 89. See also, Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *War Without Winners* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 97.

rebels via Pakistan with Stingers, “when they’re available.” He also recalls discussing the proposal with Eagleburger during a trip back to Washington, before leaving his post in November 1983.¹² But it appears no significant action was taken on the proposal.¹³

Widespread Opposition to the Stinger Proposal

The rebels themselves took up the plea for effective air defense weapons as early as August 1983, during a visit by two sympathetic U.S. Congressmen, Clarence Long (D-MD) and Charlie Wilson (D-TX). When the American legislators raised the matter with Pakistani President Zia Ul-Haq, however, he instead suggested the alternative of an air cannon like the Swiss-made Oerlikon and rejected any U.S.-made weapons. “If it was American-made the Soviets would trace it to Pakistan and he [Zia] didn’t want that,” recalled Long.¹⁴ As it turned out, neither did the Reagan administration at the time favor the provision of high-tech U.S. weapons, such as the Stinger, to the Mujahedin. There was virtual unanimity within the administration on this point, although individual agencies often had different reasons for opposition, based on their own parochial concerns.

For the Central Intelligence Agency and especially its cautious Deputy Director John McMahon, directly traceable U.S. involvement raised the danger of public exposure and political scandal that could damage the agency, as had earlier CIA covert operations uncovered by the Pike and Church congressional committees in the 1970s. Despite widespread reports dating back to 1980 that the United States was supplying the rebels tens of millions of dollars in annual aid and coordinating an even larger amount from allies such as Saudi Arabia and China,¹⁵ the agency clung to the tenet of “plausible deniability.” As Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-WY) later quipped, the aid program was “bizarrely open for something covert.”¹⁶ McMahon insisted that CIA involvement be limited exclusively to the supply of foreign-made weapons to its Pakistani counterpart,

¹² Ronald Spiers, interview with author, 16 August 1995. Spiers says the cable was a personal, no dissemination (NODIS) telegram.

¹³ Michael Pillsbury, who subsequently worked on the issue at the Pentagon, says he saw no record of the Stinger proposal in the Reagan administration’s covert action files prior to 1984 (interview with author, 8 August 1995). Eagleburger can shed no light on this apparently abortive push for the Stinger, saying through a spokesperson that “he just doesn’t remember.” (Letter from Libby Powell, executive assistant to Lawrence Eagleburger, 28 August 1995.)

¹⁴ Bob Woodward and Charles R. Babcock, *Washington Post*, 13 January 1985.

¹⁵ See, for example, Leslie H. Gelb, “U.S. Said to Increase Arms Aid for Afghan Rebels,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1983; Russell Watson with David C. Martin, “Is Covert Action Necessary?” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1982; “Sadat Says U.S. Buys Soviet Arms in Egypt for Afghan Rebels,” *New York Times*, 23 September 1981; Michael Getler, “U.S. Reportedly Is Supplying Weapons to Afghan Insurgents; Afghan Rebel Forces Reportedly Getting U.S. Arms Assistance,” *Washington Post*, 15 February 1980.

¹⁶ Hearing of the Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan, typescript transcript, 30 April 1986, 53. (Obtained from National Security Archives, Washington, DC.)

the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which would handle all direct interaction with the rebels. Even though the Mujahedin effort was by far the CIA's largest overseas operation, eventually coming to consume the vast majority of its covert action budget, only a handful of U.S. intelligence officers ever were permitted into the field to observe its implementation.¹⁷

The agency's other main fear, especially for then-Deputy Director for Intelligence Robert Gates, was the risk of Soviet counter-escalation. In a then-classified 1984 memo, Gates warned that "the Soviets would have to consider more seriously more dramatic action," if the U.S. were to increase aid significantly.¹⁸ In addition, some at the CIA claimed the unsophisticated rebels could not handle a weapon like the Stinger, citing the rebels' past failure to shoot down planes with the Soviet SA-7 missile.¹⁹ Despite retrospective claims that CIA Director Bill Casey had actively pushed for the Stinger starting in the spring of 1983, such assertions are not corroborated by his administration colleagues, and the CIA's institutional stance remained resolutely against providing the missile for several more years.²⁰

Pentagon officials too had numerous concerns about supplying the Stinger, but in 1983 they worried most about provoking Soviet retaliation against Pakistan. According to Fred Iklé, undersecretary of defense for policy and the civilian in charge of covert programs at the Pentagon, the danger that "one million Soviet troops" might roll into Pakistan in retaliation was still very real in 1983.²¹ Even if the Soviets were to respond only by boosting their cross-border raids into Pakistan, experts warned this could undermine vital Pakistani public sup-

¹⁷ Vince Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995.

¹⁸ "Nomination of Robert M. Gates," Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, S. Hrg. 102-799, Volume II, 24 September, 1-2 October 1991, 449-450. In his later memoirs, Gates is less than frank about the stance he and the CIA took on the Stinger. He claims credit, for himself and the CIA, both for supporting the Stinger decision and for warning of the possible danger of proliferation of Stingers to terrorists. The reality is that U.S. officials who warned about such proliferation were *opposed* to the Stinger decision, as was Gates for a long time. See Gates, *From the Shadows*, 350, 561.

¹⁹ It reportedly later was discovered that the SA-7's given to the rebels had been sabotaged in Poland, explaining their poor performance. (Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995.) See also, Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 118. Others say this is insufficient explanation, given the variety of sources from which SA-7's were obtained. (Pillsbury, interview with author).

²⁰ Apparently, the original source of many erroneous reports about Casey is a single reference in Joseph Persico, *Casey: From the OSS to the CIA* (New York: Viking, 1990), 312. Persico writes that in 1983 Casey learned "the Afghan rebels wanted American SA-7 Stingers [sic]." Here, Persico confuses the Soviet SA-7 with the American Stinger. Persico then writes: "Yes, Zia told Casey, he would allow these Stingers to be delivered through Pakistan—after he received the first one hundred for himself." Here, Persico apparently conflates a 1983 meeting with one in 1985. Unfortunately, such uncorroborated claims have found their way into otherwise excellent secondary accounts, including James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 60; and Levin, *CIA: America's Secret Warriors*.

²¹ Fred Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

port for the Mujahedin.²² An additional concern was prompted by simulated war games, which indicated the Soviets might retaliate symmetrically by supplying anti-aircraft missiles to Central American rebels then confronting the U.S.-supported government in El Salvador.²³

At the State Department, meanwhile, senior diplomats feared that the spectacle of “Made-in-America” weapons being used to kill Soviet soldiers could upset superpower relations in other, higher-priority areas, such as arms control.²⁴ Even the Near East desk, which had a more exclusively regional focus, was opposed to such military escalation on grounds it could undercut the nascent negotiating track for peace in Afghanistan.

The Reagan administration also gave great weight to Zia’s views, because Pakistan was the linchpin of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. Although Zia too wanted to help the Mujahedin in Afghanistan, he was under constant Soviet pressure—diplomatically and, near the Afghan border, militarily—to cease funneling aid to the rebels. To retain Zia’s allegiance and cooperation, U.S. officials became extremely deferential to his preferences (including overlooking his burgeoning nuclear weapons programs for years after it should have triggered sanctions under U.S. nonproliferation law). Even as late as 1986, when most of the administration had come around to supporting the Stinger proposal, mere reports of Zia’s opposition were sufficient to block it.

General Mohammed Yousaf, director of Afghan operations for ISI, learned of Zia’s opposition the hard way, according to his memoirs, *The Bear Trap*. In early 1984, soon after being transferred to ISI from the Pakistani army, Yousaf entertained a visiting delegation of private American advocates of the Mujahedin cause. Groups such as the Federation for American-Afghan Action, Free the Eagle, Committee for a Free Afghanistan, and the Freedom Research Foundation played a key role in boosting U.S. aid for the rebels by calling media attention to their struggle and advising conservative members of Congress. When the visiting Americans asked Yousaf which weapon he would recommend to counter Soviet air superiority, he replied frankly, “the Stinger.” The Americans, having previously heard CIA reports that Pakistan opposed this weapon, proceeded to the U.S. embassy and accused the CIA station chief of blocking the Pakistani request. He replied that, to the contrary, it was Zia who opposed the Stinger, and the station chief in turn lodged a protest with Yousaf’s boss, ISI Chief Akhtar Abdul Rahman. An embarrassed Akhtar invited the delegation back to explain that Yousaf had misspoken: Pakistan did not favor the Stinger.²⁵

²² Barnett R. Rubin, Yale University, testimony before Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 1 May 1986.

²³ Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989.

²⁴ See, for example, George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), 692.

²⁵ Mohammed Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), 180–181.

Zia often illustrated his opposition to the supply of U.S.-made weapons by utilizing a favorite analogy. The key in Afghanistan, he told CIA Director Bill Casey in late 1982 and a visiting congressional official in early 1984, was to “keep the pot boiling.”²⁶ In other words, the Mujahedin should be armed only enough to continue harassing the Soviets. Too much escalation would cause the “pot to boil over,” provoking a Soviet retaliation against Pakistan, he cautioned another U.S. delegation the following year.²⁷ Indeed, the Soviets explicitly had warned Pakistan against permitting introduction of the Stinger.²⁸ Zia also reportedly feared that a Stinger could fall into his enemies’ hands and be used to shoot down his presidential plane, an ironic footnote in light of his ultimate demise in a suspicious plane crash in 1987.²⁹

Although Zia maintained the pot-boiling analogy until at least 1986,³⁰ it appears he reversed his specific opposition to the Stinger as early as November 1984. That month, he requested U.S. supply of the missile from a visiting congressional delegation led by Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.³¹ Strangely, CIA officials in Washington continued to characterize Zia as opposed to the Stinger for an additional sixteen months, with significant ramifications for U.S. policy.

A Stinger Advocate Joins the Administration

In 1984, the only American officials calling for supply of high-tech U.S. weapons to the Mujahedin were in Congress or private advocacy organizations, while the administration remained strongly opposed to any escalation that would affect the “deniable” nature of U.S. assistance. Indeed, when Congress took up a resolution by Senator Paul Tsongas (D-MA) in October 1984, calling for “material assistance” to be supplied to the Afghan rebels, the State Department and CIA lobbied vigorously in opposition, watering it down to a more ambiguous call to “support effectively” the rebels.³² As the *Washington Post* reported in January 1985, “congressional supporters wanted initially to supply

²⁶ John B. Ritch III, “Hidden War: The Struggle for Afghanistan,” A Staff Report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 1984, 36. See also Gates, *From the Shadows*, 252.

²⁷ Pillsbury, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

²⁸ Riaz M. Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 175. Khan was a Pakistani official involved for many years in negotiations on Afghanistan.

²⁹ Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 181. There is, however, no indication Zia’s plane was shot down by a Stinger.

³⁰ “If anybody’s thinking that the greater the heat of the insurgency, the easier the solution, he is wrong.” Rubin, testimony of 1 May 1986, 83–84, citing *Washington Post*, 23 March 1986.

³¹ “Zia first asked for Stingers for the Mujahedin during a visit by Senator Nunn,” according to then-U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Deane R. Hinton (letter to author, 18 January 1996). The date of the visit was November 1984, and the congressional delegation also included Senators John Glenn (D-OH), Bennett Johnston (D-LA), and David Pryor (D-AR). Senator Sam Nunn, personal communication conveyed by his staff, 20 May 1997.

³² Cronin, “Afghanistan After Five Years”; also Robert Pear, *New York Times*, 18 April 1988.

U.S.-made Redeye or Stinger ground-to-air, heat-seeking missiles, but the CIA blocked that because those missiles could be traced too easily to the United States.”³³

The monolithic administration stance was broken in September 1984, when conservative senators succeeded in having one of their staffers, Michael Pillsbury, assigned to the Pentagon, where he soon began working on covert programs under Iklé.³⁴ One of the key policy issues in Congress at the time was the adequacy of U.S. support for anticommunist “freedom fighters” around the world. By October 1984, Pillsbury had drafted a memo for Iklé to send to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, requesting authorization to explore the provision of high-tech U.S. weapons to the four anticommunist insurgencies then supported by the administration.³⁵

Pillsbury was not an immediate convert to the Stinger and initially shared the widespread concern about provoking Soviet retaliation against Pakistan. He first explored four less provocative air-defense options, but eventually found each inadequate.³⁶ The Soviet SA-7 already had proved largely ineffective in the conflict, especially after Soviet and Afghan aircraft were equipped with flares to distract such heat-seeking missiles. The Blowpipe, a British-designed SAM available in many countries, could maintain plausible deniability but was not a “fire-and-forget” weapon, so that rebels would be vulnerable to attack as they stood in the open to guide the missile onto its target with a joystick. The Swiss-made Oerlikon anti-aircraft cannon, a pet project of Congressman Wilson who had added \$40 million onto the CIA covert budget specifically for the weapon,³⁷ was too bulky to satisfy mobility requirements. The Redeye, an obsolete U.S. missile that had served as the model for the Soviet SA-7, was sufficiently dispersed around the globe to provide deniability, but generally was ineffective against helicopters and vulnerable to the same counter-measures as the SA-7. Pillsbury gravitated to the Stinger by default.

By early 1985, the administration was compelled to reassess its approach to the Mujahedin for a variety of reasons. First and most importantly, Soviet forces had sharply escalated attacks against the rebels and their weapons pipeline on the Pakistan border, putting at risk the continued viability of the opposition according to a Pentagon intelligence study.³⁸ Second, the U.S. Congress was stirring up public pressure for increased aid to the rebels. The final version

³³ Woodward and Babcock, *Washington Post*.

³⁴ Lee Roderick, *Leading The Charge: Orrin Hatch and Twenty Years of America* (Carson City, NV: Gold Leaf Press, 1994), 219.

³⁵ Iklé, interview with author, 3 January 1996. Pillsbury had been working for the Senate Republican Steering Committee. According to press reports, the other three U.S.-supported insurgencies were in Angola, Nicaragua, and Cambodia.

³⁶ Pillsbury, interview with author, 16 August 1995.

³⁷ Bob Woodward, *VEIL: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 316–318.

³⁸ Leslie Gelb, *New York Times*, 19 June 1986.

of the Tsongas resolution of October 1984 stated that, “it would be indefensible to provide the freedom fighters with only enough aid to fight and die, but not enough to advance their cause of freedom.”³⁹ Soon after, in January 1985, a Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan was established and began holding hearings to showcase the purportedly desperate plight of the Mujahedin.

A third trigger for the administration’s reassessment was that in March 1985, the Soviet Union selected a new secretary general, Mikhail Gorbachev, whose commitment to the Afghanistan occupation was unknown. Fourth and perhaps most important, some U.S. officials perceived the Soviets were “tired of the war,” so the Red Army was unlikely to increase its commitment of troops sufficiently to invade Pakistan.⁴⁰ Indeed, while the Soviets had escalated tactically several times, they stubbornly stuck to a troop cap of 120,000 men. In March 1985, Soviet military expert Alex Alexiev testified, “I don’t believe that the Soviet Union can put in half a million men. . . . [A]ctual physical occupation of the country is almost unthinkable.” Barring that, he said, “escalation is not really a meaningful concept. Short of open genocide, it cannot get much worse.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, there still were dissenting views within the administration, including one official who warned in January 1985: “Consider what they haven’t done to Pakistan. . . . You have to believe the Soviets could, if they chose, march in with sufficient troops to do the job.”⁴²

The formal policy shift occurred in March 1985, when Ronald Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 166, still classified secret, authorizing assistance to the rebels “by all means available.”⁴³ Even more significant was an annex, classified top secret and signed by National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, which outlined specific measures the United States would take to assist the rebels.⁴⁴ American aid no longer would be limited to enabling the rebels to “harass” the Soviets, but would aim to compel a Soviet withdrawal. The Mujahedin would receive satellite reconnaissance and other U.S. intelligence to assist their targeting of Afghan and Red Army installations, as well as demolition expertise and secure communications technology.⁴⁵ Secretary of State George Shultz later reported that both he and the CIA’s Casey

³⁹ Pear, *New York Times*, 18 April 1988. Notably, while Congress repeatedly emphasized the immorality of inadequately arming the rebels, this argument does not appear to have figured prominently in the administration’s internal deliberations, which hinged on strategic concerns. See also, Woodward and Babcock, *Washington Post*, 13 January 1985.

⁴⁰ Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995. The CIA’s Cogan concurs, saying it became “clear that our concerns about a Soviet intervention in Pakistan were also exaggerated.” (Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 80.)

⁴¹ Alex Alexiev, Rand Corporation, testimony before Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan. U.S. Senate, typescript transcript, 11 March 1985, 93, 112–113.

⁴² Woodward and Babcock, *Washington Post*.

⁴³ Gelb, 19 June 1986.

⁴⁴ Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July 1992.

⁴⁵ Coll, *Washington Post*, 20 July 1992. See also, Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July 1992.

fully supported the measure.⁴⁶ The dollar value of U.S. aid climbed in successive years from \$122 million in fiscal year 1984, to \$250 million, \$470 million, and \$630 million in FY 1987,⁴⁷ generally matched by equal contributions from Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ The Stinger missile, however, as well as other high-tech weaponry directly traceable to the United States, were conspicuously absent from the annex.

By all accounts, Pillsbury was unsatisfied by this intermediate escalation of aid, continuing to believe that top-quality U.S. weapons should be sent to the Mujahedin. He says this belief was reinforced in meetings with rebel leaders brought to the United States by private American advocacy groups. Pakistan's ISI had ordered the rebels not to meet with CIA officials, but the Pentagon was immune from the ban. In meetings with leaders including General Rahim Wardak and the brother of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, Pillsbury says he got the distinct impression the rebels' needs were not being accurately transmitted to Washington via Pakistani and U.S. intelligence agencies. The initiative for high-tech weapons, he concluded, would have to come from outside the U.S. intelligence community.⁴⁹

A Trip to Pakistan

Pillsbury soon managed to convince his boss, Fred Iklé, of the merits of the Stinger, and in May 1985 the two set off for Pakistan. There, ISI Chief Akhtar informed them the rebels did indeed require Stingers to counter the Soviet escalation. Pillsbury, having been told previously by the CIA that the Pakistanis opposed the Stinger, insisted the agency's station chief report Akhtar's request directly to Casey in a cable.⁵⁰ In light of Akhtar's behavior in the previous year's meeting with U.S. advocates, hewing to Zia's then-policy of opposing Stingers, this change is further evidence Zia had come to favor the Stinger by this point.

Around this time, Iklé made his first pitch for the Stinger to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. The secretary responded by asking his assistant, Colin Powell, to check with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the CIA's Casey. When the word came back negative, however, Iklé told Pillsbury they had no support in the administration.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1087.

⁴⁷ Olivier Roy, *The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War*, Adelphi Papers 259 (London: Brassey's for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1991), 35. See also, David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 8 February 1987.

⁴⁸ Kathy Evans, *The Guardian*, 2 January 1992.

⁴⁹ Pillsbury, interview with author, 16 August 1995.

⁵⁰ Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 195.

⁵¹ Iklé says that Casey, with whom he regularly spoke and often joined for breakfast with Weinberger, favored the Stinger option "in principle," but felt compelled to defer to the CIA's career staff, who were opposed. Iklé, interview with author, 3 January 1996. Also Pillsbury, interviews with author, 8 August and 1 September 1995.

Pillsbury, rather than being deterred, apparently redoubled his efforts. Such behavior may have sprung from his experience as a staff person in Congress, where proposals commonly fail several times before being adopted, or may simply have reflected Pillsbury's peculiar character. Even on Capitol Hill he had earned a special reputation for going outside official channels in pursuit of his objectives.⁵² Pillsbury acknowledges this operating style ruffled a number of feathers in the executive branch, where decision making, especially on national security matters, is expected to be hierarchical rather than entrepreneurial. Several of his administration colleagues, however, are more blunt, criticizing Pillsbury as a "loose cannon."⁵³ For better or worse, his persistence appears to have helped keep the Stinger issue alive when it had little institutional support within the executive branch.

When Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) called to ask his former staffer where he might profitably spend the congressional recess of June 1985, Pillsbury seized the opportunity and suggested Pakistan. Discovering that all military aircraft routinely used for official trips already were reserved, Pillsbury also managed to obtain use of the vice-president's Air Force 2, to permit the trip to go forward. Pillsbury and Hatch, along with a bipartisan congressional delegation that included Senators Chic Hecht (R-NV), David Boren (D-OK), and Bill Bradley (D-NJ) traveled to Pakistan, where they met with both President Zia and rebel leaders.⁵⁴

Hatch asked Zia about air-defense needs, but the Pakistani president refused immediately to take the bait. Rather than seeking Stingers directly for the rebels, Zia requested them only for his own army to defend the border area from Soviet aircraft incursions. Zia also hinted he might be able to divert some Stingers to the rebels if they were supplied to his army under an official foreign military sale, but the U.S. delegation explained to his staff that this would violate American law.⁵⁵ Apparently, Zia had backed away from his earlier request to Nunn to provide Stingers explicitly for the Mujahedin, but he still appeared to favor the rebels receiving the missiles. Hatch persuaded Zia to put the army request in writing to President Reagan, and the following month the White House announced it was rushing 100 Stingers to Pakistan, accompanied by Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. The rebels, however, were left out.⁵⁶

Iklé and Pillsbury finally gained an ally within the administration in September 1985, when Morton Abramowitz, the State Department's assistant sec-

⁵² Roderick, *Leading The Charge*, 218–219.

⁵³ Then U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Deane Hinton criticizes Pillsbury for promoting the Stinger option during his trips to Pakistan despite the "official line" of U.S. opposition, terming him a "loose cannon." He adds, "That was OK for Congressmen and staffers, but once Pillsbury joined the executive branch his behavior was quite objectionable." Letter to author from Ambassador Deane Hinton, 29 August 1995. Weinberger cited in Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 197.

⁵⁴ Roderick, *Leading The Charge*, 257–258.

⁵⁵ Pillsbury, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

⁵⁶ Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, 12 July 1985.

retary for intelligence and research, joined a delegation to Pakistan led by Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage. Abramowitz says he already had a vague sense the war was not going well for the rebels and wanted to see for himself. The Mujahedin's specific need for enhanced air defense was driven home, he says, in meetings with Akhtar, assorted rebel leaders, and General Mirza Aslam Beg, a Pakistani army commander for the border region. "All professed to want the Stinger," recalls Abramowitz. Even the CIA's station chief told him he could not understand why agency headquarters opposed it.⁵⁷

Upon his return to Washington, Abramowitz went to see Casey to get the director's views on the Stinger. Casey was lukewarm, almost disinterested, says Abramowitz. "He wasn't for it, or strongly against it."⁵⁸ Others at the agency, however, clearly were opposed to the Stinger. According to Selig Harrison, Deputy Director John McMahon strenuously pushed the alternative of the British Blowpipe on grounds it would maintain plausible deniability and be just as effective.⁵⁹

JCS Objections

In the fall of 1985, Iklé made his second attempt to win Weinberger's support for the Stinger, managing to put the issue on the agenda of the secretary's weekly "tank meeting" with the JCS. Iklé later reported that a "vigorous quarrel" broke out in the meeting, but JCS opposition prevailed.⁶⁰

The military's objections to the Stinger proposal never before have been documented publicly. However, a recently obtained, declassified 1986 Defense Investigative Service report summarizes an interview with General John Moellering, who attended the tank meeting as assistant to the chairman of the JCS. The report reveals Moellering "was initially opposed to the possible release of the [Stinger] weapons to Third World countries for reasons of technology loss, accountability problems and depletion of a finite and small, strategic stockpile."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Abramowitz, interview with author, 30 August 1995. Abramowitz notes that he took the station chief's comment with a grain of salt.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 196. McMahon ultimately resigned the same month President Reagan approved the Stinger for the rebels in Afghanistan and Angola. Some claim the Stinger decision was a prime motivating factor for McMahon, who had been the object of an intense letter-writing campaign to the White House by American advocacy groups on behalf of the Stinger, calling for his resignation. David B. Ottaway and Patrick E. Tyler, *Washington Post*, 5 March 1986.

⁶⁰ Pillsbury, interview with author, 1 September 1995. The Army chief of staff at the time, General John Wickham, confirms that Iklé attended the tank meeting to discuss the Stinger. Wickham, interview with author, 8 September 1995.

⁶¹ Special Agents Larry J. Dobrosky and Samuel Blevins, "Report of Investigation, Unauthorized Disclosure—Stinger Missiles," Defense Investigative Service, 14 April 1986, based on interview of General John H. Moellering, 3 April 1986.

Pillsbury immediately set to work to address each of these three concerns. Technology loss—the risk that the Soviets would obtain a Stinger and use reverse-engineering to copy it and develop effective counter-measures—initially appeared a legitimate concern. Weinberger especially was sensitive to it and years later acknowledged that “I thought there was a great risk in using that technology. . . . In general I felt we should not let our technology out.”⁶² The JCS viewed its main responsibility as preparing to fight and win a war against the Soviet Union in Europe and did not want to risk undermining its technological edge merely to help rebels in a peripheral struggle. Pillsbury, however, was able to neutralize this argument by uncovering that the Stinger technology already had been compromised to the Soviets a year earlier, through the leak of design information and parts in Greece.⁶³ Vince Cannistraro, a CIA official delegated to the National Security Council (NSC), suggests this leak stemmed from a 1983 memorandum of understanding between Greece, West Germany, Turkey, and the United States, to produce U.S.-designed weapons in Europe.⁶⁴ The Soviets even published a detailed analysis of the Stinger’s performance envelope as early as November 1985.⁶⁵

The second JCS concern, the danger of depleting the strategic stockpile, arose despite the army possessing several thousand Stingers, on grounds that all of these missiles were needed for potential hostilities in Europe.⁶⁶ The missile’s manufacturer, General Dynamics, was reportedly unable to produce a new batch of first-generation Stingers for the rebels, because it was gearing up to produce a more advanced model known as Stinger-POST for the Pentagon. Pillsbury, however, called General Dynamics directly, receiving assurances the manufacturer could boost production to meet both the army’s need for the new model and the rebels’ need for the original, without net reduction in the army stockpile.⁶⁷

The Joint Chiefs’ third ground for objection, accountability, was well-founded, because under the CIA’s arrangement with ISI, after weapons arrived

⁶² Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 197.

⁶³ Howard B. Means, *Colin Powell: Soldier/Statesman* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1992), 210. See also, David C. Morrison, “Fatal Sting,” *National Journal*, 21 November 1987; and Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989. Fred Iklé notes with irony that this Soviet espionage backfired. Had the Soviets not already obtained the Stinger design, the United States would have been less willing to supply the weapon to the Afghan rebels. Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

⁶⁴ *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 17 October 1988, 35. Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995.

⁶⁵ Yossef Bodansky, “SAMs in Afghanistan: Assessing the Impact,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 25 July 1987, 153.

⁶⁶ Iklé recalls that the JCS’s “stockpile concern was huge,” but that he felt the Joint Chiefs were being short-sighted by insisting on preserving Stingers to fight a future NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation. In Iklé’s view, supplying the Stingers to the Mujahedin could help force the Soviets out of Afghanistan and thereby “reduce the likelihood of World War III” and any need to use Stingers in Europe. Iklé, interview with author, 3 January 1996.

⁶⁷ Pillsbury, interview with author.

in Pakistan they effectively left U.S. control. The CIA could establish rules for distribution, but lacked agents on the ground to ensure that Pakistanis and rebels complied. Moreover, ISI was known to give the best weapons to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—the most radical rebel leader and certainly not the Americans’ first choice. Hekmatyar was not the most effective military leader, but ISI reportedly favored him because he supported the Muslim insurgency in Kashmir and, therefore, furthered Pakistan’s own regional agenda.⁶⁸ Thus, if the United States sent Stingers, there was a real danger they would be stolen from—or sold by—the Mujahedin, ending up in the hands of terrorists or radical states such as neighboring Iran that could use them to shoot down civilian airliners or U.S. military aircraft.⁶⁹ Indeed, the rebels earlier had admitted to the CIA’s McMahon that, “We do sell some of your weapons. We are doing it for the day when your country decides to abandon us, just as you abandoned Vietnam and everyone else you deal with.”⁷⁰ To address this concern, Pillsbury began to explore with the CIA whether U.S. military officials could be sent to Pakistan to exercise more control over weapons distribution.

The military brass was not the only roadblock. At the State Department, though Mort Abramowitz had managed to enlist the support of Michael Armacost, Eagleburger’s successor as undersecretary of State, there still was vigorous opposition from the regional officers, especially Arnold Raphel, senior deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asian Affairs. Raphel felt a military escalation risked undermining the negotiating track in Geneva, then just beginning to make progress. Pillsbury, in turn, opposed Raphel’s negotiations, fearing they would lead to a sell-out of the rebels. After considerable sniping, the two staffers agreed to a horse-trade: Pillsbury would stop undercutting the negotiating track in return for Raphel ceasing to oppose the Stingers.⁷¹ While this deal did not hold, it momentarily smoothed the path for both efforts.

In December 1985, Secretary of State Shultz finally endorsed the Stinger proposal, explaining in his memoirs:

The Afghan people were war weary, and Soviet policy was “buying them off.” The Soviets seemed to be winning. . . . There would be a narrow window in the next year or two in which pressure on the Soviets might be effective. . . . [T]he resistance did not have the weapons to deal with [Soviet helicopters] and the helicopters were wreaking havoc. . . . In the State Department some people worried that any American weapons system that could turn the tide would so antagonize the Soviets that it would sour our overall effort to improve relations. I strongly disagreed.⁷²

⁶⁸ See, for example, Roy, *The Lessons*, 35–40.

⁶⁹ Persico, *Casey*, 313, citing a mid-1980s fact-finding trip McMahon took to rebel training camps in Peshawar, Pakistan.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁷¹ The deal is discussed in Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 197. Pillsbury confirms it in interview with author, 15 August 1995.

⁷² Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 692.

The Turning Point

Despite Shultz's support, the proposal continued to face opposition from Weinberger—based on the JCS concerns—and the CIA, continuing to cite Zia's purported opposition.⁷³ Pillsbury was equipped to challenge the JCS concerns, but not yet the claims about Zia, so he turned again to Capitol Hill. During the congressional recess of January 1986, Pillsbury and Abramowitz escorted a delegation of Senators Hatch and Hecht, and Congressmen Michael DeWine (R-OH), Robert Lagomarsino (R-CA), and James Courter (R-NJ) to Pakistan. Also aboard were Vince Cannistraro, Charles Dunbar (the State Department's Coordinator for Afghan Affairs), and Norm Gardner (from the CIA's operations directorate).⁷⁴

When the delegation met with Zia, the Pakistani president made an unequivocal request that Stingers be supplied to the rebels. "Zia couldn't have been more clear that this was the one weapon the Mujahedin needed or they would be butchered," says Courter.⁷⁵ Much to the CIA's embarrassment, Zia also complained that he had been asking for the Stingers "since last year,"⁷⁶ which accords with Senator Nunn's account of his 1984 visit. Apparently, the CIA had been conveying Zia's views inaccurately to Washington officials, though it is uncertain whether this lapse arose in the field or at agency headquarters.⁷⁷

To make sure there was no further miscommunication, upon returning home Senator Hatch called Casey personally to brief him on the meeting. Pillsbury then worked out logistical details with the CIA—such as who would train the Mujahedin, in which country, and subject to which kind of polygraphs—winning approval for the plan from the agency's Deputy Director for Opera-

⁷³ Walcott and Carrington, *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 1988.

⁷⁴ Roderick, *Leading The Charge*, 259–260. Before meeting Zia in Peshawar, the delegation first travelled to Beijing, where it obtained an endorsement of the Stinger plan (and other expanded U.S. assistance) from an official of the Chinese government, a key ally in the Mujahedin aid program. Obtaining China's imprimatur, it was thought, might help resolve lingering concerns among Pakistani and U.S. decision-makers.

⁷⁵ Walcott and Carrington, *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 1988.

⁷⁶ Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995. Cannistraro also recalls Zia saying they needed the Stingers because the Soviet-bloc SA-7's were useless.

⁷⁷ It is also possible that Zia wavered in his stance on the Stinger in response to fluctuating estimates of what was needed to "keep the pot boiling" at the right temperature. However, Cannistraro says the agency simply was opposed and "kept devising one excuse after another." (Interview with author, 8 August 1995.) Gates, *From the Shadows*, 349–350, reports that in a December 1985 meeting with Casey, Weinberger and Iklé, McMahon pledged the agency would transfer the weapons to the rebels if only the Pentagon would supply them. However, Angelo Codevilla, who spent the early-1980s on the staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee, says that, "The CIA's protestations of willingness to provide anti-air protection [were] insincere," because they were always accompanied by claims that Zia still opposed it. "By early 1986 it was clear to those inside the government who had been working on the Afghan issue that John McMahon and the CIA bureaucracy had lied." Angelo Codevilla, *Informing Statecraft: Intelligence for a New Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 271–272.

tions Clair George in late January.⁷⁸ By the end of the month, Pillsbury had prepared a memo for Weinberger reporting how each of the JCS concerns had been addressed and that the CIA had dropped its opposition. The secretary finally relented, setting the stage for a dramatic White House meeting.

In the Reagan administration, covert programs usually were managed by the interagency Planning Coordination Group (PCG), which met regularly in Room 208 of the Old Executive Office Building, chaired by the NSC's Don Fortier. Regular participants included George from the CIA, Iklé from the Pentagon, Abramowitz from State, and Moellering from the JCS, or their deputies, along with other individuals cleared for individual projects. But the meeting to hash out finally the Stinger proposal was special, attended by several more senior officials and held in the White House situation room. In this highly charged setting, a CIA representative declared that Zia and the agency still were opposed to the Stinger. Apparently, the Near East bureau of the agency, which long had opposed the Stinger proposal, had not been briefed on either the Zia meeting or George's decision. Abramowitz reacted with outrage, and the meeting broke down without consensus.⁷⁹

The CIA soon cleared up its error, and on 25 February 1986, the PCG formally approved the Stinger for the Mujahedin, as well as for anticommunist rebels in Angola.⁸⁰ Senate Republicans, however, still were concerned that Secretary of State George Shultz might not support sending the Stingers to the anticommunist rebels if asked by the president. Despite the Pillsbury-Raphel nonaggression pact, the State Department's Near East desk had been lobbying hard to block the plan. Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-KS) responded by inviting the secretary to his Capitol Hill office, whereupon Shultz was surprised by a roomful of conservative senators demanding he renew his support for "effective" weapons for the rebels. The secretary complied.⁸¹

Finally, in March 1986, President Reagan authorized notification to Congress of his decision to provide Stingers to the Afghan rebels, necessitating a "memorandum of notification" modifying Jimmy Carter's six-year-old finding. With the Made-in-America threshold now crossed, the United States also began to supply an array of other sophisticated weapons for the rebels, including mine clearers, satellite-targetable mortars, "mule-mobile" rocket launchers, helicopter detectors, and even rudimentary cruise missiles.⁸²

Remarkably, the bureaucratic battle still was not over. At the end of April, the administration lost its leading advocate for the Stinger, when Pillsbury was

⁷⁸ Pillsbury, interviews with author, 11 August 1995 and 1 September 1995.

⁷⁹ Former government official, name withheld upon request.

⁸⁰ David B. Ottaway and Patrick E. Tyler, *Washington Post*, 30 March 1986.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* See also Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 197; Patrick E. Tyler and David B. Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 6 March 1986, which discusses the meeting from the Angola perspective. Also, interview with Pillsbury, 11 September 1995.

⁸² Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989. See also Ottaway and Tyler, *Washington Post*, 30 March 1986.

fired from the Pentagon for allegedly leaking the Stinger decision to the press, a charge from which he subsequently was exonerated.⁸³ Congressional opponents objected to the deal on grounds of inadequate accountability in Afghanistan, with Senator Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) warning: “We cannot afford to let these particular missiles, the ultimate terrorist weapon, slip into the wrong hands.”⁸⁴ Army Chief of Staff John A. Wickham, who had been overruled by Weinberger, nominally toed the new administration line but told the press, “we anguish over decisions” about who should get the weapon. On 7 May DeConcini sponsored a last-minute amendment to bar export of Stingers unless the recipient could guarantee stringent controls, conditions that could not be met in the guerrilla environment of Afghanistan. The vote fell short, 62 to 34.⁸⁵

In June, however, administration officials confirmed the Stingers still had not been sent to Afghanistan.⁸⁶ CIA and Army officials, long opposed to exporting the Stinger, now claimed to have identified a new Soviet counter-measure that could inhibit the missile’s effectiveness, requiring a new evaluation. Field testing at White Sands Missile Range, however, determined the new Soviet defenses were ineffective.⁸⁷ Pakistani instructors were flown to the United States in June for training, and by the end of the summer the first Stingers and a training simulator finally were sent to Pakistan. On 25 September 1986, Mujahedin fighters fired their first five Stinger missiles, knocking three Soviet MI-24 Hind helicopters out of the sky on their first try. The military dynamic had shifted.⁸⁸

GORBACHEV PURSUES WITHDRAWAL INDEPENDENTLY

Unbeknownst in Washington during this long wrangling over how to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev apparently was seeking the same objective from his seat in the Kremlin. Evidence now indicates that Gorbachev sought withdrawal from the moment he was named general secretary in March 1985 and that the Politburo agreed to pursue this goal well before the Stinger missile reached Afghanistan. Even before coming to power in 1983, he had termed the war a “mistake” in a conversation with a Canadian cabinet official.⁸⁹ Likewise, in spring 1984, Gorbachev encouraged Marshal Sergei Akh-

⁸³ Michael Pillsbury, “Drowning in a Leak,” *Washington Post*, Outlook, 10 November 1991.

⁸⁴ Dennis DeConcini, *New York Times*, op-ed, 30 April 1986.

⁸⁵ David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 21 June 1986. Wickham says that he cannot recall any personal communication with DeConcini on the Stinger issue. Wickham, interview with author, 8 September 1995.

⁸⁶ Leslie H. Gelb, *New York Times*, 18 June 1986.

⁸⁷ Walcott and Carrington, *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 1988. Interestingly, the Stingers for Angola were not similarly held up, indicating either that the Soviet counter-measures were not believed to be in use in Angola or that the CIA did not have the same misgivings about the Angolan rebels as they did the Mujahedin.

⁸⁸ Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 176, 182.

⁸⁹ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 187.

romeev, a leading Soviet general in Afghanistan, to share with the Politburo his frank military judgment that the war could not be won.⁹⁰ Gorbachev himself says that upon coming to power, the Politburo almost immediately “began to seek a way out of the situation.”⁹¹ UN negotiator Diego Cordovez confirms that the new Soviet leader had a marked impact on then-stalled peace negotiations between Pakistan and the Afghan government. “From the time Gorbachev came in things began to change. . . . It was immediate and very significant.”⁹²

By all authoritative accounts, the main force driving Gorbachev to resolve the Afghan conflict in 1985 was not the direct costs of the war—in terms of rubles, casualties, or public opinion. In this regard, Afghanistan was not a Soviet “Vietnam,” as some have argued.⁹³ The Soviets’ deployment cap of 120,000 troops and their 14,000 total deaths were approximately one-fourth of the U.S. totals in Vietnam, drawn from armed forces about twice as large and spread over an approximately equal duration.⁹⁴ Moreover, Soviet censorship prevented the growth of Vietnam-like domestic public opposition until Gorbachev deliberately lifted the press ban.

Gorbachev’s chief concern, rather, was that the Afghan intervention represented a persistent obstacle to achievement of his main political objective—*perestroika*, or domestic economic restructuring. He believed that so long as the Red Army remained in Afghanistan, the West would not renew the economic and technological cooperation of the *detente* years, which he viewed as essential to revitalizing the Soviet economy. Nor could he commence his desired shift in resources from military expenditures (of which Afghanistan *per se* was only a small part) to civilian spending until East-West tensions were relaxed. Primarily for these reasons, Gorbachev concluded that Soviet troops had to be withdrawn quickly, one way or another.⁹⁵ By so doing, he also stood to

⁹⁰ Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 726.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 725–726.

⁹² Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States & the Soviet Union, 1983-1990* (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1992).

⁹³ While many have made this analogy, at least one scholar goes even farther, arguing that the Soviet experience in Afghanistan was analogous to Napoleon’s in Russia, and Britain’s in the Suez Crisis, in the sense that a military defeat led to the collapse of an empire. See Douglas Anthony Borer, *Superpowers Defeated: A Comparison of Vietnam and Afghanistan* (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1993, 397, forthcoming as book: Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999).

⁹⁴ Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1990), 2nd ed., 298.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson, *Explaining Change in Foreign Policy: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1993), 200–203; Mike Bowker, *Russian Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth, 1997), 141–142; Tad Daley, *Gorbachev and Afghanistan, The Soviet Debate Over the Lessons of Afghanistan and Consequent Directions in Russian Foreign Policy* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rand Graduate School of Policy Studies, March 1995), 88–90, 104, 234–236. According to several Soviet sources cited by Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, 246, this belief of Gorbachev’s was further reinforced by his experience at the Reykjavik summit of October 1986. Gorbachev, himself, declared in February 1987: “I frankly say that our international policy is, more than before, determined by domestic policy, by our interests in concentrating on constructive work to improve our country.” Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, 249. See

reap secondary benefits, including soothing relations with China and the Arab world, boosting the morale of the Red Army, and setting a potential precedent for resolution of other East-West conflicts in the Third World.⁹⁶

Initially, however, Gorbachev's Politburo embraced neither an immediate withdrawal nor the ultimate goal of a "neutral" Afghanistan. To the contrary, Gorbachev at first presided over a continuing qualitative escalation of the military intervention in Afghanistan. While some have characterized this as a last-ditch Soviet effort to "win" the war,⁹⁷ that is an exaggeration. At no time did the Soviets increase quantitatively their troop levels necessary to defeat the rebels outright by cutting off their supply lines and occupying large parts of the countryside. Rather, the Politburo strategy in 1985-1986 apparently was to ratchet up military pressure on the rebels sufficient to compel their acceptance of a negotiated settlement that would leave a Soviet-friendly regime in Kabul following Red Army withdrawal.⁹⁸

It is uncertain whether this initially aggressive policy was Gorbachev's own personal preference or resulted from compromise with Politburo hard-liners. Some commentators cite the 1985 escalation as evidence Gorbachev himself initially was not committed to peaceful withdrawal. General Mikhail Zaitsev, the highly-regarded commander of Red Army troops in East Germany, was brought in, and attacks were escalated, especially in areas of the Pakistan border that served as a sanctuary and arms pipeline for the Mujahedin.⁹⁹ The Soviets also deployed one-third of their elite *Spetznaz* troops, additional KGB personnel, and "Omsk vans" for secure battlefield communications.¹⁰⁰ Reportedly, Red Army leaders assured the Politburo these moves would enable victory within two years.¹⁰¹

also Eduard Shevardnadze, translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 81; Michael McGwire, *Perestroika and Soviet National Security* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 267; Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-90* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 96, 110-114, which concludes that Gorbachev's overall foreign-policy moderation was motivated "by the costs to detente that previous Soviet policy in the periphery had incurred." See also, Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 301; Gates, *From the Shadows*, 331, acknowledges that Gorbachev viewed access to new technology as the key to solving Soviet economic problems.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Daley, *Gorbachev and Afghanistan*; and Bowker, *Russian Foreign Policy*.

⁹⁷ Borer, *Superpowers Defeated*, 341; Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July 1992.

⁹⁸ Nicolai N. Petro and Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Russian Foreign Policy: From Empire to Nation-State* (New York: Longman, 1997), 246-247. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 153. Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* (Winter 1996/1997), Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 132, (hereafter referred to as CWIHPB).

⁹⁹ Schweizer, *Victory*, 212; Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 188. Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 175. The largest Soviet offensive began in May 1985. In July 1985, Zaitsev was brought in.

¹⁰⁰ Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July 1992.

¹⁰¹ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 187.

Morton Abramowitz, however, puts this escalation in perspective, arguing that the plans were not Gorbachev's. "When Gorbachev came in, the plans for escalation were already made. . . . It was like Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs." Confirmation comes from Alexander Yakovlev, Gorbachev's foreign policy adviser: "The military-industrial complex pressed him to try this, try that but it's not true, as some have said, that he himself wanted to try for a military decision."¹⁰² A slightly more nuanced explanation is offered by Viktor Kremeniuk, who argues Gorbachev initially did not push any personal strategy for how to get Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. Rather, Gorbachev the politician walked a fine line between liberals and hard-liners, and "decided to give the military a chance to prove themselves."¹⁰³

A compelling analysis by Sarah Mendelson concludes that such compromise was characteristic of Gorbachev's first two years in office, during which time he laid the groundwork for more fundamental reform through personnel changes in the Communist party and empowerment of nontraditional expert institutions. The personnel overhaul was massive, but could not be achieved overnight. For example, not until Gorbachev's first anniversary, at the 27th Party Congress of March 1986, could changes be made in the Central Committee. At that event, however, some 40 percent of the Central Committee was newly elected—four times the turnover rate of the previous two congresses. Similarly, Politburo membership was altered dramatically by Gorbachev, with eight new members added and five removed in his first year.¹⁰⁴ Still, Gorbachev faced persistent pressure from his right wing and from the Russian and Afghan militaries, which at first opposed the withdrawal decision and later attempted to sabotage its implementation.¹⁰⁵

In the face of such pressure, Gorbachev pursued a remarkably steady effort to extract Soviet troops from Afghanistan—albeit while initially trying to ensure a "friendly" regime remained. In June 1985, he restarted regional security talks with the United States after a three year hiatus and jump-started the UN negotiations by authorizing Afghan approval of a key provision under which the superpowers would guarantee an eventual settlement.¹⁰⁶ The following

¹⁰² Ibid., 187–188. Yakovlev also has said that, "Right from the start the view of [Gorbachev] was that a peaceful withdrawal should be effected." See Foreign Broadcast Information Service (hereafter FBIS) SOV-91-251, 31 December 1991, 3, transcript of "Political Investigation—Behind the Scenes of War," Moscow Central Television First Program Network, 27 December 1991.

¹⁰³ Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, 224.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 22, 70, 220, 226–227.

¹⁰⁵ On Soviet and Afghan attempts to sabotage implementation of the withdrawal, see FBIS-SOV-91-251, 31 December 1991, 3, where Yakovlev notes, "the implementation was sabotaged. . . . The evacuation was hampered. The road was blocked, cut in two places. Then they found that a bridge had been blown up somewhere. Then it was said that the air force could not get through to Kabul. There was some kind of conference going on there. . . . It became apparent that they were deliberately holding things up, spinning things out in order to put off the moment when it would be possible to say: That's it, we're getting out."

¹⁰⁶ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 726; and Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 189.

month, he instructed Soviet newspaper and television reporters to begin reporting the war openly, including the controversial issue of Soviet casualties.¹⁰⁷ Previously, the Soviet public routinely had been told that “soldiers in Afghanistan were planting trees and building schools and hospitals.”¹⁰⁸ In retrospect, this media directive can be seen as an attempt by Gorbachev to outflank Politburo hard-liners, by appealing directly to the sensibilities of the Soviet people.

In October 1985, the Politburo approved Gorbachev’s strategy of employing “a combination of military and political measures” to “expedite the withdrawal” of Red Army troops while leaving a “friendly Afghanistan” behind. Essentially, this was a three-track strategy: escalate the war to drive the Afghan opposition to seek compromise; accelerate Afghan government reforms to coopt moderate elements of the opposition; and intensify negotiations to harness the results of the first two tracks.¹⁰⁹ One tactic the Soviet leader used to persuade his Politburo colleagues was to read aloud letters from angry mothers questioning how it could be the Soviet Union’s “internationalist duty” to destroy villages and kill civilians¹¹⁰—letters no doubt triggered by his earlier lifting of media restrictions.

The following month at the Geneva summit, Gorbachev tried to convey this important shift in policy to Ronald Reagan, but the president “did not pick up at all on Gorbachev’s lightly veiled hint about pulling out of Afghanistan,” according to Shultz.¹¹¹ Reagan, however, later claimed he did understand Gorbachev’s message even at the time, that “it was a war he had no responsibility—and little enthusiasm—for.”¹¹² By December 1985, Gorbachev’s skepticism about the Afghan effort had leaked into official publications, with *Pravda* acknowledging that “far from all the people in Afghanistan, even amongst the workers, have accepted the Saur Revolution.”¹¹³ Gorbachev’s Foreign Ministry,

¹⁰⁷ Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992. Interestingly, while the ban on reporting individual casualties was reportedly lifted at this early date, and Soviet TV broadcast a report on the anxiety of soldiers’ families on 20 October 1986 (see Khan, *Untying*, 178), high-profile press exposes from Afghanistan (notably Artem Borovik’s articles in *Ogonek*) did not start to appear until spring 1987, and aggregate casualty figures were not published until two years later (*Pravda*, 17 August 1989), suggesting either that Gorbachev continued to have to compromise with Politburo hard-liners or that Gorbachev himself did not want to undercut too drastically public support for continued prosecution of the war. For discussion of Gorbachev’s use of the press to build support for withdrawal, see Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, 238, 253–255. Apparently, the idea of applying *glasnost* to coverage of the war was originated by Politburo liberals and quickly embraced by Gorbachev. See comments of Yakovlev, FBIS-SOV-91-251, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 1. Tamarov, a 1984 Red Army draftee, writes that “Only a few knew that more and more cemeteries were being filled with the graves of eighteen- to twenty-year-old boys.”

¹⁰⁹ CWIHPB, 180. Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992.

¹¹⁰ Rodman, *More Precious*, 327.

¹¹¹ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 601.

¹¹² Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 639.

¹¹³ Gordon Adam, “Afghanistan—The Superpower Trap” in *Detente in Asia?* (The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992), 33, quoting *Pravda*, 23 December 1985.

under Edouard Shevardnadze, later confirmed that the “political decision of principle on this matter [was] adopted as far back as December 1985.”¹¹⁴

In February 1986, Gorbachev went public, telling the 27th Party Congress that Afghanistan was a “bleeding wound” and “we should like, in the nearest future, to withdraw the Soviet troops stationed in Afghanistan. . . .”¹¹⁵ American conservatives, still skeptical, downplayed the importance of this comment by pointing out that Gorbachev continued to blame the war on “counterrevolution and imperialism” rather than Soviet aggression.¹¹⁶ Foreign Minister Shevardnadze later acknowledged this admittedly mixed message was the product of a compromise with hard-liners, who nearly succeeded in removing the troop-withdrawal reference entirely.¹¹⁷

In the spring of 1986, Gorbachev removed yet another barrier to Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan’s ruler Babrak Karmal. Because Karmal had been unable or unwilling to broaden his political base within Afghanistan, the Kremlin believed an immediate Red Army withdrawal would lead to his quick demise and replacement by a regime unfriendly to the Soviets. Karmal also refused to cooperate with Soviet efforts to set a withdrawal timetable, telling Gorbachev, “If you leave now, you’ll have to send in a million soldiers next time.”¹¹⁸ But Gorbachev would not permit the Afghan ruler to block his plans, telling the Politburo in October 1985 that Soviet withdrawal must take place “with or without Karmal.” On 4 May 1986, Karmal bitterly accepted his forced resignation and was replaced by his chief of intelligence, Mohammed Najibullah, who savvily had aligned himself with the new Soviet policy of withdrawal.¹¹⁹ In July, Gorbachev ordered a token troop withdrawal to demonstrate the seriousness of his intentions. Although a public relations disaster in the West, because there was little actual reduction in Soviet combat strength,¹²⁰ Pakistani officials among others took it as a sincere indication of Gorbachev’s intent to leave Afghanistan entirely.¹²¹

The watershed change in the Politburo’s official policy came in November 1986. While Gorbachev had been laying the groundwork for withdrawal for

¹¹⁴ USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Foreign Policy and Dipomatic Activity of the USSR,” *International Affairs* (January 1990): 12. See also, Shevardnadze, *The Future*, 68. Shevardnadze was announced as Andrei Gromyko’s replacement on 3 July 1985.

¹¹⁵ Mikhail S. Gorbachev, “The Political Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the Party Congress of the CPSU, Moscow, 25 February 1986” in *Toward a Better World* (New York: Richardson & Steirman, 1987).

¹¹⁶ Rodman, *More Precious*, 327.

¹¹⁷ Shevardnadze, *The Future*, 47. See also, Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 202.

¹¹⁸ Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 239.

¹¹⁹ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 202–205. These authors also cite an additional point of contention between Gorbachev and Karmal: the Afghan leader demanded as a condition of his cooperation that the indirect UN negotiations (in which his government and Pakistan communicated exclusively via the UN mediator due to Pakistan’s refusal to recognize the Afghan regime) be converted to direct negotiations.

¹²⁰ Rodman, *More Precious*, 329.

¹²¹ Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 223–224.

more than a year, he always had conditioned that goal on arranging to leave behind a “friendly” regime in Kabul. At the Politburo meeting of 13 November 1986, however, this changed dramatically in two ways.¹²² First, the ultimate Soviet objective was changed from a “friendly” to a “neutral” Afghanistan—an outcome the Mujahedin and United States would be much more inclined to accept in a negotiated settlement. Second, the Politburo imposed on itself a deadline for withdrawal—in Gorbachev’s words, “one year - at maximum two years”—to be enforced apparently even if the first condition were not met.

As Andrei Gromyko stated at the meeting: “Our strategic goal is to make Afghanistan neutral. . . . But most important—to stop the war. I would agree that it is necessary to limit this to a period of one–two years.” Edouard Shevardnadze concurred that Gorbachev had “said it correctly—two years.” The Politburo also embraced two further steps to lay the groundwork for a Red Army withdrawal: establishing a separate Afghan-run military command to assume control after the pull-out, and inviting Najibullah to visit Moscow the following month to impress upon him the need to broaden his domestic political base in anticipation of the withdrawal.¹²³

General Akhromeev, by this time deputy defense minister, conceded at the Politburo meeting that despite the Soviets’ qualitative military escalation, their deployment still lacked sufficient troops either to establish authority on rural territory or to shut down all border supply routes. Soviet-backed forces could continue to win individual military confrontations but, he said, “we have lost the battle for the Afghan people.” The Red Army could “maintain the situation on the level that it exists now. But under such conditions the war will continue for a long time.” Only KGB Chief Viktor Chebrikov still parroted the hard-line position that “not everything was done that could have been done”—but he received no support from the others.¹²⁴ Soon after the meeting, Gorbachev went public with at least part of the new policy, telling Indian reporters in late-November 1986 that the Soviet Union now favored a nonaligned, neutral Afghanistan,¹²⁵ but Western observers failed to recognize the significance at the time.

Because this momentous decision came just two months after introduction of the Stinger, many previously have argued that the missile’s impact triggered the Soviet decision—based on the simplistic logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Viewed in context, however, the Politburo’s establishment of a withdrawal deadline was merely one step in a steady progression of Soviet policy, set in motion more than a year earlier and facilitated by Gorbachev’s growing power base in the Kremlin.

Thereafter, Gorbachev adhered resolutely to the Politburo deadline despite substantial hurdles, including a prolonged dispute over the conditions un-

¹²² CWIHPB, 179–180, contains a full transcript of the meeting.

¹²³ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 208.

¹²⁴ CWIHPB, 179–180; also Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992.

¹²⁵ McCgwire, *Perestroika*, 275.

der which U.S. and Soviet aid to the contending Afghan sides would terminate.¹²⁶ In December 1986, he informed Najibullah that Soviet troops would withdraw within one and a half to two years. In July of the next year, during the Afghan leader's visit to Moscow, Najibullah was told he had only twelve months. Also in July 1987, Soviet diplomats were authorized to pass word of the decision to their foreign counterparts,¹²⁷ with Shevardnadze personally telling U.S. Secretary of State Shultz in September 1987.¹²⁸ In February 1988, the Kremlin publicly announced its plans to withdraw, and on 15 February 1989, the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan, only three months behind the deadline set by the Politburo two years earlier.¹²⁹

THE STINGER'S IMPACT

A number of important questions about the Stinger's use in Afghanistan have never been addressed satisfactorily. Most fundamentally, what was the Stinger's military impact? Second, what was its political impact, if any, on the Soviet decision to withdraw and on the end of the cold war, and did it match U.S. expectations? Third, was the Stinger supply program, once approved, handled responsibly by the CIA? Finally, from a longer-term perspective, what was the net impact of the Stinger decision on global security in light of the hundreds of missiles apparently still unaccounted for?

U.S. Intentions

Before assessing the Stinger's impact, it is necessary to explore precisely what the Reagan administration hoped to achieve by this watershed escalation. Former officials concur on the basic rationale—the Stinger would increase the Soviets' costs in Afghanistan, convince them it was unwinnable, and compel a decision to withdraw. In the words of Peter Rodman, deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs at the NSC, the United States intended to show the Soviets that Afghanistan was “indigestible.”¹³⁰

However, Reagan officials differ on several important points. One is the extent to which the Stinger decision was a reaction to Gorbachev's ascension to power. According to former Undersecretary of Defense Fred Iklé, a scholar of war termination and author of the seminal work *Every War Must End*, the decision was not spurred by the presence of a new Soviet leader but rather was part of an older U.S. strategy to escalate the war gradually.¹³¹ Indeed, as early

¹²⁶ On the contentious debate over “symmetry,” see Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 260–266, chapter entitled “The United States Moves the Goalposts.”

¹²⁷ Oberdorfer, *The Turn*, 240–244.

¹²⁸ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1086.

¹²⁹ Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992.

¹³⁰ Peter Rodman, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

¹³¹ Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

as 1983, President Reagan had signed NSDD 75, stating: “The U.S. objective is to keep maximum pressure on Moscow for withdrawal and to ensure that the Soviets’ political, military, and other costs remain high while the occupation continues.”¹³² In 1985, NSDD 166 boosted aid for the rebels with the explicit goal of helping them compel a Soviet withdrawal. Thus, the Stinger decision of 1986 can be seen as but one step—albeit a major one—in a steady escalation of U.S. pressure against the Soviet occupation. For Iklé, Gorbachev was “just the beneficiary” of this gradually escalating policy.¹³³

According to Mort Abramowitz, however, Gorbachev was the key. The administration’s assessment of the new general secretary as a moderate, not personally committed to the war, led it to conclude that escalating the war would compel withdrawal rather than counter-escalation. “If it had been another Stalin, you might have thought about it differently,” he explains.¹³⁴

Another bone of contention is whether the Stinger escalation was informed by secret intelligence from high-placed sources in the Kremlin or public reports on Red Army tactics and the deteriorating condition of the Soviet Union. The *Washington Post* reported in 1992 that: “An intelligence coup in 1984 and 1985 triggered the Reagan administration’s decision to escalate the covert program in Afghanistan. The United States received highly specific, sensitive information about Kremlin politics and new Soviet war plans in Afghanistan. . . . The Reagan administration moved in response to this intelligence to open up its high-technology arsenal to aid the Afghan rebels.”¹³⁵

Similarly, Peter Schweizer’s book *Victory* reports that, “In January 1985, the administration received detailed knowledge of Soviet plans to dramatically escalate the war in Afghanistan.” According to an account Schweizer attributes to Robert McFarlane, President Reagan responded by telling his national security team: “Do whatever you have to help the Mujahedin not only survive but win.”¹³⁶

Pillsbury likewise was impressed by the “super information about KGB and General Staff decision-making” available to the administration, at least until the CIA’s Aldrich Ames began exposing U.S. agents at the end of 1985. Based

¹³² Christopher Simpson, *National Security Directives of the Reagan and Bush Administrations: The Declassified History of U.S. Political and Military Policy, 1981-1991* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 258.

¹³³ Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

¹³⁴ Abramowitz, interview with author, 30 August 1995. This concept that political leaders responsible for entry into a war will be less willing to concede in the face of opposing escalation than will incoming leaders with less of a personal political stake in the war is explored formally in George W. Downs and David M. Roache, Princeton University and UC-Davis, “Intervention, Escalation, and Gambling for Resurrection,” unpublished manuscript, 15 April 1992. For a more general discussion of the relationship between domestic politics and surrender in war, see Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), rev. ed., chap. 4, “The Struggle Within: Patriots Against ‘Traitors.’”

¹³⁵ Coll, *Washington Post*, 19 July 1992.

¹³⁶ Schweizer, *Victory*, 212–213.

on the reams of unconfirmed intelligence reports that crossed his desk, as well as CIA studies, Pillsbury says he perceived a serious schism in the Kremlin. General Zaitsev, together with the General Staff and KGB, were escalating the war aggressively and distorting their reports to the Kremlin on the war's status and prospects. "I believed the information was going through several filters before reaching Gorbachev and Shevardnadze," says Pillsbury. It was this filtering, he argues, that made it necessary for U.S. officials to find a way to convey directly to Gorbachev that the United States would not permit a Red Army victory. Shooting down Soviet aircraft with American-made missiles, he says, was the perfect solution.¹³⁷

Many other administration officials, however, discount the influence of secret intelligence. Iklé says his support for the Stinger was prompted by the well-publicized 1985 Soviet escalation and by his assessment—based on public reports on the unhealthy state of the Soviet military and economy—that the Red Army would not respond by invading Pakistan.¹³⁸ Abramowitz says that while the United States knew "there was a controversy" in the Kremlin about what to do in Afghanistan, he recalls the information coming from open sources rather than raw intelligence. "The highly sensitive intelligence came later," he says.¹³⁹ Rodman reports the administration found out only subsequently about the General Staff's secret plan to win the war within two years and that "we just saw they were going for broke." Rather than secret intelligence reports, he says, the Stinger escalation was based more on "objective factors" and "changes in Gorbachev's rhetoric."¹⁴⁰

The Initial Military Impact

Without question, the Stinger had an immediate military impact. Although initial estimates may have been somewhat overblown—claiming the Stinger downed approximately one aircraft per day during the first three months of its deployment—the missile clearly represented an enormous qualitative improvement in the rebels' air-defense capability. As ISI's Yousaf details in his memoirs, previous anti-aircraft technology provided to the rebels paled in comparison. The Oerlikon, for example, required "some twenty mules to transport a section of three guns . . . [making] the weapon more of a liability than an asset." It was especially ill-suited to Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, since "the long, heavy, cumbersome barrel had to be positioned across the animal, making it impossible to go through defiles, where it snagged on every bush." Likewise, the Blowpipe, which arrived in 1986, "was a disaster." During one engagement, thirteen of the missiles were fired at exposed enemy aircraft without a single

¹³⁷ Pillsbury, interviews with author, 11 August and 15 August 1995.

¹³⁸ Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

¹³⁹ Abramowitz, interview with author, 30 August 1995. It should be noted that Abramowitz did not assume his intelligence position at the State Department until spring 1985.

¹⁴⁰ Rodman, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

hit—"a duck shoot in which the ducks won." The weapon was not man-portable "over any distance," says Yousaf, who cannot "recall a single confirmed kill by a Blowpipe" before he left ISI in 1987.¹⁴¹

The Stinger was different. While the kill rate and number of targets destroyed are still disputed, the missile unquestionably shot down Soviet and especially Afghan aircraft at an unprecedented rate in its first few months of use.¹⁴² Selig Harrison has attempted to rebut this conclusion relying on Soviet statistics,¹⁴³ but even if the reported statistics are accurate, his argument is flawed by several lapses. First, in attempting to prove the Stinger did not trigger an increase in downed aircraft, he counts 1986 as a pre-Stinger year because the missile was used only in its final four months. However, 1986 was the year of the missiles' greatest effectiveness, as opposing pilots had yet to adopt countermeasures. Second, he fails to grasp the significance of his own findings that while the Soviets themselves experienced no significant increase in aircraft losses, there was a sharp jump in the loss of Afghan government aircraft. Rather than indicating any Soviet imperviousness to the Stinger, as he implies, such evidence is consistent with reports the Soviets responded to the missile by abstaining from dangerous missions, shifting them to Afghan pilots. From the Mujahedin perspective, the nationality of pilots was of little consequence so long as enemy aircraft finally were being shot down.

Third, Harrison appears to conflate aircraft losses with aircraft shoot-downs, a key distinction underscored in an earlier analysis by Scott McMichael. As McMichael states: "During the first two years of the war, the great majority of Soviet aircraft losses (75-80 percent) must be attributed to non-combat causes, plus losses suffered on the ground due to raids, rocket attacks, and sabotage. . . . There can be no doubt at all that the Stinger turned the ratio on its head."¹⁴⁴ The Stinger's effectiveness was due mainly to six technological advantages: it required little training; it was truly man-portable, weighing just 35 pounds; it was a "fire-and-forget" weapon; it was faster and had greater range than earlier SAMs; it could attack fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters from any angle, unlike the relatively primitive SA-7 and Redeye, which could focus only on a jet engine's exhaust from the rear; and once locked on target, it could not be deflected by flares.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 87-88, 171.

¹⁴² Declassified U.S. intelligence cables (dates withheld but identified as approximately March 1987) reveal the initially enormous perceived impact of the missiles. "The Stinger missile has changed the course of the war because Soviet helicopter gunships and bombers no longer are able to operate as they once did," says one cable. "More tactical and air support changes occurred in the last quarter of 1986 and the first quarter of 1987 than in the previous seven years of the conflict," according to another. (Cables obtained from National Security Archives, Washington, DC.)

¹⁴³ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 199.

¹⁴⁴ McMichael, *Stumbling Bear*, 92.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 90, although he appears to attribute one feature to the Stinger, an ultra-violet lock-on, that is found only on the more advanced Stinger-POST, a model not provided to the Mujahedin, at least initially. See also, Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 175.

Yousaf presents a detailed accounting of the Stinger's first ten months in service until his departure from ISI in August 1987. During this time, he claims, 187 Stingers were fired, of which 75 percent hit their target, for a total of approximately 140 downed aircraft. Such detailed statistics must be based on Mujahedin self-reporting, the reliability of which is unknown. Nevertheless, these figures are more reliable than those in an oft-cited September 1987 U.S. analysis, which estimated "the destruction of about 270 aircraft per year." That study's author, Aaron Karp, acknowledged his projections were pure conjecture based on arbitrary assumptions the Mujahedin would fire all their missiles and achieve a low kill rate of 33 percent.¹⁴⁶ While these two assumptions may have seemed reasonable at the time, evidence suggests both were mistaken. Unfortunately, Karp's study has contributed to popular confusion about the Stinger's performance, as his estimates have been widely reported without indication of their lack of empirical basis.

A more rigorous U.S. Army analysis was conducted in early 1989 by a team sent to "go sit with the Mujahedin" in Pakistan for several weeks. It concludes that by war's end the rebels had scored "approximately 269 kills in about 340 engagements" with the Stinger, for a remarkable 79 percent kill ratio.¹⁴⁷ Selig Harrison rejects such figures, quoting a Russian general who claims the United States "greatly exaggerated" Soviet and Afghan aircraft losses during the war. However, the findings of the U.S. study are not necessarily out of line with the Soviets' own statistics that he cites. From 1986 through 1988, the years that include all Stinger launches, Harrison reports that Soviet and Afghan forces lost a total of 310 aircraft. If one discounts for the number of aircraft shot down in 1986 prior to introduction of the Stinger in September, those lost to attrition, and those shot down with other weapons, it is not implausible that somewhere in the range of 269 were shot down with Stingers.

As for the kill ratio, it is impossible to confirm. A U.S. Army analyst involved in the study claims that "several levels of verification" were used to ensure that rebel descriptions of the engagements were consistent with each other, with the limited amount of available physical evidence, and with known characteristics of the missile system. Among factors reportedly responsible for the rebels' high success rate is that distribution of the weapons was limited to their best educated, most effective warriors, who were trained to hold fire unless a kill was extremely likely.¹⁴⁸ Yousaf also cites the rebels' daring tactics, which included positioning Stinger teams at the ends of Soviet runways. Another tactic was for one team of rebels to stand vulnerably in the open, acting as bait to draw enemy aircraft into range, while a second hidden team waited

¹⁴⁶ Aaron Karp, "Blowpipes and Stingers in Afghanistan: One Year Later," *Armed Forces Journal International* (September 1987): 36–40.

¹⁴⁷ Maj. William McManaway, "Stinger in Afghanistan," *Air Defense Artillery* (January-February 1990), 3–8; Maj. William McManaway, "The Dragon is Dead!" *Air Defense Artillery* (July-August 1989); Tony Capaccio, *Defense Week*, 12 June 1989; David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 5 July 1989.

¹⁴⁸ Former U.S. Army analyst, interview with author, 18 November 1998.

to fire the missiles. By contrast, the Pakistan Army utilized more conservative tactics, necessitated in part by having to stay on its own side of the border, which led to miserable results. Yousaf reports that, to his knowledge, the army “fired twenty-eight Stingers at enemy aircraft without a single kill.”¹⁴⁹

War correspondent Mark Urban, however, claims the Mujahedin Stinger kill ratios reported by the U.S. Army were grossly inflated, venturing his own alternative estimate of only 10 percent.¹⁵⁰ While Urban’s skeptical views have been widely cited, it is rarely noted that the primary basis for his conclusions appears to have been the anecdotes of TV journalists, who reported great difficulty in videotaping successful missile hits.¹⁵¹ In retrospect, there are several plausible reasons why journalists might have observed a lower kill ratio than occurred overall, including: taping Stinger firings on the safer, Pakistani side of the border, where the Pakistani Army reportedly had much lower kill ratios than the Mujahedin; viewing launches of missiles other than Stingers, without knowing the difference; observing Stinger firings during the war’s last year or two, after Soviet adoption of counter-measures that significantly reduced the Stingers’ effectiveness; and for logistical reasons, being unable to tape Mujahedin employing their most daring and dangerous—and, therefore, most successful—tactics. In sum, a host of selection effects may have distorted the sample of missile firings that TV journalists were able to view, making it unrepresentative of the total universe. In this light, it is possible that the reports of both Urban and the U.S. Army are essentially accurate—the Mujahedin achieved a high Stinger kill ratio overall, but TV journalists witnessed a low kill ratio in the firings they observed.

Soviet Counter-Measures

In response to the Stinger’s immediate success, the Red Army initially restricted its pilots to less dangerous missions, shunting the rest onto Afghan flyers. The Afghans, however, soon lost their nerve as well. According to Yousaf, they would pretend to go out on missions, fire off their ammunition, return to

¹⁴⁹ See Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 183–184, although their statistics for the Pakistan Army’s success rate should be approached cautiously in light of the memoir’s generally negative tone toward that army.

¹⁵⁰ Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 296. Urban also argues that other weapons and tactics were more important to the Mujahedin’s cause than the Stinger, including plastic-cased mines (238, 303), high-tech radios (303), and the rocketing of air fields (223). In addition, he gives evidence that the Soviets still were able to use helicopters effectively after the Stinger’s introduction, for example, in the resupply of Khost in late-1987 (303). Finally, Urban even claims that changes in Soviet air tactics in late-1986 were a response not mainly to the Stinger, as generally argued, but to Gorbachev’s pre-Stinger decision to scale-down the Soviets’ offensive ground posture, which reduced the need for air support (297).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 270–271, and fn. 18, 277, which cites “interviews with various journalists . . . between them they witnessed more than 20 launches with only one possible kill.”

base, and falsely report success.¹⁵² A former Afghan pilot confirms that he and his fellow “pilots went on strike and refused to fly in areas where Stinger missiles were present.”¹⁵³

Fairly quickly, however, Soviet forces adopted a series of technical and tactical countermeasures that mitigated the impact of the Stinger. In the technical area, Soviet aircraft were retrofitted with improved flares, infrared beacons, and baffles on their exhausts to impede the Stingers’ ability to lock on target. Aircraft also were equipped with a missile radar warning system to notify pilots of the need for evasive action.¹⁵⁴

Tactically, the Soviets had numerous responses. Fixed-wing aircraft flew at higher altitudes outside the Stinger’s three-mile range, which averted the missile threat but reduced the pilots’ effectiveness, earning them the derisive sobriquet “cosmonauts” from Soviet ground troops.¹⁵⁵ Helicopter pilots pursued the opposite strategy, adopting low-altitude, nap-of-the-earth techniques to hide from the Stingers, which function best when hot aircraft are silhouetted against a cool, blue sky. At the lower altitude, however, helicopters became more vulnerable to small-weapons fire. Interestingly, the same tactical countermeasures had been reported as early as the first year of the war and several times thereafter in response to earlier-model SAMs.¹⁵⁶ However, the Stinger’s introduction apparently triggered a dramatic renewal and expansion of their use.

The Soviets also reportedly shifted many air operations to cover of darkness, as the rebels initially were not equipped with night-vision equipment.¹⁵⁷ They increasingly relied on human intelligence to discover the location of Stingers, then either destroyed the missiles, purchased them, or avoided the locations entirely.¹⁵⁸ Some daredevil Soviet pilots utilized a tactic that was a mirror-image of the rebels’ own: flying in tandem within the Stinger’s range but separated by a large distance, the first of two Soviet aircraft would make itself vulnerable in order to flush a Mujahedin Stinger team from its perch, after which the second aircraft would appear and fire on the exposed rebels.¹⁵⁹ For

¹⁵² Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 179.

¹⁵³ David Isby, “Soviet Surface-to-Air Missile Countermeasures: Lessons from Afghanistan,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 1 January 1989.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, McMichael, *Stumbling Bear*, 89; see also, Bodansky, “SAMs in Afghanistan.”

¹⁵⁵ Capaccio, *Defense Week*, quoting Representative Charlie Wilson.

¹⁵⁶ David C. Isby, “Soviet Tactics in the War in Afghanistan,” *Jane’s Defence Review*, vol. 4, no. 7 (1983), 683–685. See also, Ritch, “Hidden War”; Craig Karp, “Afghanistan: Six Years of Soviet Occupation,” U.S. Department of State, Special Report No. 135, December 1985, 1. Prior to the initial introduction of these techniques, the rebels are reported to have downed sixty helicopters with SAMs in 1980, according to Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 350.

¹⁵⁷ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 350, says that about five months after the Stinger’s original introduction into Afghanistan, the CIA introduced a new sighting system that also worked at night, which forced Soviet and Afghan pilots to fly at higher altitudes both day and night.

¹⁵⁸ Isby, “Soviet Surface-to-Air.”

¹⁵⁹ John Gunston, “Stingers Used by Afghan Rebels Stymie Soviet Air Force Tactics,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 4 April 1988, 47.

important air support missions that could not be conducted safely in the presence of Stingers, such as facilitating insertion of special operations forces, the Soviets sometimes substituted long-range suppressive artillery fire, which was effective but required more ground forces and sacrificed the element of surprise.¹⁶⁰

Despite the army's claim that the "Stinger was the war's decisive weapon"¹⁶¹—echoed by many others including *60 Minutes*, which declared, "The Stinger is generally credited with having won the war for the Mujahedin"¹⁶²—the net effect of Soviet counter-measures eventually was to offset the Stinger.¹⁶³ David Isby, an expert military analyst of the Afghan conflict, concluded in 1990 that, "although none of the Soviets' countermeasures were totally successful, the Stinger . . . did not succeed in forcing Soviet helicopters out of the sky."¹⁶⁴ A leading French expert on Afghanistan, Olivier Roy, confirms from his experience among the rebels in late 1988 that, "by 1989, the Stinger could no longer be considered a decisive anti-aircraft weapon."¹⁶⁵

Ironically, one of the JCS's original concerns had been vindicated. The combat effectiveness of the Stingers—at least in their original configuration—was indeed compromised. The resulting impact on American security interests, however, was minimal. By war's end, U.S. Stinger technology had already advanced two generations and, more importantly, the cold war was drawing to a close.

Impact on Soviet Withdrawal

A key question is what impact, if any, the Stinger's deployment had on the power struggle between Gorbachev—already seeking withdrawal—and General Staff hardliners claiming Soviet escalation could enable military victory.

¹⁶⁰ David C. Isby, "Stinger in Afghanistan: The Soviets Try to Adapt," *Rotor & Wing International*, February 1990, 58.

¹⁶¹ McManaway, "Stinger in Afghanistan." See also, Capaccio, *Defense Week*.

¹⁶² *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 30 October 1988; see also, Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989, which quotes Congressman Charlie Wilson saying, "Once the Stinger made their helicopters useless, that put the Russians on foot against the Mujahedin and there's nobody on Earth who can fight the Mujahedin on foot."

¹⁶³ A few press accounts, dissenting from the common wisdom, voiced this opinion as early as 1987. See, for example, Elaine Parnell, "Stingers in a Tale," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 November 1987, who wrote that the Stinger's impact was "nothing approaching the impression given by some that the Stinger has tilted the balance of the war." See also, Bodansky, "SAMs in Afghanistan," who wrote in July 1987 that, "the primary impact of the Resistance's air-defence capabilities was a modification of Soviet-Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) tactics. . . . [T]here is no evidence that any Soviet-DRA aerial operation was canceled or aborted because of Resistance air-defence." It should be noted, however, that Bodansky consistently had a hawkish view of Soviet intentions and capabilities, stating in March 1985 that the Red Army was "on its way to attaining total victory." See Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan, 11 March 1985.

¹⁶⁴ Isby, "Stinger in Afghanistan," 58.

¹⁶⁵ Roy, *The Lessons*, 53.

As commonly reported, “the supply of high-tech American weaponry to the Mujahedin played a key factor in the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. . . . [T]here is evidence it helped convince the Kremlin that the war was unwinnable.”¹⁶⁶ Likewise, the NSC’s Cannistraro says that when the Stingers arrived, the Soviets “started taking losses that were unacceptable.”¹⁶⁷ His NSC colleague Rodman attributes the diplomatic breakthrough in part to “the escalation of U.S. military aid to the Mujahedin, especially the furnishing of ‘Stinger’ anti-aircraft missiles.”¹⁶⁸

Former Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, however, presents a contrary view: “The Stinger definitely prolonged our stay. . . . It made our military men, our hawks, much more determined than ever not to withdraw, not to appear to be giving in under duress.” This view is shared by Georgi Arbatov, Andrey Kokoshin, and General Akhromeev,¹⁶⁹ and is the main thesis of Harrison and Cordovez in *Out of Afghanistan*. More generally, George Kennan¹⁷⁰ and Raymond Garthoff argue that the militarized version of U.S. containment strategy, including the Reagan Doctrine, prolonged the cold war as a whole. As Garthoff puts it, “Gorbachev pressed ahead. . . not owing to the Reagan hard line and military buildup, but despite it.”¹⁷¹ According to these authors, reduced U.S. pressure would have enabled an earlier withdrawal by permitting the Soviets to save face while doing so.

Rodman rejects such revisionist assessments of the Stinger as “liberal fantasy.”¹⁷² Abramowitz, despite being present when Shevardnadze made his comment, says, “I don’t believe that for a minute.”¹⁷³ Iklé cautions that “too much face-saving might have saved the Soviet regime.” He believes the humiliating defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan was integral to reducing the status and influence of hard-liners in the Kremlin. “Otherwise, we might still have the Cold War.”¹⁷⁴ French expert, Olivier Roy, concurs that “by undermining the prestige of both the old Brezhnevian guard and the army, [the failure in Afghanistan] gave Gorbachev more room for manoeuvre.”¹⁷⁵

Implicit in all such assessments of the political impact of the Stinger decision are counter-factual claims—that is, what would have happened in its ab-

¹⁶⁶ Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1992.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Schweizer, *Victory*, 270.

¹⁶⁸ Rodman, *More Precious*, 221. He says that Gorbachev’s ascendance was the other key.

¹⁶⁹ Mendelson, *Explaining Change*, 43, 215–216.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, “Who Won the Cold War? Ask Instead, What Was Lost?” *International Herald Tribune*, 29 October 1992, adapted from “The G.O.P. Won the Cold War? Ridiculous,” *New York Times*, 28 October 1992. See also, “The Failure in Our Success,” *New York Times*, 14 March 1994.

¹⁷¹ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 775. This argument is also made by McGwire, *Perestroika*, 386, who states that Gorbachev pressed for reform “despite the assertive policies of the Reagan administration, not because of them.”

¹⁷² Rodman, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

¹⁷³ Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 198.

¹⁷⁴ Iklé, interview with author, 19 August 1995.

¹⁷⁵ Roy, *The Lessons*, 47.

sence. These must be separated from actual facts and evaluated for plausibility. Two facts are clear. First, when Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he initially escalated the war. Second, had the United States not countered with NSDD 166, followed by the Stinger and other U.S. technology, the Soviets would have gained militarily against the Mujahedin. However, at least three important counter-factual questions remain: How badly damaged would the Mujahedin have been? Would this have reversed the rebels' opposition to the unfavorable negotiated settlement then on the table? How would this military progress have affected Politburo decision making? While counter-factual reasoning never is certain, answers to these questions can be found with relative confidence.

First, despite the claims of some,¹⁷⁶ it is highly unlikely that the Soviet escalation of 1985-1986, if not countered by the United States, would have succeeded in eliminating the Mujahedin. Indeed, the Mujahedin had proved able to survive even in the early 1980s, when they were considerably more out-matched than they would have been in this subsequent scenario.¹⁷⁷ The Soviets' fundamental problem was their unwillingness to increase troop levels, forcing them into a strategy of coercion based mainly on air power.¹⁷⁸ Throughout the twentieth century, such an approach had failed to produce victory against a people on its home territory.¹⁷⁹

Second, it is extremely unlikely that even substantial Soviet military progress would have compelled the rebels to accept a negotiated settlement that left a pro-Soviet government in Kabul. As demonstrated in subsequent years, the rebels preferred to face death rather than cede power even to each other, let alone to a pro-Soviet regime.

Third, regardless of the situation in Afghanistan, Gorbachev was intent on his two-track strategy of consolidating power, by placing allies in key Communist party positions, and establishing nontraditional sources of expertise. By late 1986, therefore, he likely could have pushed his views through the Politburo despite any military gains in Afghanistan. The ultimate question, therefore, is whether Gorbachev's own preference would have changed had the 1985

¹⁷⁶ Gates, *From the Shadows*, 429, for example, claims that, "Thanks to our massive infusion of assistance during 1985-1986, the Mujahedin were able to withstand the Soviet maximum push."

¹⁷⁷ Of course, Soviet tactics had improved by the later time period, but so had those of the rebels. For an insightful contemporaneous view from the rebels' perspective, see Almerigo Grilz, "Afghanistan: The Guerrilla is Changing," *Military Technology*, no. 6 (June 1987), which appends an interview with Abdul Haq, Mujahedin commander in the Kabul area. See also, Ian Kemp, "Abdul Haq: Soviet Mistakes in Afghanistan," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 5 March 1988, in which the rebel leader contends that some Soviet changes, such as the use of *Spetsnaz* troops, had backfired. Abdul Haq also denies that the Stinger made a decisive difference.

¹⁷⁸ As Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 17, describes the Soviet escalation that started in 1984: "The aim appears to have been to win by shattering rebel morale and destroying their support infrastructure by, quite simply, encouraging mass emigration from rural areas outside Kabul's control: a policy of 'migratory genocide.'"

¹⁷⁹ Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win—Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Soviet escalation gone unopposed and produced military gains in Afghanistan. The key fact here is that Gorbachev's primary objective in Afghanistan was to eliminate a thorn in East-West relations that inhibited Soviet economic revitalization. The West, especially the Reagan administration, would not have dropped its insistence on Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan as a precondition for renewed détente, regardless of progress in the war. Thus, it is very likely that Gorbachev still would have pushed for the withdrawal deadline in late 1986, even had the Soviets made gains against the Mujahedin.¹⁸⁰ Red Army hard-liners would have protested, as they did in any case, but Gorbachev had sufficient votes in the Politburo to prevail.

Although counter-intuitive and contrary to popular wisdom, it appears the U.S. counter-escalation of 1985-1986 was largely irrelevant to the Soviet withdrawal decision of November 1986.¹⁸¹ This is clearly the case for the Stinger, which was not utilized in Afghanistan until September 1986, a mere two months before the Politburo's decision to adopt a withdrawal deadline. At the key November 1986 Politburo meeting, no mention was made of the Stinger nor any other U.S. escalation. Rather, Defense Minister Akhromeev blamed Moscow for capping troop levels and Kabul for failing to coopt the opposition. Moreover, the Stinger effectively was neutralized by technical and tactical counter-measures well before the Soviets actually completed their withdrawal. Thus, there is no evidence the Stinger even hastened Soviet withdrawal. Neither is there evidence it delayed the Soviet pullout.

Had Gorbachev not decided autonomously to withdraw, it is unlikely the Stinger could have chased him out of Afghanistan. Prior to his entering office, the Red Army's strategy in Afghanistan had presumed a protracted occupation, relying only on holding key cities and garrisons as bases for attacks on population, infrastructure, and supply lines in rebel-controlled areas.¹⁸² These bases were never seriously threatened by the Mujahedin even after they acquired the Stinger. Previous Soviet conquests had required occupations of far greater duration. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, there was a cottage industry among U.S. Sovietologists trying to figure out which historical model the Soviets would use to absorb Afghanistan: Mongolia,¹⁸³ Central Asia,¹⁸⁴ Finland,¹⁸⁵ Eastern Eu-

¹⁸⁰ Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 300, reaches the same conclusion.

¹⁸¹ This belies the conclusion of Scott in his otherwise excellent account of the Reagan Doctrine: "There is little doubt that the increasing costs of Afghanistan, caused in no small part by the application of the Reagan Doctrine, contributed mightily to the restructuring of Soviet policy." Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 78. See also Gates, *From the Shadows*, 350: "There is little question that providing the Stinger was a major turning point in the Afghan war." Mark Urban is closer to the truth in dismissing as "nonsense" the "myth that American supplies, particularly the Stinger missile, won the war in Afghanistan." He concludes: "The West and Pakistan did not win the 20th Century Great Game—Gorbachev simply decided he was not playing any more—not with Soviet soldiers at least." Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 302–304.

¹⁸² Rais, *War Without Winners*, 102–104.

¹⁸³ "A Brief History of Russian and Soviet Expansion Toward the South," Combat Capabilities Analysis Group, United States Central Command, MacDill Air Force Base, 30 June 1985, 71.

¹⁸⁴ Alexander Alexiev, testimony, 11 March 1985, 114.

¹⁸⁵ Rubin, testimony, 1 May 1986.

rope generally,¹⁸⁶ or Poland specifically.¹⁸⁷ In 1982, General Secretary Yuri Andropov reminded Politburo colleagues that it had required almost fifteen years to subdue Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan.¹⁸⁸ In June 1985, the United States Central Command, unaware of the changes Gorbachev was bringing to the Kremlin, concluded the Soviets could “be expected to show their historical persistence in Afghanistan, anticipating a slow, gradual domination of the country. . . . [where] time may be on their side.” The study, citing previous Soviet triumphs over indigenous anticommunist movements, concluded that “the Afghans will likely suffer a similar fate.”¹⁸⁹ According to a key Pakistani official, Islamabad likewise believed Soviet “costs [in Afghanistan] were not intolerable and appeared to be on the decline.”¹⁹⁰

Unintended Consequences: Stinger Proliferation

As the JCS and Senator DeConcini had warned, Stinger accountability proved grossly inadequate. First, Pakistan skimmed off a percentage of the Stingers for itself—a missile tax—with some reportedly winding up on the black market. Of those that reached the Mujahedin, perhaps half were sold for cash, given to allies such as Iran, lost in ambushes, or hoarded for future conflicts.¹⁹¹

According to press reports, Stingers now have proliferated around the globe. While not all of this spread can be confirmed or attributed solely to the Mujahedin supply operation, the missiles originally destined for Afghanistan likely account for much of it. Reportedly, Stingers already have shot down aircraft twice in Bosnia¹⁹² and once in Tajikistan.¹⁹³ In 1987, an Iranian boat fired a Stinger that reportedly hit a U.S. helicopter in the Persian Gulf but failed to explode.¹⁹⁴ Tunisian fundamentalists are reported to have used a Stinger in a failed 1991 assassination attempt.¹⁹⁵ Stingers also reportedly have been acquired by Kashmiri militants, Indian Sikhs, the Iranian drug mafia, Iraq,¹⁹⁶ Qa-

¹⁸⁶ Edward Luttwak, testimony before Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan, 30 April 1986, 45.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Gouttierre, Center of Afghan Studies, University of Nebraska, quoted in Aaron R. Einfrank, *Washington Times*, 17 January 1986.

¹⁸⁸ Dobbs, *Washington Post*, 16 November 1982.

¹⁸⁹ United States Central Command, “A Brief History,” 71–72.

¹⁹⁰ Khan, *Untying*, 169.

¹⁹¹ Parnell, “Stingers in a Tale,” 33. According to a report cited in Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 225, several stolen or diverted Stingers ultimately were sold to the rebels’ opponent, Afghan leader Najibullah, for about \$25,000 each, although other analysts assume the missiles were captured by the Afghan army in ambushes.

¹⁹² Charles Hanley, AP, *Calgary Herald*, 18 November 1993, reports the 1992 downing of an Italian supply plane. *Washington Post*, 28 July 1995, reports the 1995 downing of a French plane by a Stinger that “almost certainly came from Pakistan.”

¹⁹³ Anwar Iqbal, *United Press International*, 26 July 1993.

¹⁹⁴ Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989.

¹⁹⁵ Christopher Dobson, *The Herald* (Glasgow), 30 July 1993.

¹⁹⁶ Evans, *The Guardian*, 2 January 1992.

tar,¹⁹⁷ Zambia (most likely from Angola),¹⁹⁸ North Korea, Libya, and militant Palestinian groups.¹⁹⁹ In addition, authorities reportedly have broken up plots to acquire the missiles by the Irish Republican Army, the Medellín Cartel, Croatian rebels, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chechen secessionists,²⁰⁰ and Cuban exiles.²⁰¹

Under President George Bush, the CIA attempted to stop this hemorrhaging, motivated especially by the connection of some of the former rebels to radical Islamic terrorists. The agency initially requested \$10 million to buy back Stingers, and when that proved inadequate, another \$55 million in 1993.²⁰² Former rebel leader and then-Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar responded that he did “not intend to allow even a round of ammunition to be taken out of Afghanistan.”²⁰³ Although a few dozen Stingers apparently were retrieved by the CIA, the main effect of the buy-back program has been to bid up the black-market price of the missile from its original value of \$30,000 to as high as \$200,000. Intelligence officials worry that those who sell back the Stingers at such exorbitant prices will recycle the profits to buy an even larger quantity of Soviet SA-14 missiles—reportedly based on the Stinger design—potentially exacerbating the overall terrorist threat.²⁰⁴ Ironically, the \$65 million appropriated by the United States to buy back a fraction of the leftover missiles is about twice the original purchase price of all of them.

A still unanswered question is precisely how many Stingers are left over from the Mujahedin supply operation. A variety of sources suggest that 300 Stingers were exported for delivery to the rebels in 1986, growing to a total of between 900 and 1200, together with approximately 250 reusable gripstocks.²⁰⁵ The U.S. Army reported in 1990 that only about 340 Stingers actually were fired by the rebels prior to the Soviet withdrawal, and the *Washington Post* reported that no missiles were fired subsequently in Afghanistan through 1994.²⁰⁶ The *Times* of London reported in 1994 that approximately 200 of the missiles were in storage in Pakistan—never delivered to the Mujahedin—and that the CIA had bought back another sixty.²⁰⁷ If these reports are accurate, some 300 to 600 of the missiles remain unaccounted for. In January 1995, U.S. intelligence

¹⁹⁷ Hanley, *Calgary Herald*.

¹⁹⁸ David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 1 May 1987.

¹⁹⁹ Edward Gorman, *The Times* (London), 14 May 1994.

²⁰⁰ Hanley, *Calgary Herald*.

²⁰¹ Larry Rohter, *New York Times*, 4 June 1994.

²⁰² Robin Wright and John M. Broder, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 1993.

²⁰³ *Los Angeles Times*, from *Associated Press*, 20 August 1993.

²⁰⁴ Hanley, *Calgary Herald*; Gorman, *The Times*; Brian Duffy and Peter Cary, *U.S. News & World Report*, 30 August 1993.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, Parnell, “Stingers in a Tale”; Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989; Coll, *Washington Post*, 20 July 1992; Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 182.

²⁰⁶ Molly Moore, *Washington Post*, 7 March 1994.

²⁰⁷ Gorman, *The Times*.

sources were quoted as believing that “over 370 Stingers are still in Afghanistan.”²⁰⁸

Some commentators have downplayed the terrorist threat posed by these remaining Stingers. Cannistraro has said the battery packs on several Stingers recovered from an Iranian boat in 1988 were found to be run-down, rendering the weapons ineffective.²⁰⁹ He also recalls being told the weapons had “a shelf life of about a year.”²¹⁰ However, a partially declassified 1987 analysis by the U.S. Central Command states clearly that, “The BCU, the power source required to activate the Stinger, has a shelf life of at least 10 years with a reliability rate of 98-99%.”²¹¹ Pillsbury recalls that a House Armed Services Committee staff person, Tony Battista, originally proposed modifying the Stingers to shorten their shelf life to several weeks prior to delivery to the rebels, but was turned down.²¹² Even if some battery units have deteriorated, however, Cannistraro concedes, “it’s silly to think” that potential users couldn’t buy a battery, or have one engineered, to meet their needs.²¹³

A final consideration is whether the Stinger is any more effective than other surface-to-air missiles commonly available in international arms markets. Among the alternatives are the British Javelin, the French Mistral, the Swedish RBS 70, and the Soviet SA-14 and SA-16.²¹⁴ Moreover, missiles similar to the Stinger are produced or are under development by China, South Africa, Brazil, and Egypt.²¹⁵ As far back as 1986, terrorism expert Robert Kupperman downplayed the significance of potential Stinger proliferation by arguing that the Soviet SA-7B, widely available even then, was sufficient to shoot down a civilian airliner.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Stinger appears to be in a category of its own, especially as a threat to military aircraft. Former CIA national intelligence officer, David Whipple, says he “would doubt there are missiles as good as the Stinger out there.”²¹⁷ That would explain why the CIA is willing to spend \$65 million to try to get them back.

The CIA’s Performance

Confronted in 1993 with the worldwide proliferation of Stingers leaking from Afghanistan, former CIA associate director for covert operations, Edward

²⁰⁸ Behroz Khan, *United Press International*, 14 January 1995.

²⁰⁹ David Hughes, “FAA Examining Missile Threat,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 16 August 1993.

²¹⁰ Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995.

²¹¹ “Stinger: One Year of Combat,” Afghanistan Fusion Cell, United States Central Command, 26 October 1987.

²¹² Pillsbury, interview with author, 11 August 1995.

²¹³ Cannistraro, interview with author, 8 August 1995.

²¹⁴ James W. Rawles, “Stinger: Requiem for the Combat Helicopter,” *Defense Electronics*, November 1988.

²¹⁵ Wright and Broder, *Los Angeles Times*.

²¹⁶ Robert Kupperman, quoted in Peter Grier, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 April 1986.

²¹⁷ David Whipple, interview with author, 9 August 1995.

Juchniewicz, responded, “Isn’t the danger posed by a handful of Stingers worth the dissolution of the Soviet Empire?”²¹⁸ Surely it would be, had that been the trade-off. However, in light of the far smaller role actually played by the missiles in ending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, let alone the cold war, the security threat they now pose may be the most lasting legacy of the Stinger decision.

The obvious question is whether the CIA could have handled the original distribution of Stingers in a more responsible manner. The CIA’s Whipple concedes only that, “in hindsight, that’s indisputable.”²¹⁹ However, even at the time, the CIA should have known better, and could have acted more responsibly. In several key respects the agency’s failings were due to poor decision making, not to a lack of concurrent knowledge.

First, the agency relied on the worrisome ISI distribution network for the Stinger in 1986, even though an expert had written as early as November 1984 that “direct supplies to the resistance are increasingly feasible.”²²⁰ Such an alternative would have enabled restricting the missile to only the most reliable rebels. By contrast, the agency knew that ISI favored the most radical rebels, many with ties to Iran.

Second, the CIA should have taken into account that the rebels were only a temporary ally of convenience. As later acknowledged by the CIA’s former chief of operations for the Near East and South Asia, Charles Cogan, it was obvious at the time that “the long-range aims of a country in which Islamists were at least beginning to have a say would not be, could not be, wholly compatible with the aims of a Western nation.”²²¹ This concern turned out not to be so long-range. As early as 1991, Hekmatyar supported Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Two years later, in the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York City, Whipple confirmed that “some of the same people who are actual or potential terrorists in [the United States] are former guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan.”²²²

Third, the CIA should have recognized soon after the initial modest deployment of Stingers that it was unnecessary to follow up with additional supplies of such an advanced weapons system. In 1987, the U.S. Central Command reported that due to the initial success of the Stinger and the “extreme difficulty for pilots to differentiate between shoulder-fired SAMs, Soviet pilots appear to treat all launches as Stinger. In numerous instances it has been noted that Soviet aircraft will depart an area as soon as a SAM is fired.”²²³ Thus, the CIA

²¹⁸ Weiner, *New York Times*, 24 July 1993.

²¹⁹ Whipple, interview with author, 9 August 1995.

²²⁰ Alexander Alexiev, *The War in Afghanistan: Soviet Strategy and the State of the Resistance* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, November 1984), 7.

²²¹ Cogan, “Partners in Time,” 74. Nevertheless, as Gates, *From the Shadows*, 349, reveals, the CIA ironically tried to increase the number of Arabs coming to Afghanistan to fight with the Muslim fundamentalists, going so far as to explore establishment of an “international brigade.”

²²² Weiner, *New York Times*, 24 July 1993.

²²³ “Stinger: One Year of Combat,” 11.

could have reduced the danger of Stinger proliferation by substituting lower-technology SAMs in follow-up shipments—without undermining rebel effectiveness.

Fourth, the CIA should have known the rebels would hoard Stingers if supplied a surplus. Even an avid Mujahedin supporter, Congressman Charlie Wilson, had earlier acknowledged that the rebels had a troubling habit of “ratholing” weapons for future use.²²⁴ For all these reasons, the CIA should have kept the rebels on a much shorter tether—at least denying them more Stingers until the original ones were exhausted.

Instead, in its most profound error, the CIA supplied additional Stingers in 1987, just as the rebels were reducing their use of the weapon in response to Soviet counter-measures. Given that the rebels were reported to be downing about one aircraft per day and to be enjoying a 75-80 percent kill ratio, the initial batch of 300 missiles should have lasted at least half a year. At that point, the CIA could have assessed the need for more missiles and found, as *Aviation Week* later reported, that “the number of launch opportunities has declined due to changes in Soviet operating techniques.”²²⁵ The agency then could have suspended or sharply reduced supply of Stingers in 1987. Instead, the CIA reportedly shipped another 600 or more missiles in 1987, distribution of which continued to the rebels until mid-1988.²²⁶ Making matters worse, the CIA reportedly loosened restrictions on missile distribution in 1987, rescinding the requirement that an expended tube be presented in exchange for each new missile and permitting individual rebels to receive more than one at a time.²²⁷ The *Washington Post* reported in April 1987 that “so many Stingers are arriving in Pakistan that there is a problem of storing the weapons safely.” A U.S. intelligence official later confirmed, “we were handing them out like lollipops.”²²⁸

So far, the United States and its allies have avoided paying a heavy price for this sloppy CIA performance, as no civil airliners outside of Afghanistan are confirmed to have been shot down by Stingers.²²⁹ U.S. intelligence officials, however, do not assume this luck will last and in 1992 established a Federal Aviation Administration study group to assess the terrorist missile threat. *Aviation Week* reports that less sophisticated SAMs were used in at least twenty-two attacks on civil airliners from 1986 to 1993, generally in countries experiencing civil insurgencies. According to a Rand analyst, as airports and airlines

²²⁴ Congressional Task Force on Afghanistan, 30 April 1986, 29.

²²⁵ Gunston, “Stingers Used,” 46. Recall that the U.S. Army later reported only about 340 Stingers were launched during the entire war.

²²⁶ Barnes, “Victory in Afghanistan,” 93.

²²⁷ David Ottaway, *Washington Post*, 5 April 1987; Yousaf and Adkin, *The Bear Trap*, 175.

²²⁸ Moore, *Washington Post*, 7 March 1994.

²²⁹ The Soviet press reported several times that Stingers had been used to shoot down civil airliners in Afghanistan. See, for example, *Tass*, 14 August 1987, reporting the downing of two AN-26 aircraft, killing thirty-six passengers in February 1987 and fifty-three passengers in June 1987.

boost security to inhibit hijackings and bombings, terrorists are increasingly likely to turn to missiles.²³⁰

THE STINGER DECISION IN RETROSPECT

The case of the Stinger provides several cautionary lessons about U.S. foreign policy generally and covert action specifically. First, it raises the question of who actually makes U.S. foreign policy and suggests procedures to help ensure its soundness. Second, it highlights shortcomings in the CIA's performance of a top-priority covert action, raising questions about the utility of such action as a tool of foreign policy. Third, it provides insight into perennial questions about the strengths and weaknesses of democracies in the conduct of foreign policy. Finally, it underscores the necessity for scholars to engage in painstaking "process tracing" to draw the proper lessons from history.

Without question, the Reagan administration's notorious lack of centralized policy coordination significantly retarded the Stinger decision and contributed to a nearly eighteen-month delay from initial proposal to final implementation, which effectively changed a good idea into a bad one.²³¹ When first seriously proposed in early spring 1985, in the wake of a Soviet escalation in Afghanistan, the Stinger plan fit an overall U.S. strategy to prevent Soviet absorption of Afghanistan by increasing the costs of the occupation. Despite misgivings of the CIA, the JCS, and the State Department, the potential benefits outweighed the risks in light of the intensified Soviet air campaign, a new Soviet leader not personally committed to the war, and the low assessed risk of retaliatory escalation. As events transpired, the missiles apparently were unnecessary to ensure the rebels' survival or to compel Gorbachev's withdrawal. However, U. S. officials had no way of knowing that in the spring of 1985, so it does not detract from the merits of the Stinger proposal when originally presented.

By the time the plan eventually was implemented in late summer 1986, however, it made considerably less sense, given that the Soviets already had signaled their intention to withdraw. At this point, the risks outweighed the potential benefits. Though delivery of Stingers at this later date probably did not prolong the war, it was unnecessary and led to two consequences feared by the JCS: missile proliferation and the development of Soviet counter-measures that effectively neutralized first-generation Stinger technology.

The Reagan administration's lack of a strong, hands-on leader in the Oval Office or at the NSC permitted individual agencies to pursue their own agendas even to the point of withholding relevant information. The JCS claimed the

²³⁰ Hughes, "FAA Examining."

²³¹ This is directly contrary to the claims of Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 234–235, 250–252, that the White House spearheaded the 1985–86 escalation of assistance to the Mujahedin and generally "dominated policy-making" when issues "involved crisis characteristics." He is closer to the truth in subsequently acknowledging that President Reagan's decisions "were taken only after other actors pushed, prodded, and even manipulated the process," 252.

Stinger plan could lead to loss of this U.S. technology without disclosing that it already had been compromised in Greece. The JCS claimed as well that the plan would negatively impact the U. S. Army's missile stockpile, without disclosing that its supplier could increase production to offset any losses. The CIA continued as late as 1986 to report that Pakistani President Zia opposed introduction of the Stinger, even though he had been telling visiting U.S. officials otherwise since 1984.

As bureaucracies inevitably promote their own interests,²³² it is no surprise the army guarded its stockpile of missiles and the CIA attempted to avoid a covert project that could lead to its embarrassment. However, it is the job of the president, the national security adviser, and their staffs to ensure that such parochial pursuits are subordinated to the national interest. Policy disputes should be brought to a head on a timely basis, debated openly and with full information, decided authoritatively, and implemented with the full cooperation of all agencies. Lack of such decisive leadership was a signal failing of the Reagan administration in the Stinger case. As Rodman observes, President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, "never would have stood for this."²³³

Some scholars have identified two factors as primarily responsible for this Reagan administration shortcoming—bureaucratic structure and presidential personality. In one of its first directives, NSDD 2, the administration intentionally downgraded the structural authority and coordinating role of the national security adviser to reduce risk of his vying for control with the secretary of State, as occurred in the Carter administration.²³⁴ Reagan's management style, meanwhile, was to avoid making decisions until his subordinates attained consensus.²³⁵ The result was a power vacuum in which "each department was free to pursue its own interpretation of the president's decisions—or to ignore the president altogether."²³⁶ As President Reagan's former chief of staff, James Baker, confirms, the foreign policy apparatus "was often a witches' brew of intrigue, elbows, egos, and separate agendas"—a dangerous model of inefficiency.²³⁷

²³² See Allison, *Essence of Decision*, especially his Model II. Also, Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1974).

²³³ Rodman, interview with author, 15 August 1995.

²³⁴ Christopher C. Shoemaker, *The NSC Staff: Counseling the Council* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 59–60.

²³⁵ Cecil Van Meter Crabb, *American National Security: A Presidential Perspective* (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1991), 182. See also, Karl F. Inderfurth, Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Decisions of the Highest Order: Perspectives on the National Security Council* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1988); John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: Morrow, 1991); Constantine C. Menges, *Inside The National Security Council: The True Story of The Making and Unmaking of Reagan's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

²³⁶ Shoemaker, *The NSC Staff*, 67.

²³⁷ James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), excerpted in *Newsweek*, 2 October 1995, 53.

The CIA's performance in the Stinger case raises questions about the agency's resources and capabilities for covert action, the quality of its decision making in such secret activities, and the reliability of its intelligence reporting, which together reinforce doubts about the overall worth of covert action and government secrecy as tools of foreign policy. The CIA's error in relying on Pakistan's ISI for Stinger distribution—long after plausible deniability was lost and the agency had established its own connections to the rebels—is often justified on grounds the agency lacked sufficient numbers of trained covert-action personnel.²³⁸ However, the inexcusable error of boosting the supply of Stingers just as their use was waning, which contributed to a gross oversupply of the missiles and worldwide proliferation, can be attributed only to a combination of shoddy intelligence, poor decision making, and bureaucratic inertia. Ironically, the CIA's program to supply the Afghan rebels, its single largest operation during the Reagan administration, is often cited as a rare example of a covert action success.²³⁹ If the above shortcomings are what can be expected from a top-priority "success," however, the overall worth of covert action should be reassessed.²⁴⁰ Assuming U. S. leaders wish to retain this prerogative, despite its potentially inherent shortcomings, the CIA at a minimum must beef up its in-house capabilities to reduce the risk of again falling prey to the whims of another nation's intelligence service.

The Stinger case also contributes to the long debate on foreign policy and democracy,²⁴¹ suggesting that effective foreign policy is fostered by a moderate level of democracy, but can be hurt by too much or too little. The Reagan administration appears generally to have suffered from too much democracy in its making of foreign policy. Disparate interests represented within the executive branch were able to lobby each other, leak information beneficial to their viewpoint, form coalitions with members of Congress, and continue to fight even after their proposals had been rejected formally. Even lone advocates could

²³⁸ Roy Godson, "Covert Action: Neither Exceptional Tool Nor Magic Bullet" in Roy Godson, Ernest R. May, and Gary Schmitt, eds., *U.S. Intelligence At the Crossroads: Agendas for Reform* (London: Brassey's, 1995), 168.

²³⁹ Robert Gates takes issue with the conventional wisdom that the CIA has had few operational successes. However, even he claims that "the greatest of them all was the war in Afghanistan." See Gates, *From the Shadows*, 360.

²⁴⁰ For a view supporting Gates, that covert action has been and can continue to be a useful tool of American foreign policy, see Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence* (London: Brassey's 1995). For an opposing view, see the work of Greg Trevorton including in *In From the Cold* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996), 23; see also Ernest May in Godson et al., *U.S. Intelligence at the Crossroads*, 173–177; and Codevilla, *Informing Statecraft*, 270.

²⁴¹ A classic statement is Theodore Lowi, "Making Democracy Safe for the World: On Fighting the Next War" in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989). See also, Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, "Political Competition and Foreign Policy Power Sharing" (paper presented at the 1996 American Political Science Association meeting, 29 August–1 September 1996).

affect U. S. foreign policy substantially by applying these tactics with sufficient enthusiasm and disregard for protocol.²⁴²

By contrast, the CIA's problems in the Stinger case were exacerbated by too little democracy. Government secrecy artificially restricted the circle of informed decision makers, contributing to poor decisions.²⁴³ Had there not been insistence on maintaining plausible deniability, the U. S. government might have debated openly which of the rebel groups were most worthy of assistance, rather than quietly delegating this crucial decision to a foreign intelligence agency with an ulterior agenda. More generally, had the program not been covert, Congress, the executive branch, and the press could have scrutinized its implementation—for example, questioning the wisdom of shipping additional Stingers to Muslim fundamentalists just as the missiles' use was dropping off.²⁴⁴ Reduced government secrecy also might have prevented the CIA from inaccurately reporting Pakistani President Zia's views on the Stinger for more than a year, which interfered with sound decision making.

According to Abramowitz, the government's interagency process "worked" in that officials eventually were turned around "based on argumentation."²⁴⁵ However, the combined effects of too much and too little democracy stretched that process out over eighteen months, which had deleterious consequences. The Stinger proposal was rejected when it might have made sense, approved when it no longer did, and implemented in a manner that unnecessarily raised risks to U. S. national security.

An important question is whether the degree of democracy in the making of U.S. foreign policy is subject to strategic manipulation or is the product of inexorable social, technological, and historical forces. Those cited above attribute the free-for-all nature of the Reagan administration's foreign-policy process to specific management style and organizational choices. Others claim, however, that it represented just one step in a historical progression toward the ever-increasing domestic relevance of foreign affairs, which is becoming subject to the intense level of democracy traditionally reserved for domestic affairs.²⁴⁶ It can be argued that technological advances such as the Internet, CNN, satellite

²⁴² Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 241–245, argues this pattern is inherent in modern American democracy.

²⁴³ Sometimes the circle of decision makers is overly restricted *within* the CIA as well, as certain offices "have been notorious for using security compartmentation to protect themselves from legitimate inquiries that might expose operational failures or uncover financial overruns or schedule slips." See Duane R. ("Dewey") Clarridge, with Digby Diehl, *A Spy for all Seasons* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 405.

²⁴⁴ The progressively decreasing concern about Stinger distribution in the field is reflected in the comments of Milt Beardon, CIA station chief in Pakistan during implementation of the program: "My philosophy, and one that I think prevailed, was: get the weapons into the hands of the shooters and really let God sort it out." (Quoted in Levin, *CIA: America's Secret Warriors*.)

²⁴⁵ Abramowitz, interview with author, 30 August 1995.

²⁴⁶ Scott, *Deciding to Intervene*, 248–250. He also argues that this trend has been exacerbated by the end of the cold war.

communication, faxes, and copy machines have exacerbated this trend by making global information instantly available to ever widening circles and encroaching on the government preserve of classified information.²⁴⁷ If such an historical trend does exist, the Stinger case suggests it will be beneficial as it broadens decision making from artificially small circles, but deleterious to the extent it undermines the government's ability to expedite, centrally coordinate, and implement its decisions.

Another lesson of the Stinger case is that in order to draw the proper lessons from history, political scientists and foreign-affairs analysts must trace the internal decision making processes of both U.S. and foreign governments, rather than treating them as "black boxes." Such process tracing of the U.S. Stinger decision reveals a surprising lack of consensus about the means and ends of the so-called Reagan Doctrine.²⁴⁸ On the Soviet side, such close analysis is essential to understanding that the withdrawal decision was driven not mainly by the direct human, financial, or political costs of the war, but by Gorbachev's desire to have Western sanctions lifted. Earlier black-box analyses concluded erroneously that Gorbachev was responding to the U.S. escalation.²⁴⁹

Ironically, the two elements of U.S. policy that appear most to have influenced the Soviet decision to withdraw were initiated not by the Reagan administration, but by President Carter immediately after the Soviet invasion of 1979. Carter suspended détente, cutting off access to trade and technology, which the Soviets came to see over time as a significant drag on their economic growth. He also initiated aid to the Mujahedin when they were weakest, establishing a weapons pipeline that helped avert their early defeat by the Red Army. The Reagan administration, spurred by Congress, steadily increased aid to the Mujahedin, no doubt improving the rebels' military prospects. However, the major U.S. escalation of aid in 1985-1986 appears not to have been crucial to the rebels' continued survival, nor to have had significant impact on Soviet decision making. Gorbachev eventually obtained domestic support for withdrawal as the result of his own actions, not due to U.S. escalation. He changed personnel, empowered nontraditional experts, and permitted press coverage of the war. Thus, the Reagan administration's most consequential action to effect Soviet withdrawal may have been holding the Carter line, refusing to normalize economic relations so long as Soviet troops remained in Afghanistan. The Reagan Doctrine, at least in the case of Afghanistan, has been credited with an achievement that had other causes—apparently due to little more than a coincidence of timing.

²⁴⁷ Doug MacEachin, "The Uncertain Future of Intelligence Analysis: Confronting the Faultline" (Oral presentation at Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 14 February 1997). MacEachin is a retired CIA official.

²⁴⁸ Interestingly, the policy's name was coined not by the administration, but by columnist Charles Krauthammer. However, Scott in *Deciding to Intervene* adduces evidence that the administration had in place a formal policy of assistance to anticommunist rebels well before this appellation was applied.

²⁴⁹ See Daley, *Gorbachev and Afghanistan*.

The pervasiveness of the myth that the Stinger slew the Red Army and by implication the Soviet empire and communism demonstrates how the distortive effects of the cold war have survived its passing. For almost half a century, Americans were confronted with apparitions such as the missile gap and the evil empire. Those responsible for erecting such exaggerated images of the Soviet adversary are now, perhaps predictably, exaggerating the credit they deserve for destroying it. Despite mounting contradictory evidence, these cold warriors continue to give the Stinger much of the credit for ending the cold war and to promote the simple lesson that the hawks had it right all along. In reality, the Stinger's impact was far smaller, and the lessons are far more complex.*

* Preparation of this article was assisted with financial support from the Paul Nitze fellowship of the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Lucian Pye fellowship of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The author would like to thank all those who commented on earlier drafts, including Steven Aftergood, Raymond Garthoff, Deane Hinton, Fred Iklé, Barry Lowenkron, Michael Mazarr, Michael Pillsbury, and Steve Van Evera.