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U.S. wasn't the good guy

A closer look into the history of the conflict between the Soviet-backed Afghan government and the U.S.-backed Afghan guerrillas reveals the common misconception implied in the headline for John Burns' article: "U.S. becomes the bad guy in Afghanistan" (Viewpoint, Feb. 4). The U.S. could not "become the bad guy" in Afghanistan simply because it was never the good guy.

The evidence is that the Shah of Iran, with U.S. knowledge and encouragement, began the series of events that culminated in the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In 1974, toward the end of creating a modern Persian empire, the shah initiated an aggressive program to persuade the Afghans to abandon their Soviet-tilted neutrality in favor of a Tehran-centered dependence. The shah's offensive included a \$2 billion aid program, heavy broadcast and print propaganda inside Afghanistan, and a very active branch of the CIA-trained Iranian secret police, SAVAK, operating out of Kabul.

Afghan President Mohammed Daud felt compelled to adapt to the new realities, which led to the dismissal, at SAVAK's behest, of Soviet-trained military officers, and plans to ban all political activity in Afghanistan except for that led by Daud.

The Soviets, who had treated the two rival Afghan Communist parties with benign neglect, woke up to the implications of an Iran-dominated Afghanistan and engineered the unification of the two parties. The new communist movement, along with other opposition elements, then suffered intensified repression under the hard-line interior minister, Abdul Qadir Nuristani.

In April 1978, coinciding with visits by Daud to Saudi Arabia and Egypt (disconcerting in Soviet eyes), Afghan Communist leader Mir Akbar Khaiber was assassinated, with all the evidence pointing to Nuristani. In the face of a planned visit by the shah to Afghanistan, and Daud's plan to meet President Carter in Washington, Daud himself was assassinated on April 28. Afghan Communist leader Nur Mohammed Taraki took control of a pro-Soviet regime, and the rest is history.

There can be no excuse for the Soviet Union's murderous efforts to control the Afghans. But neither is there evidence that the Soviets would have initiated a violent program to acquire more influence in Afghanistan if Washington had restrained its megalomaniac client from interfering with a fragile, 30-year-old neutrality.

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