

## Pretexts and US Foreign Policy: The War on Terrorism in Historical Perspective\*

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**Abstract** *This article analyzes the way that US foreign policy élites have used pretexts to manage public opinion. Policymakers, it is argued, often seize upon threatening external events, and use these events to create a favorable political climate in which to “sell” policies of militarization and external expansion to the public. The article argues that the Bush administration has used the threat of terrorism as a pretext to implement a wide range of policies that had been decided upon in advance of the 9/11 attacks. It also argues that the recent uses of pretexts by the Bush administration have strong historical precedents: extended case studies of pretexts are presented for the events surrounding the Korea crisis of 1950 and the Afghanistan crisis of 1979–1980, as well as the more recent War on Terrorism.*

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are to indicate brief but precise description of pretexts ... for U.S. military intervention in Cuba ... We could blow up a U.S. ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba ... We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities, and even in Washington ... We could sink a boatload of [refugee] Cubans en route to Florida (real or simulated). We could foster attempts on the lives of Cuban refugees in the United States even to the extent of wounding in instances to be widely publicized. Exploding a few plastic bombs ... would be helpful. (Recently declassified US government document, presenting a proposed “Operation Northwoods,” 1962<sup>1</sup>)

Public benefit would soon become the pretext ... perfidy and murder the end. (Edmund Burke<sup>2</sup>)

This article will analyze the use of pretexts in US foreign policy. The basic argument is that American foreign policy since 1945 has followed a distinct pattern, wherein policy élites have sought to implement programs of external expansion, which in turn have been frustrated by public skepticism. In order to persuade the public on the need for assertive action overseas—often accompanied by increases in the military budget—élites have sought out various pretexts to justify these actions. This article will explore the use of pretexts in three detailed case studies: North Korea’s invasion of South Korea in 1950; the

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<sup>1</sup> “Justification for U.S. Military Intervention in Cuba,” March 13, 1962, pp. 2, 8–9. Transmitted to the Secretary of Defense from General L. L. Lemnitzer, the JCS Chairman. Full text available online from the National Security Archive at: <[www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20010430](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20010430)> .

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Pelican Books, 1969), p. 177.

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during 1979–1980; and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

I will argue that US foreign policy has often engaged in aggressive and offensive activities, which are inherently difficult to justify in public debate. In addition, these offensive actions have asymmetrically benefited certain vested interests, notably the military-industrial complex, and this too has been difficult to justify. The function of pretexts has been to obscure these awkward features; hence the need to demonstrate that US policy is reacting to provocations, threats to the national security, and the like. Undergirding this analysis is the assumption that the American public is often reluctant to countenance military action abroad. It is often thought that the American public has been consistently nationalistic and supportive of military force. Such views obscure a considerable complexity. In fact, public opinion polls have shown that Americans are typically reluctant to use military force overseas, at least initially. Proposals for military action have often encountered what Edward Tufte termed “uninformed skepticism and informed hostility.”<sup>3</sup> This popular skepticism can be traced to the very beginnings of the Cold War when, it should not be forgotten, Harry S. Truman was encouraged to “scare hell out of the American people,” since this was felt to be the only way to elicit their support for conflict with the Soviets.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of such public opposition, pretexts are often used. When referring to pretexts, I do so in the ordinary English language sense that a pretext is “an appearance assumed in order to cloak the real intention or state of affairs.”<sup>5</sup> The basic process is simple: a dramatic event will be contrived to give the (mistaken) impression that a foreign power has threatened vital national interests. In other cases, foreign policy élites will simply wait for some event to occur, and will seize upon the event to justify actions that had, in any case, already been decided upon. The key point is that the policy decision occurs first, and is then *followed* by the “provocation” that is used to legitimate the policy. I place my work within the tradition of Herman and Chomsky, who emphasize the importance that deception and propaganda play even in formally democratic countries.<sup>6</sup> Though Herman and Chomsky are generally considered radical critics of US policy, many of their basic points are accepted by the mainstream realist theory of international relations, which also seems to recognize a “need” for élite manipulation of public opinion. Hans Morgenthau strongly implies such manipulation when he writes: “the government must realize that it is not the slave to public opinion; that public opinion is not a static thing to be discovered ... it is a dynamic, ever changing entity to be continuously created and recreated by informed and responsible leadership; that it is the historic mission of the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Adam Clymer, “Poll Finds Americans Don’t Know U.S. Positions on Central America,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1983. The quote referred specifically to US policy toward Central America during the 1980s, but I will argue that the basic point applies more broadly. See also Justin Lewis, *Constructing Public Opinion: How Political Elites Do What They Like and Why We Seem to Go along with It* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), Chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup> The famous quote is from Senator Arthur Vandenberg.

<sup>5</sup> *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 2002). In an earlier era, such themes were also emphasized in the work of Charles Beard.

government to assert that leadership."<sup>7</sup> One of the easiest ways for "responsible leadership" to create and recreate public opinion is through the use of pretexts.

Some readers will no doubt feel uncomfortable with the general theme of this article, fearing that it falls in the category of a wildly implausible "conspiracy theory." What this ignores is that the use of pretexts is well established and documented. Operation Northwoods, noted in the epigram above, was a Joint Chiefs of Staff project, aimed at fabricating some sort of pretext to justify an invasion of Cuba. It should be noted that this proposal was ultimately rejected and, insofar as the records show, never implemented. But the fact that it was presented at such a high level underscores that the use of pretexts as a foreign policy tool is well understood in official circles. In some cases, pretexts were not merely advocated but also implemented. Consider the events that attended US intervention in Vietnam: It is widely recognized that the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident was largely a contrived event, a pretext designed to achieve congressional support for the military escalation that the Johnson administration was seeking. The incident refers to alleged North Vietnamese attacks against US naval vessels in the Tonkin Gulf. The official accounts of the "unprovoked attacks" involved a large measure of fabrication.<sup>8</sup> The ruse was successful, however, as both houses of Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which effectively gave the president a *carte blanche* to intervene in Vietnam. Despite this success, White House officials saw the need for additional pretexts to galvanize public opinion.

In February 1965, US officials seized upon a minor event in the Vietnamese village of Pleiku, where a Vietcong attack had killed several Americans. Such attacks were inevitable, given that US personnel operated in war zones. The incident was nevertheless emphasized as yet another act of Communist aggression, which demanded escalation. President Lyndon Johnson duly ordered a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam, which was followed up with large-scale US ground troops later in the year. In retrospect, there is little doubt that the Pleiku incident was simply another pretext, intended to justify a policy that had already been decided upon. This was strongly implied by presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy, who later commented that "Pleikus are streetcars," which caused historian George Kahin to add: "in other words, you could expect one [a streetcar] to come along presently and you were ready to board as soon as it did."<sup>9</sup> The administration had already decided on the need for escalation and was simply waiting for some event to justify the action and convince the public of its necessity.

It will be observed that pretexts come in two forms. The first type, which we will term an "orchestrated pretext," involves deliberate manufacture of key events to be used as pretexts. The Tonkin Gulf incident clearly involved

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 142–143.

<sup>8</sup> For a recent account of the deceptions associated with this event, see interview with Daniel Ellsberg, July 29, 1998, Institute for International Studies, University of California, Berkeley ([globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Ellsberg/ellsberg98-2.html](http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Ellsberg/ellsberg98-2.html)). Anthony Lewis writes that "Lyndon Johnson sent 500,000 men to Vietnam ... on the pretext of a Tonkin Gulf incident that did not happen." See Lewis, "The Fault, Dear Brutus," *New York Times*, November 27, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Both quotes from George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 277.

fabrication, combined with mis-presentation to the public. Northwoods too entailed the planned fabrication of events. The essence of an orchestrated pretext is that the identified "event" either never happened at all, or it happened in a way that was substantially different from what was presented to the public. A second type is what we will term a "pretext of convenience," whereby events occur fortuitously and serve to justify a preexisting program. The Pleiku incident would fit into this latter category, since the attack did occur as reported. On the other hand, it is clear that the Johnson administration was simply waiting for something to happen, well knowing that one of Bundy's proverbial streetcars would come along sooner or later.

The two types of pretexts have this in common: in both cases, the public is fundamentally misled regarding the true motivation of foreign policy élites. The public is shown evidence that the government used force reluctantly, in response to specific provocations; in reality the "provocations" (if they occurred at all) were merely intended to justify courses of action that were predetermined. Pretexts of convenience are the preferred method, since in this case there is no need to fabricate nonexistent events; there is accordingly less danger that the deception will unravel and cause a scandal. Obviously, it is safer to avoid outright lies. But when necessary, foreign policy élites may also arrange for an orchestrated pretext. Both types will be used, as circumstances require.

Some qualification is necessary: it is certainly true that many countries have throughout history used pretexts to justify aggressive actions. The US is hardly the only one to do so. For reasons of space we will confine our discussion to pretexts in US foreign policy. It should also be noted that the United States now spends as much on military power as the next 27 largest military powers combined.<sup>10</sup> The issue of pretexts in US policy is of special significance, given the extraordinary character of American dominance.

The discussion of pretexts is especially salient for the present period, which is truly an era of pretexts. While there is little doubt that the Bush administration was deeply shocked by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, there can be equally little doubt that the attacks were manipulatively used to justify a massive expansion of US power in the Middle East/Central Asia region, combined with an augmentation in the military budget. And in addition, there have been numerous "sub-pretexts," which have followed the attacks and have further served to justify policy. The war against Iraq, for example, was justified by the need to protect against "weapons of mass destruction," which later proved nonexistent. The Iraq war then itself became a pretext to justify a series of new domestic initiatives, across a broad range of areas. Sometimes the rationalizations used to justify these domestic programs have been outright ridiculous. In advocating for the administration's tax cut, for example, House Majority Leader Thomas Delay stated: "Nothing is more important in the face of a war than cutting taxes."<sup>11</sup>

The use of pretexts in the current period is so common that it has been widely recognized in the mass media, by pundits from a range of ideological perspectives. Thus, Arnaud de Borchgrave, writing in the *Washington Times*, notes: "When this writer first heard from prominent neo-conservatives in April

<sup>10</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p. 307.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in "The Budget Fight is Now," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2003.

2002 that the war was no longer a question of 'if' but 'when,' the *casus belli* had little to do with WMDs [weapons of mass destruction]." De Bourgrave adds pointedly that "WMDs were not the principal reason for going to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq; *they were the pretext* [emphasis added]."<sup>12</sup>

The point of this article is that the recent tendency to use events as pretexts—and then follow up with aggressive actions that were foreordained—has strong historical precedents. Indeed, I argue that it has been the main technique used by US foreign policy élites to justify their actions during the entire post-1945 period. The Tonkin Gulf incident and the more recent practices of the Bush administration cannot be seen as isolated events. Such practices have been the norm.

### **The Korean War and NSC-68**

The standard account of the Korean War asserts that it was, in essence, a politically simple conflict: on June 25, 1950, the North Korean military, acting at the behest of its backers in Beijing and especially Moscow, engaged in an unexpected and completely unprovoked invasion of South Korea. The international community, led by the United States and the United Nations, correctly understood this action to be an act of aggression, which was eventually repelled. The American decision to defend South Korea is easy to understand, as an implementation of containment. American motives can be interpreted as defensive.<sup>13</sup> It is also frequently asserted that the shock of the Korean War was decisive in leading to a massive change in US military posture associated with the famous National Security Council memorandum, NSC-68.<sup>14</sup> The implementation of NSC-68 led to a threefold increase in military spending in the United States. Given the dramatic nature of the communist aggression, policymakers had little choice except to increase military spending.

In recent years, the above view of the Korean War has been criticized and reinterpreted by a new coterie of historians, led by the University of Chicago's Bruce Cumings. Working with Korean language sources, Cumings has argued that the question of "who started the Korean War" is far more complicated than it would appear upon first consideration. Cumings notes that the Korean War of 1950 was in fact an extension of a civil war between left- and right-wing elements, which had commenced shortly after the liberation from the Japanese in 1945. The invasion in June 1950 must be seen in the context of this larger civil war.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the sense of shock that supposedly attended the June 1950 invasion is not well supported by the facts. Declassified documents from the 1948–1950 period underscore that Korea was not, in fact, considered strategically

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<sup>12</sup> A. de Borchgrave, "Iraq and the Gulf of Tonkin," *Washington Times*, February 10, 2004, available online at: <[www.washingtontimes.com/functions/print.php?StoryID=20040209-090308-2252r](http://www.washingtontimes.com/functions/print.php?StoryID=20040209-090308-2252r)>.

<sup>13</sup> This is a typical account of the Korean War. See, for example, Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 708–710.

<sup>14</sup> US National Security Council, "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," April 14, 1950, available online at: <[www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm)>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War* (London: Viking, 1988).

vital. A key document from this period was a March 1949 National Security Council study (NSC-8/2), which constituted the official US policy up until the North Korean attack. This document argued that the United States had “little strategic interest in maintaining its present troops and bases in Korea” and advocated the withdrawal of the remaining American forces. (These forces were in fact withdrawn in June 1949.) The document argued, in essence, that the US should continue to support South Korea with economic and political aid—but not as a high priority and not with US troops.<sup>16</sup> It should also be noted that NSC-2/8 anticipated that North Korea might seek to overthrow the Rhee regime “through direct military aggression.”<sup>17</sup> Evidently, the possibility of an invasion was anticipated in official circles. Though the exact timing was a surprise, the fact that the invasion occurred was not a surprise.

In light of these facts, the public display of emotionalism and near hysteria that attended the June 1950 invasion raises obvious questions: if US officials had long anticipated the possibility of an invasion, then why was the invasion considered such a shock when it actually occurred? And if Korea was regarded as being of only secondary strategic importance by major elements of the foreign policy bureaucracy, then why was the invasion treated as a watershed event?

And the interpretation of NSC-68 also seems questionable. It is generally accepted that the implementation of rearmament, called for in NSC-68, was closely connected with the Korean War; the elevated level of international tension that resulted from the North Korean invasion was one of the key shocks that convinced policymakers to accept the recommendations of NSC-68 and to implement massive rearmament. Once again, newly declassified information casts doubt on this interpretation. In fact, key figures in the Truman administration had *already* accepted the logic of NSC-68 and were determined to implement rearmament well before the invasion. Dean Acheson would later note that NSC-68 was approved by the president and “became national policy” in April 1950, i.e. two months *before* the North Korean invasion.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to NSC-68, the main issue for the Truman administration was to find a way to persuade the (otherwise skeptical) Congress and the public of the need for increased military expenditures. In what follows, I will argue that the administration essentially used the Korean War as a *pretext* to justify implementation of NSC-68 and to effectively “sell” the project to Congress and the public.

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–50* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 70–71. Note that the quote is actually from a Joint Chiefs of Staff report, which was cited approvingly in NSC-8/2. See also discussion in Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 251–253. Leffler begins his discussion by noting Korea’s “marginal” importance. Note that some State Department figures did view Korea as more important than the drafters of NSC-2/8; these dissenters do not appear to have had sufficient sway to affect the dominant view or to delay the exit of US troops from the peninsula.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*, *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 374. This point—that NSC-68 was approved before the North Korean invasion—is often missed. Michael Cox, for example, mistakenly writes: “Korea persuaded a skeptical Truman of the virtues of NSC-68.” See Cox, “The Empire’s Back in Town: Or America’s Imperial Temptation Again,” *Millennium* 32:1 (2003), p. 14.

The tense atmosphere that resulted from the war would prove an ideal environment to achieve these objectives.

Before proceeding further with the specifics, let us consider the general context in which these debates took place. The late 1940s had of course been a time of building the key foundations of the Cold War. The 1947 National Security Act had created the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, the Defense Department, and the reorganization of the armed services. The Truman Doctrine of containment also was declared in that year. The following year, 1948, brought the Marshall Plan. And in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created. There was only one shortcoming: the military budget remained remarkably small—approximately \$14 billion per year on the eve of the Korean War<sup>19</sup>—given the new global commitments that the United States had undertaken. The demobilization that had occurred after the end of World War II had never been fully “corrected,” partly because the public and the Congress remained skeptical of large-scale expenditure programs, which threatened the fiscal balance.

By the end of the 1940s, there was a growing asymmetry between the US political commitment on the one hand, which was truly global in scope; and the military capability to implement this program, on the other hand. The major constraint remained the small size of the military budget. This constraint, in turn, was causing serious political tensions, which could only be resolved through much greater resource allocations to the military.

The first of these tensions concerned the internal politics of the armed forces. The US strategic posture came to rely increasingly on squadrons of nuclear-equipped heavy bombers, directed by the Air Force. This posture limited the flexibility of the military, and it also limited the scope of US foreign policy more generally.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the strategy of hegemony “on the cheap” was causing turmoil within the military itself. It appeared that the Air Force had established a position of extreme privilege within the Cold War bureaucracy, to the detriment of the Navy, whose officers felt slighted. The fact that the Air Force had been created as a separate service only in 1947—and was thus seen as something of an “upstart” service—added to the sense of irritation. In response, the Navy sought to rival the Air Force with the creation of a new class of giant aircraft carriers, to be capable of launching bombers against the Soviet Union. The first of this new generation of aircraft carrier, far larger than any previous, was to be grandiosely named the “USS *United States*.” In 1949, in a major strategic decision, the Defense Department abruptly cancelled the USS *United States* project, several days after construction had begun. Due to limited funds, the Truman administration decided to emphasize production of B-36 bombers—to be operated by the Air Force—and to place on hold the Navy’s program of advanced carrier development.

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Commerce, *The National Income and Product Accounts of the United States, 1929–1974* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Whether one wishes to view US policy during this period as fundamentally acting defensively or offensively has been a matter of longstanding debate among historians. For recent discussions on this issue, see: Melvin P. Leffler, “Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened,” *Foreign Affairs* 75:4 (1996); and Robert Buzzanco, “What Happened to the New Left? Toward a Radical Reading of American Foreign Relations?” *Diplomatic History* 23:4 (1999).

The result of the USS *United States* cancellation was the “Revolt of the Admirals,” in which senior naval officers openly began to criticize both the Air Force and the overall military posture being advocated by key figures of the Truman administration. Naval officers launched a campaign of attack against the Air Force, focusing on supposed weaknesses of the B-36. The public airing of inter-service rivalries became an embarrassment. In 1949, Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower stated: “God help us if ever we go before a Congressional committee to argue our professional fights as each service struggles to get the lion’s share ... [Someday] public airing of grievances ... will go far beyond the bounds of decency and reason and someone will say, ‘Who’s the boss? The civilians or the military?’”<sup>21</sup> The Revolt of the Admirals forms part of the political backdrop that led to NSC-68.

The relative lack of funding also was having an impact on US influence overseas, especially in what was considered to be the most strategically critical area, Western Europe. Once again, the main problem was budgetary. By 1949–1950, European reconstruction was proving far more expensive than had been anticipated. Even the massive funds provided through the Marshall Plan were proving inadequate, and these would be exhausted by 1951. A “dollar gap” remained, as European economies lacked sufficient dollars to purchase vitally needed materials from the United States. A series of currency crises and other economic setbacks emerged during 1949, raising the possibility of more severe economic instability in the near future, once Marshall Plan funds were gone.

The possibility that economic recovery in Europe would falter was an alarming one for both economic and political reasons. Politically, there was the danger of increasing anti-American sentiment, which threatened NATO and the emerging plan for US hegemony on the continent. European élites had always accepted American hegemony with a measure of ambivalence, and this ambivalence continued throughout the immediate post-World War II period. In 1947, for example, the *Economist* noted:

Not many people in this country believe the communist thesis that it is the deliberate and conscious aim of American policy to ruin Britain and everything Britain stands for in the world. But the evidence can certainly be read that way. And if every time that aid is extended, conditions are attached which make it impossible for Britain ever to escape the necessity of going back for still more aid, to be obtained with still more self-abasement and on still more crippling terms, then the result will certainly be what the Communists predict.<sup>22</sup>

A failure of reconstruction threatened to encourage anti-US elements in Western Europe, posing a threat to the nascent alliance with the United States and its quest for global hegemony. The possibility that key European states

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<sup>21</sup> Herman S. Wolk, “The Battle of the B-36: The ‘Revolt of the Admirals’ Focused on the Big Bomber, but the Real Issues Ran Much Deeper,” *Air Force Magazine*, July 1996, available online at: < [www.afa.org/magazine/july1996/0796battl.asp](http://www.afa.org/magazine/july1996/0796battl.asp) > . See also Lt. Cdr. Andrew L. Lewis, “The Revolt of the Admirals,” unpublished research report, US Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1998, available online at: < [www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/docs/98-166.pdf](http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/docs/98-166.pdf) > . Eisenhower’s quote did not refer specifically to the Revolt of the Admirals (which occurred after the comment), but to Navy–Air Force tensions more generally.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Michael Hudson, *Super-Imperialism* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1972), pp. 189–190.

would turn neutral in the Cold War (“Finlandization”) was a consistent fear during this period.

The prospect of Finlandization also had an economic dimension. It was widely believed that a Europe outside of NATO would establish an autarkic economic policy, probably involving the use of regional currency and trading blocs, combined with barriers to trade with the United States. The possibility of European economic isolation was an additional source of anxiety for American policymakers, who regarded trade with Europe as essential for the continuing prosperity of the United States. A basic fear throughout this period was that the demobilization after World War II would lead to a renewed depression. Avoiding this possibility remained a basic objective of US foreign policy élites, who viewed world trade, especially with Europe, as a major stimulus to world economic dynamism and a key factor in preventing a post-war slump.<sup>23</sup> The way to avoid a slump, US officials believed,<sup>24</sup> was to ensure a successful reconstruction of Europe. In the long run, of course, European reconstruction would be enormously successful, and the “miracle” growth rates of western Germany, Italy, and France during the period 1950–1973 have been widely noted. However, this success is only evident in retrospect. During 1949–1950, post-war recovery seemed very fragile indeed. The possible failure of European reconstruction posed a major threat to this vision of trade-driven economic prosperity.

With Marshall funds running out, policymakers needed some other way of continuing support for European reconstruction. The possibility of using military aid as a means of financing reconstruction was considered. A 1950 State Department document noted the basic idea: “Congress is more likely to be sympathetic toward a program based upon military security than one in which part of the justification is based on continued economic recovery.” At the same time it was clearly recognized that military aid would be an efficacious method of bridging the dollar gap—since military aid would be granted in dollars—and thus would assist economic reconstruction. The State Department explicitly recognized this point: “The distinction between aid in support of foreign military effort abroad and aid for economic recovery is largely artificial.”<sup>25</sup> All of these factors clearly influenced the thinking of officials who were drafting NSC-68 in early 1950. Indeed, Paul Nitze, who directed the document’s drafting, noted that “our prime concern had remained ... the economic situation in Europe.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This discussion draws on Fred Block, “Economic Instability and Military Strength: The Paradoxes of the 1950 Rearmament Decision,” *Politics & Society* 10:1 (1980).

<sup>24</sup> Such policies were also favored by free trade industries and financial interests, who were closely integrated into policymaking during this period. See Fred Block, *The Origins of International Economic Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Lawrence Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977); and Thomas Ferguson, “From Normalcy to New Deal: Industrial Structure, Party Competition, and American Public Policy During the Great Depression,” *International Organization* 38:1 (1984).

<sup>25</sup> US Department of State, “Legislation for Foreign Aid Programs,” November 16, 1950 in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1950*, Vol. I (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 409.

<sup>26</sup> John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Nitze, “NSC-68 and the Soviet Threat Reconsidered,” *International Security* 4:4 (1980), p. 172.

NSC-68 itself was a curious document. Now fully declassified, much of the narrative was written in highly ideological language that sounds, at least in retrospect, like a series of Cold War clichés, regarding the rightness of the Western side and the evil of its communist adversaries. In its rhetorical style and basic arguments, it was clearly a continuation of well established policies. However, it represented a departure in the key respect that it recommended massive increases in military spending of more than 300%, for a target budget in the range of \$50 billion.<sup>27</sup> Though the language emphasized primarily the military and political character of the threat, there was some acknowledgment of the economic factors that influenced official thinking. NSC-68 noted that the augmented military spending would prove an economic benefit:

the economic effects of the [military spending] program might be to increase the gross national product by more than the amount being absorbed for additional military and foreign assistance purposes. One of the most significant lessons of our World War II experience was that the American economy, when it operates at a level approaching full efficiency can provide enormous resources for purposes other than civilian consumption while simultaneously providing a high standard of living.<sup>28</sup>

In essence, a form of “military Keynesianism” was explicitly advocated, in order to overcome incipient economic instability. To be sure, a program of more traditional Keynesian policy involving spending on public works, combined with some degree of economic planning, would have been a more efficient allocation of resources (at least from a strictly economic standpoint). However, such a program was ideologically unacceptable at the time. In any case, President Harry Truman privately approved the document’s recommendations.

In sum, the background to NSC-68 was a series of political tensions that could only be resolved through massively increased appropriations. Military spending was viewed as a potential panacea which would resolve (or at least reduce) inter-service rivalries in Washington, finance European reconstruction, and prevent a world economic downturn. It promised to solve the myriad problems facing US policymakers during the difficult period of 1949–1950. Yet, the administration faced yet an additional hurdle: convincing the public and Congress to support this proposal.

The possibility of getting the proposed spending increases through Congress seemed challenging to say the least, given the enormous sums being sought. A vast campaign of “persuasion” would be required. To be sure, the framers of NSC-68 realized that propaganda and salesmanship would be vitally important. Acheson notes in his memoirs that “throughout 1950 ... I went about the country preaching” the main points contained in NSC-68.<sup>29</sup> Acheson goes on to explain this public relations campaign, using remarkably frank language:

Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home a point ... In the State Department

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<sup>27</sup> Curiously, the NSC-68 document itself never offered a specific budget figure, which had been omitted to prevent bureaucratic feuds. It argued in general terms for a massive increase. However, Acheson made it clear that the framers of the document were thinking of a budget in the range of \$50 billion. See Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

<sup>28</sup> NSC-68, section IX, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

we used to discuss how much time that mythical “average American citizen” put in each day listening, reading, and arguing about the world outside his own country. Assuming a man or woman with a fair education, a family, and a job in or out of the house, it seemed to us that ten minutes a day would be a high average ... If we made our points *clearer than truth*, we did not differ from most other educators.<sup>30</sup>

The cynical reader must find a certain grim amusement in viewing such statements, notably Acheson’s condescending attitude regarding the intelligence of the average citizen, who required an “education” provided by the Secretary of State himself. Acheson was not above using propaganda—speaking in a language “clearer than truth”—which necessarily entailed deception and falsification.

Despite these propaganda efforts, the prospect of success must have seemed remote at the time. The public was clearly not enthusiastic about increases in military spending, as indicated by a March 1950 Gallup Poll, which found that only 23% favored augmented military spending; 67% were opposed. Even among those who favored increased spending, it seems doubtful that many of them would have supported the huge increases advocated in NSC-68.<sup>31</sup> In Congress too there was considerable opposition to new spending programs. This was especially true of the dominant Republican members of Congress, who held traditionally conservative views regarding government spending in all areas, including the military. The isolationist right-wingers within the Republican party were surely weakened by the events of the early Cold War; but they remained formidable, and they might well have blocked the full implementation of NSC-68—had the North Korean invasion not intervened.

The Korean War did indeed create a new atmosphere in the country, one that was far more conducive to the objectives of Acheson and other members of the Truman administration. The emotional reaction to the invasion is nicely evoked in President Truman’s first major speech on the topic:

On Sunday, June 25th, Communist forces attacked the Republic of Korea. This attack has made it clear, beyond all doubt, that the international Communist movement is willing to use armed invasion to conquer independent nations. An act of aggression such as this creates a very real danger to the security of all free nations ... Communist leaders have demonstrated their contempt for the basic moral principles on which the United Nations is founded.<sup>32</sup>

A *New York Times* correspondent on the US West Coast noted: “The first broad reaction [to the invasion] was the repetitious putting of the question ‘Is this it?’ Did it mean, everyone wanted to know, the start of the third world war?”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375, emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> From *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935–1971*, Vol. II (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 897–898. The 23% thought that current military spending at the time was “too little.” The 67% believed that military spending was “too much” or “about right.”

<sup>32</sup> Harry Truman, “Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Situation in Korea,” July 19, 1950, available online at: <[trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=823&st=&st1=](http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=823&st=&st1=)>.

<sup>33</sup> “Report from the Nation: All Eyes on Korea,” *New York Times*, July 2, 1950.

What is interesting about the above statements is the implication that the North Korean invasion was a shock to US policymakers and a major threat to US security. Retrospective accounts, similarly, have viewed the implementation of NSC-68, which followed, as an obvious and natural reaction to this overwhelmingly evidence of aggression. It is widely believed that “The Korean War forced a reluctant administration to accept rearmament.”<sup>34</sup> We have already seen that neither perception was accurate. Declassified documents make it clear that the invasion had been anticipated beforehand; and the US military was not predestined to defend South Korea, since the country was not considered strategically vital. Security considerations alone cannot explain the US reaction to North Korea’s invasion.

It also must be emphasized that the massive rearmament program was planned *before* the North Korean invasion. The officials of the Truman administration, led by Acheson, appear to have been awaiting some pretext that would persuade the public and Congress. On March 21, 1950, Acheson met with Congressman Christian Herter—a respected figure in State Department circles—to discuss the difficulties of implementing NSC-68; the need for a pretext was openly discussed. Acheson’s notes from the meeting offer the following account: “Mr. Herter said that he wondered whether it would be possible to *bring about ... some domestic crisis.*” Such a crisis, Herter observed, would give “the American people a realization of the seriousness of the situation,” and presumably would make them more likely to fall into line with the objectives of NSC-68. Acheson replied, “I do not believe it will be necessary to create such a situation, *the chances are too good that the Russians will do so themselves.*”<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, Acheson knew that something would come along sooner or later to establish the requisite atmosphere of crisis, and thus justify rearmament. As it turned out, the Korean War was an excellent pretext. While discussing the implementation of NSC-68 in his memoirs, Acheson notes: “it is doubtful whether anything like what happened in the next few years [following the drafting of NSC-68] could have been done *had not the Russians been stupid enough to have instigated the attack against South Korea.*”<sup>36</sup>

Thus it would appear that the North Korean invasion constituted a “pretext of convenience”; it simply presented itself, as a stroke of luck, at just the right moment to justify NSC-68. The Truman administration was savvy enough to take advantage of the situation by citing it as a major threat to US security and thus creating a public furor. To use the language of McGeorge Bundy, Korea was a “streetcar,” which appeared by chance. However, it is also possible that the situation was more complicated than this. There is some evidence that US officials—led once again by the Machiavellian Acheson—actively sought to lure North Korea into launching its invasion. Korea may thus fall into the category of an “orchestrated pretext.” The basic facts are these: on January 12, 1950, Acheson delivered a foreign policy speech at the Washington Press Club in which he outlined the US military posture in East Asia. The substance of his

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<sup>34</sup> Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*, *op. cit.*, p. 29. Note that in making this statement, Fordham is paraphrasing the views of others.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*, *op. cit.*, p. 69, emphasis added. Acheson did not specifically mention Korea in these notes. However, the later North Korean invasion would fit in with his statement that “the Russians will do so themselves.”

<sup>36</sup> Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, *op. cit.*, p. 374, emphasis added.

speech left some doubt as to whether South Korea fell within the “defense perimeter” that the US had established. Acheson thus created a degree of uncertainty as to the possible US response in the event of any future North Korean invasion. Later, after the war began, conservative critics would assert that the speech had been an act of gross incompetence by Acheson, who had inadvertently given a “green light” to the North Korean regime and its Soviet/Chinese backers. Curiously, Acheson himself essentially endorsed this interpretation of his Press Club speech, noting that he had been “inexperienced” and had spoken “off the cuff.”<sup>37</sup> Cumings has explored the circumstances surrounding Acheson’s famous speech and found that (contrary to Acheson’s own public account) he did not deliver the speech off the cuff. Acheson had painstakingly prepared the text, through multiple drafts, which he then vetted among his aides.<sup>38</sup>

There is little in his actions to suggest mere carelessness. More generally, Cumings suspects that Acheson was not the type to act with incompetence and that, in delivering his speech, Acheson probably was acting with intent:

When a reader peruses the papers of a prominent individual, sitting astride the daily flow of policy papers, memos, notes, letters, and diaries, one forms judgments. Some people you like more, others less; some reputations are enhanced, others diminished; eventually you arrive at fairly certain conclusions about the person. Acheson’s papers bring forth the unshakable conviction that he was not naïve, nor an inexperienced man. Indeed few secretaries of state have ever matched Acheson’s grasp of world affairs, his vision, his Olympian self confidence, his capacity to think things through... All this leads me to the assumption that Acheson knew what he was doing on January 12 [the date he delivered the speech].<sup>39</sup>

These facts suggest the possibility that Acheson was acting strategically when he made his Press Club speech, in an effort to encourage the North Korean invasion that followed. On the other hand, Cumings acknowledges a variety of possible motives for Acheson’s speech. There is no definitive evidence to establish his “real” motives, and so the matter must remain in doubt.<sup>40</sup> Whatever Acheson’s reasons for making the speech, one thing is clear: The June 1950 invasion was a decisive factor, which enabled the rearmament that Acheson and others were seeking.

The Korean War is remembered primarily for its sensational military aspects. Retrospective accounts typically emphasize battles, strategies, offensives, counteroffensives, movements of divisions, and the like. What such accounts obscure is the far more profound domestic transformation that was occurring, just beneath the surface, in the implementation of NSC-68. During the course of the war, the US underwent a full rearmament, well in excess of what was necessary to actually fight the Korean War. Congressional and popular skepticism was overcome. By 1954, annual US military spending was over \$41 billion per year,

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 408.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 420.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410–413.

<sup>40</sup> Cumings also considers the possibility that Acheson used the speech to send confusing signals to North Korea, China, and the USSR, in order to keep the communists off balance. *Ibid.*, pp. 427, 430–431.

which was close to what the framers of NSC-68 had sought.<sup>41</sup> The continued reconstruction of Europe was facilitated by NATO, which dispersed US dollars through overseas bases in Europe and also through the modernization of European military forces. The feared economic downturn did not occur and, indeed, the world experienced several decades of unprecedented prosperity. And the US military services were quieted by massive increases in spending, which funded both strategic bombers and aircraft carriers. The Navy's cherished super-carrier program was not abandoned, and the aircraft carrier remains to this day a centerpiece of US global strategy. The stark trade-offs associated with the earlier era of low spending were no longer necessary in the new environment of massive spending.

It was during this period that Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex" was truly created as a permanent feature of the US political economy. The militarization of large parts of the economy had major and irreversible effects on the political system and even the popular culture of the United States. In retrospect, the Korean War served primarily as a pretext to implement this militarization. Of the pretexts noted in this article, the Korean War was by far the most important, in that it laid the institutional groundwork for all the other pretexts that followed.

### The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

The crisis associated with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan of December 1979 has much in common with the events of the Korean War. In both cases, a communist invasion created a major war scare in the United States. In 1980, shortly after the Soviet invasion actually occurred, Fred Block made the following analysis:

The crisis created by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ... bears a striking resemblance to the events almost thirty years before when North Korean forces invaded South Korea ... In both situations, the invasions were widely seen as proof of the Soviet Union's commitment to a policy of global conquest, and each invasion precipitated an effort by the administration in Washington to increase dramatically U.S. levels of military spending ... a number of post-Afghanistan policy initiatives ... had the quality of *initiatives that were waiting for a crisis to justify them* [emphasis added], rather than being direct responses to a sudden change in the global political military situation.<sup>42</sup>

Block adds that in both cases, the invasions "precipitated a shift in U.S. policy that appeared to have been in preparation for some time before."

We will see that Block's initial hunch—that the Afghan invasion was a pretext—was indeed quite accurate. It has been strongly corroborated by information that has entered the public record in the years since the invasion. In what follows we will see that prior to the Afghan invasion, there had been an extended effort by elements of the foreign policy establishment to achieve a major increase in military spending. There is no single document, comparable to NSC-68, which spells out this program of augmented spending; nevertheless, there was a clear plan, openly discussed in public to achieve such an increase.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Commerce, *National Income and Product Accounts*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>42</sup> Block, "Economic Instability and Military Strength," *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Advocates of increased spending launched a vast and highly sophisticated lobbying campaign aimed at persuading the public (and skeptical elements of the government as well) of the need for rearmament. It was the Afghan crisis that enabled implementation of this program. To be sure, there were additional events—instability in Central America, alleged Soviet adventurism in Africa, and especially the Iranian Revolution—which contributed to the atmosphere of crisis and helped to legitimate the shift in policy. However, it was the Afghan invasion, above all, which was presented as the premier “threat” to US security, and so we will focus on this case.

The Afghan crisis began in April 1978, when the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in a *coup d’état*. Most of the evidence that has come from Soviet sources since the end of the Cold War indicates that the Soviet leadership did not trigger the coup and was highly suspicious of the PDPA leadership.<sup>43</sup> Once in power the PDPA, through brutality and misrule, alienated most of the rural population, which led in turn to a large-scale rebellion led by a series of scattered Muslim guerrilla groups, collectively referred to as the Mujahiddin.<sup>44</sup> In the context of this civil war, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan during December 24–27, 1979 and occupied the country for nearly a decade.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was treated with at least as much emotionalism as the Korean case. Superficially, the Afghan invasion seemed even more serious, since this time it was not a perceived Soviet surrogate that was undertaking the invasion (like North Korea); it was the Soviet Army itself that had invaded. The invasion constituted the largest use of Soviet military force by far since World War II. There was general agreement at the time that the Soviet invasion constituted (in the words of Lane Kirkland) “the greatest threat to peace since World War II,” and a menace to US security.<sup>45</sup>

Under scrutiny, however, there was little evidence that the Soviet invasion was a threat to US security. To be sure, Afghanistan did have some strategic importance, in that it bordered the USSR. As a potential security threat to the Persian Gulf and to Western interests, however, it held virtually no importance. The country has exceptionally rugged topography, with vast deserts and mountain ranges (with peaks up to 25,000 feet). It had only a rudimentary infrastructure, no railroads, and no direct outlets to the sea. It was not, in fact, very close to the Persian Gulf (indeed the Soviet Union itself was not very much further from the Gulf). For most of the Cold War, American officials assumed that the country’s significance for Western security was virtually nil. A 1950 document from the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated, for example, that “Afghanistan is of little or

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<sup>43</sup> The best account of this period, based on recent materials from the ex-USSR, is in Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 25–32. Regarding the ex-Soviet documents, see also David N. Gibbs, “Why Did the Soviet Union Invade Afghanistan?” paper presented at conference on Hot Wars During the Cold War at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, May 2004.

<sup>44</sup> For background, see David N. Gibbs, “The Peasant as Counterrevolutionary: The Rural Origins of the Afghan Insurgency,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 21:1 (1986).

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Ed Townsend, “AFL-CIO Rallies to Sakharov Cause,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 1980.

no strategic importance to the United States."<sup>46</sup> A 1954 National Intelligence Estimate noted that "Afghanistan's primitive economy, underdeveloped resources, negligible military capabilities, and lack of useful strategic facilities severely restrict its positive value."<sup>47</sup> The record of declassified documents becomes somewhat thin during the later period (especially during the 1970s). However, the available evidence suggests that Afghanistan remained unimportant: a 1973 article in the *Wall Street Journal* was entitled: "Do the Russians Covet Afghanistan? If So, it is Hard to Figure Why."<sup>48</sup> In 1989, as Soviet troops ended their occupation, American officials once again acknowledged that Afghanistan held little relevance for Persian Gulf security. In that year, the *New York Times* offered the following quotes: "'The bottom line is that Afghanistan is not Iran,' said an Administration official. 'It has no oil reserves and isn't located on the Persian Gulf. *It's not a particular strategic prize* [emphasis added].'"<sup>49</sup>

All of this must raise some obvious questions: if Afghanistan was of such limited importance for US security, then why did American officials make claims to the contrary in December 1979? Why did a country in which the US had never shown much interest—which had been characterized as "a wasteland" and "a vast expanse of desert waste"<sup>50</sup>—suddenly elicit such intense concern? In the discussion that follows, I will argue that Afghanistan was not really a central issue; it was a pretext, intended to elicit public support for rearmament.

Let us now turn to the larger context in which the Afghan invasion occurred. During the period leading up to the 1979 invasion, US foreign policy faced three main constraints. First, the American debacle in Vietnam had weakened the prestige of the US military and this led, in turn, to significantly lowered military budgets, during the years that followed, as indicated in Table 1.

It will be noted that military spending was in a steep decline, almost continuously since 1968 (the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and a turning point in public perceptions of the war). The result was a sizable decrease in absolute military spending. As a percentage of the GDP, the drop in military spending was even more sizable, accounting for only 5.1% of GDP by 1978. This decline posed major challenges to the military-industrial complex, including both weapons manufacturers and uniformed personnel.

A second problem during the post-Vietnam era was heightened challenges to US hegemony, emanating primarily from the Third World, which threatened US power and prestige. At a symbolic level, many "radical" Third World regimes openly used anti-American rhetoric. At a more substantive level, Third World states became increasingly assertive in their dealings with foreign investors, making demands for joint ownership of facilities, augmented revenues, and

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<sup>46</sup> US Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Program Assistance for the General Area of China," January 16, 1950, p. 35. From *Declassified Documents Reference System Online*.

<sup>47</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, "Outlook for Afghanistan, 1954," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, Vol. XI (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 1492.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Kann, "Do the Russians Covet Afghanistan? If So, it is Hard to Figure Why," *Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 1973.

<sup>49</sup> Elaine Sciolino, "To U.S., Afghanistan Seems to Move Farther Away," *New York Times*, February 12, 1989.

<sup>50</sup> Quotes from Kann, *Wall Street Journal*, *op. cit.*, 1973.

**Table 1.** US military expenditures, 1968–1978

	Spending in millions of US dollars at constant 1973 prices	As percentage of GDP
1968	\$103,077	9.3
1969	\$98,698	8.7
1970	\$89,065	7.9
1971	\$82,111	7.1
1972	\$82,469	6.6
1973	\$78,358	6.0
1974	\$77,383	6.1
1975	\$75,068	6.0
1976	\$71,022	5.4
1977	\$73,966	5.3
1978	\$71.475	5.1

Sources: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook, 1979* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1979), pp. 35, 37; and *SIPRI Yearbook, 1983* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1983), pp. 161, 171.

shared technology.<sup>51</sup> Multinational corporations—which in an earlier era could dictate to “banana republics”—now found themselves on the defensive. The ability of American military power to intimidate foreign governments, and thus ease up their demands against US-owned businesses, was reduced during this period. In March 1979, *Business Week* ran a special issue on the “Decline of U.S. Power,” which made the following observations:

The U.S. has been buffeted by an unnerving series of shocks that signal an accelerating erosion of power and influence ... “As I travel the world, there is no question that U.S. prestige is being openly questioned and challenged”, says Otto Schoeppler, chairman of Chase Manhattan Ltd. in London ... “There is also a parallel decline in standing and prestige of U.S. companies in international markets” ... And S. A. Constance managing director of Manufacturers Hanover Ltd in London goes even further: “The most talked about subject in the world” is the erosion of American power, “and nothing could epitomize it more than the spectacle of the Mexican President lecturing the President of the U.S.”<sup>52</sup>

Clearly tensions were building up, as US political weaknesses began to pose problems for multinational business interests.

A third major challenge existed with regard to the Persian Gulf, which was of course one of the most strategically vital areas in the world. The problem was that the US had major interests in the Gulf, but few means to protect those interests with military power. Until 1968, the oilfields were protected by Great Britain, which maintained a land- and naval-based force in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf. However, due to the high expense of these forces, the British gradually withdrew, during 1968–1971.<sup>53</sup> Thereafter, Western interests were considered vulnerable. The US sought to use the Shah of Iran as America’s

<sup>51</sup> See Joseph LaPalombara and Stephen Blank, *Multinational Corporations and Developing Countries* (New York: Conference Board, 1979); and Thomas Biersteker, *Multinationals, the State, and Control of the Nigerian Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>52</sup> “The Decline of U.S. Power: The New Debate over Guns and Butter,” *Business Week*, March 12, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Regarding the politics of the British military withdrawal, see Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), pp. 608–613.

“gendarme” in the Gulf during the 1970s, but the Shah was never considered as reliable as Britain had been (and of course the Shah was overthrown in 1979). Western vulnerability was dramatically demonstrated during 1973–1974, when members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries vastly increased the price of oil exports, effectively disrupting economic stability throughout the Western world. In the midst of this oil crisis, American officials seriously considered seizing the Persian Gulf oil facilities by force, in order to ensure continued access.<sup>54</sup> This plan was not implemented, however, presumably because officials were skittish about any new overseas adventures, which might lead to Vietnam-style disasters. Also, the US lacked sufficient bases and other military infrastructure in the region, which were required as staging areas for the proposed attacks. So, the seizure of the oilfields was never undertaken. In 1979, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution, there was a second round of oil price rises, with further damaging effects. And once again, the US could make no significant military response.

By the end of the 1970s, there was a collective perception of “crisis” in US foreign policy (which resulted from the after-effects of the Vietnam War), combined with weaknesses in the Persian Gulf. In response, there was a campaign to alter foreign and military policies in fundamental ways, in order to reestablish the more forceful stance of the early Cold War. In many respects, this campaign offers a direct parallel to similar efforts, previously discussed, associated with NSC-68. During the 1970s, however, the rearmament campaign did not emanate primarily from within the executive branch—as NSC-68 did—but from outside pressure groups. A broad coalition of élites within the military-industrial complex and the foreign policy establishment mobilized for a major campaign.

The central organization in this vast lobbying effort was the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), which was newly created in 1976. Its Board of Directors listed an exceptionally prestigious range of foreign policy figures, including former generals and admirals (such as General Lyman Lemnitzer, a key advocate for Operation Northwoods, mentioned earlier), as well as high-level civilian officials. A key figure in the CPD was former Defense Department official Paul Nitze, who had directed the drafting of NSC-68 during the Truman administration. Anti-communist labor figures, such as Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO, were also prominent. For funding, the CPD and its affiliated groups were lavishly supported by the military procurement companies, which had an obvious interest in rearmament.<sup>55</sup> *Business Week* succinctly characterized the CPD as a group formed “to lobby for bigger defense budgets and filled with veteran cold warriors.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Reynolds, “U.S. Ready to Seize Gulf Oil in 1973,” British Broadcasting Corporation, January 2, 2004, available online at: <[news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3333995.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3333995.stm)> .

<sup>55</sup> Jerry Sanders notes that supporters of the various lobbying groups associated with the CPD included Honeywell, McDonnell-Douglas, Lockheed, and Motorola. David Packard, of Hewlett-Packard, was one of the CPD’s vice chairmen. See Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), pp. 154, 222–224.

<sup>56</sup> “Lobbies,” *Business Week*, November 29, 1976.

The Committee had considerable influence within both parties in Congress, and also the prestige media. The CPD initially adopted an adversarial attitude *vis-à-vis* the Carter administration, which seemed excessively dovish and committed to détente with the Soviets.<sup>57</sup> However, Committee members retained important points of contact within the administration, notably at the National Security Council; the instinctive anti-communism of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski dovetailed nicely with the forceful world-view of the CPD. Opposed to the CPD line were such figures as Cyrus Vance at the State Department and Andrew Young, who served as US delegate to the United Nations, and these more moderate figures initially held sway within the administration. It would go beyond the scope of this discussion to provide a full account of the complex bureaucratic politics of this period. Suffice it to say that, over time, the external lobbying efforts exerted considerable influence over the Carter administration. By late 1978, there was a change of direction within the administration, in favor of a more assertive stance being advocated by the Committee on the Present Danger.

The shift in power was manifested by the increased centralization of activity within the National Security Council, under Brzezinski. More moderate figures, such as Vance and Young, were gradually sidelined (and later, both men were effectively forced out of the administration altogether). By early 1979, the Carter administration began a substantial increase in military purchasing, which fueled an arms boom. On January 21, 1979, the *Washington Post* reported:

Business is booming for most of the defense contractors of this country and will stay that way. This is the view from the executive suites of the aerospace industry as well as from the cubicles of the Commerce Department where analysts have been going over the sales figures on planes, ships, missiles, and tanks ... "Business hasn't been as good as this since the late 1950s and early 1960s" when the United States was rushing to deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles and airlines were buying lots of new planes, said James W. Beggs, executive vice president of General Dynamics.<sup>58</sup>

The president's recommended budget, submitted in January 1979, called for a 3% (inflation adjusted) increase in military spending. The increase was especially significant since the overall budget emphasized austerity and spending cuts for major domestic programs; the military was one of the few areas that saw increased spending. There was also a military buildup in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf, which marked a break with past policies. In February 1979, Brzezinski "submitted a memo to the President urging a new 'security framework' to reassert US power and influence in the region, *thus abandoning our earlier plans* to demilitarize the Indian Ocean." The following month, President Carter accepted Brzezinski's recommendation to send an aircraft carrier task force to the Indian Ocean, as well as aerial command and control aircraft to Saudi Arabia and arms supplies for a friendly regime in North Yemen. In memoirs, Brzezinski concludes that "by early 1980 the ground had been laid for

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<sup>57</sup> Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>58</sup> George C. Wilson, "Business Booms for Weapons Makers," *Washington Post*, January 21, 1979.

a more formal American commitment to the protection of the [Persian Gulf] region."<sup>59</sup>

Despite these concessions, Carter was pressured to augment military spending even further and to intensify the buildup in the Gulf. CPD members, especially Nitze, continued to prod President Carter, and such prodding was taken very seriously within the administration.<sup>60</sup> By June 1979, the *Washington Post* noted: "In order to 'beat' Paul Nitze, the Carter administration has had to join him."<sup>61</sup>

Clearly, additional augmentations in military spending would be required, beyond those implemented during 1979. The main problem was once again the public. While elite opinion had shifted in favor of the CPD view, the general public remained skeptical. A January 1979 poll found that only 34% favored increased military spending.<sup>62</sup> A subsequent poll in June 1979 found the public overwhelmingly concerned with domestic economic problems, notably the high cost of living; only 5% listed "International Problems, Foreign Policy" as a major concern.<sup>63</sup> It was not at all clear that voters were ready to support the rearmament policies being pursued by the CPD and, increasingly, the Carter administration as well. The Democratic Party's liberal wing, led by Senator Edward Kennedy, remained a threat to Carter, especially in light of Kennedy's intention to challenge Carter for the party's presidential nomination in 1980.

In short, it appears that the Carter administration had largely decided on the necessity of full rearmament. To gain public support for this policy, however, would require some new Soviet provocation and an atmosphere of crisis. The December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan helped to provide that crisis atmosphere, just as the Korean War had provided a crisis in 1950. In his January 1980 State of the Union address, President Carter made the following dramatic statement: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force [the USSR] to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."<sup>64</sup> The president threatened war against the Soviet Union. In addition, he called for a

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<sup>59</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), pp. 446–447, emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Even as late as March 1980, CPD member William R. Van Cleave stated that Carter's policies were "too little and far too late." Quoted in John K. Cooley, "Pentagon to Forge Budget 'Extras': Lobbies Gird for Battle," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 17, 1980.

<sup>61</sup> This statement referred to Nitze's plan for protecting land-based nuclear missiles; however, it nicely characterizes the more general nature of interaction between Carter and the CPD. Quoted from C. Robert Zelnick, "Paul Nitze: The Nemesis of SALT II," *Washington Post*, June 24, 1979. Soviet officials assumed that détente was effectively dead even before the invasion of Afghanistan. See Odd Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A': New Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, no date, available online at: <wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=library.document&topic\_id=1409&id=391>.

<sup>62</sup> Adam Clymer, "Carter Budget Gets Support in Survey: Public Backs Cuts in Spending as Key Way to Combat Inflation," *New York Times*, January 31, 1979.

<sup>63</sup> *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1979* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1980), pp. 176–177.

<sup>64</sup> Jimmy Carter, "The State of the Union Annual Message to the Congress," January 21, 1980, available online at: <www.presidency.ucsb.edu/site/docs/doc\_sou.php?admin=39&doc=3>.

5% (inflation adjusted) annual increase in military spending, which was considerably higher than the 3% increase of 1979. It was understood that this augmentation in spending was to be sustained over a period of several years, in order to fund a sizable shift in the strategic balance.<sup>65</sup> Carter undertook a series of additional changes in the US military posture, the most significant of which was the implementation of a Rapid Deployment Force, which was intended to give the US a major intervention capability in the Persian Gulf region, which it had previously lacked.<sup>66</sup>

US rearmament would now be fully implemented, without any major political constraints. The criticisms offered by Senator Kennedy, that rearmament would weaken social programs, were no longer credible in light of the perceived "crisis." To be sure, the crisis concerned a country—Afghanistan—that officials had long insisted was of very limited importance to US security, and it remained of limited importance. This point received scant attention at the time.

In public, nearly everyone expressed apprehension regarding the implications of a Soviet occupied Afghanistan. However, such expressions of concern were mixed with a measure of satisfaction that the invasion offered "opportunities" to forge a shift in policy. In his memoirs, Brzezinski notes that the invasion "represented an opportunity for him [Carter] to demonstrate his genuine toughness,"<sup>67</sup> thus helping to appease Carter's CPD critics. An editorial in *Air Force Magazine* took a more expansive view: "The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan can provide a catalyst for putting U.S. foreign and defense policy on the road to renewed credibility. The Russian seizure in Afghanistan was a tragedy for the Afghans ... and a blow to U.S. strategic interests. *Nevertheless adversity can be turned into opportunity and opportunity into advantage* [emphasis added]." The article noted that Soviet support for "North Korea's invasion of the south in 1950 triggered U.S. rearmament," with the hopeful implication that the Afghan invasion might have a similar, galvanizing effect. The editorial concluded that by invading Afghanistan, "The Soviets, once again, may have inadvertently saved us from ourselves."<sup>68</sup>

It thus appears that the Afghan invasion was a pretext of convenience, which came at just the right time. However, new evidence has emerged, suggesting that the Carter administration might have deliberately provoked the invasion. This assertion will surprise some readers, so let us consider the point at length: in 1996, former CIA official Robert Gates revealed that in July 1979—six months before the Soviets invaded—President Carter approved a secret program to aid anti-communist Mujahiddin guerrillas, who were fighting in Afghanistan.<sup>69</sup> The level of aid, only several hundred thousand dollars, was small, but its political significance was substantial. American officials must have realized that the USSR

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<sup>65</sup> One month after the invasion, the *Washington Post* reported: "Very good times are indeed around the corner for many defense contractors." George C. Wilson quoted in Hobart Rowen, "Fiscal '81 Budget a Victim of New Cold War," *Washington Post*, January 20, 1980.

<sup>66</sup> Joe Stork, "The Carter Doctrine and U.S. Bases in the Middle East," *MERIP Reports*, September 1980.

<sup>67</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

<sup>68</sup> John L. Frisbee, "Afghanistan: A Watershed," *Air Force Magazine*, February 1980.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Michael Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 146–147.

would regard this aid as a serious provocation on its southern frontier. And so, the possibility must remain open that the secret US aid program contributed to Soviet paranoia at the time and influenced their later decision to invade.

In a 1998 interview with the French press, Brzezinski provides further evidence of US provocation. In that interview, Brzezinski confirms Gates' earlier assertion about the secret aid to the Mujahiddin. He then goes on to explain US motives in furnishing that aid:

According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahiddin began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. But the reality, closely guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention ... It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap ... The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, essentially: "We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war."<sup>70</sup>

Evidently, the Afghan crisis entailed a measure of fabrication. Far from being a threat to Western security—as the public was told at the time—it is clear that at least some officials viewed the 1979 invasion as a *positive* development in the Cold War, one that was actively welcomed. Brzezinski himself was pleased about "drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap" and giving "the USSR its Vietnam war." And by his own account, Brzezinski recognized that in aiding the Mujahiddin, US policy increased the likelihood of a Soviet invasion.

Whatever the intentions of Brzezinski and his colleagues at this time, there is little doubt that the invasion furnished an ideal political environment for increasing the military budget—despite earlier public skepticism—and "correcting" for perceived US weakness following the Vietnam defeat. During the period 1980–1985, the US underwent the largest peacetime military buildup in history, reversing the post-Vietnam pattern of lowered military spending. The Rapid Deployment Force evolved into the US military's Central Command, which provided a permanent presence in the Gulf region and protected US oil interests, thus fulfilling a long-term strategic objective. (Alternative strategies, based on oil conservation and the development of alternatives to fossil fuels—which would have been more efficient in the long run—were now considered unnecessary.<sup>71</sup>) And there emerged a consensus in favor of actually using this new military capability from time to time, leading to a series of major interven-

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in "Les Révélations d'un Ancien Conseiller de Carter: 'Oui, la CIA est Entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes ...'" *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Paris), January 15–21, 1998, emphasis added, translation by William Blum and David Gibbs. An English translation is available online at: <[www.gened.arizona.edu/dgibbs/brzezinski\\_interview.htm](http://www.gened.arizona.edu/dgibbs/brzezinski_interview.htm)>. Brzezinski also makes the following (internally contradictory) statement: "We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would."

<sup>71</sup> Thus, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1991: "The federal government is spending as much on the Persian Gulf war every five to 10 hours as it has budgeted for energy-efficiency research in all of fiscal 1991." David Stipp, "Split Personality: Americans are Loath to Curb Energy Use Despite War Concerns," *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 1991.

tions during the 1980s. Whether it resulted from chance or deliberate provocation, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was extremely helpful in achieving these objectives.

### **The War on Terrorism**

Crises can be opportunities. (David Wurmser, American Enterprise Institute, January 2001<sup>72</sup>)

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were of course decisive events in the history of US foreign policy, and they proved an ideal pretext for yet a third major round of rearmament. While there has been some speculation that the Bush administration had foreknowledge of the attacks and deliberately allowed them to occur,<sup>73</sup> such an interpretation seems extremely implausible. The fact that the Al Qaeda attacks damaged the Pentagon, and nearly killed a large portion of the US military leadership, makes it unlikely that these attacks would fall into the category of an orchestrated pretext. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that as a fortuitous event—as a pretext of convenience—the Al Qaeda attacks were useful to the objectives of the Bush administration.

Let us now turn to the larger context in which the attacks took place. The main “problem” that the United States faced, prior to September 11, was the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the country’s main enemy, the Soviet Union. This may upon first consideration seem paradoxical, since the USSR’s collapse was widely viewed as a sensational victory and the achievement of a longstanding objective. Nevertheless, the lack of an enemy which followed was problematic, since there was no longer any obvious way to justify US military expenditures. The basic anxiety was nicely expressed by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell. In a 1991 interview, General Powell stated: “Think hard about it. I’m running out of demons. I’m running out of villains. I’m down to Castro and Kim Il Sung.”<sup>74</sup> Obviously, Castro and Kim were not adequate substitutes for the (then disintegrating) Soviet Union.

Losing the primary enemy was a difficult and disorienting experience for foreign policy élites, especially since virtually all military spending since World War II had been justified as necessary to protect against the Soviets. The 1991 Gulf War temporarily boosted military’s prestige and prevented even deeper cuts; but this victory could not reverse the basic trajectory of reduced spending. The military responded to the new political environment in several ways. The first reaction was a plan, directed by General Powell, to reduce the size of the military by approximately one quarter. Clearly, some reduction would be expected, and the military sought to anticipate this demand in order to minimize

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<sup>72</sup> David Wurmser, “Middle East ‘War’: How Did it Come to This?” *AEI Online*, January 1, 2001, available online at: <[www.aei.org/include/pub\\_print.asp?pubID=12266](http://www.aei.org/include/pub_print.asp?pubID=12266)>.

<sup>73</sup> As implied in Michael Meacher, “This War on Terrorism is Bogus: The 9/11 Attacks Gave the U.S. an Ideal Pretext to Use Force to Secure its Global Domination,” *Guardian*, September 6, 2003. Despite its implausible thesis, this is an extremely informative article.

<sup>74</sup> “General Advocates Cuts in U.S. Military Budget,” *Toronto Star*, April 9, 1991.

its effects. The military force that remained was intended to stay at that approximate level—75% of its size at the end of the Cold War—indefinitely.<sup>75</sup>

In order to justify this still sizable military force, there was an active search for new enemies. This was to prove a difficult task, and no really adequate enemy presented itself (until, of course, September 11). During the early 1990s, General Powell had established a Regional Defense Strategy, which declared that the US would now seek to contain a variety of medium-sized “rogue states,” as a substitute for the USSR. The basic absurdity of this strategy as a justification for the military budget was summed up by Matthew Evangelista in 1997: “The U.S. government has not made the case for sustaining near Cold War-levels of military spending (about \$280 billion) when the potential adversaries it names (Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, and Syria) between them spend only \$22 billion.”<sup>76</sup> Efforts to establish more substantial enemies faced other problems. Throughout the 1990s, there was considerable effort to promote China as a possible enemy state, but this effort was opposed and largely impeded by powerful business interests who sought to benefit from the considerable trade and investment opportunities that were opening up in China during this period. The concept of “humanitarian intervention” was another possible justification, and it posited that the US military could act across the globe as an altruistic force by alleviating famine, defending minorities against persecution, furthering democracy, and overthrowing dictatorships. Humanitarian intervention was probably the most successful of all the “coping” strategies that were tried as a justification for the military, and the idea proved popular among intellectuals and pundits in the media, who widely promoted it.<sup>77</sup> However, humanitarian crises never generated the same level of public interest and fear that the purported threat from communism had produced during the Cold War. Something more was needed.

The search for new enemies sometimes reached comic proportions. In 1992, the Pentagon produced a Defense Planning Guidance document. The report described America’s allies in hostile terms and—in all seriousness—it contemplated the possibility of “military rivalry” with Germany and Japan. The draft document was leaked to the press and excerpts were published in the *New York Times*; the plan elicited ridicule. The Defense Planning Guidance was revised, dropping the controversial parts. Nevertheless, this episode underscores the sense of near desperation among the foreign policy establishment, in their effort to generate new enemies.<sup>78</sup>

In any event, the military budget did indeed decline from its height during the Cold War (though the US military remained, by far, the best funded in the

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<sup>75</sup> Described in Michael T. Klare, *Rogue States and Nuclear Outlaws: America’s Search for a New Foreign Policy* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), pp. 32–34.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew Evangelista, “Second Guessing the Experts: Citizens’ Group Criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Soviet Military Estimates,” *International History Review* 19:3 (1997), p. 592.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>78</sup> See description of this controversy in Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992; and “Excerpts From Pentagon’s Plan: ‘Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,’” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

**Table 2.** US military expenditures, 1989–1998

	Spending in millions of US dollars at constant 1995 prices	As percentage of GDP
1989	\$373,618	5.6
1990	\$356,994	5.3
1991	\$313,647	4.7
1992	\$331,280	4.9
1993	\$313,784	4.5
1994	\$296,188	4.2
1995	\$278,856	3.8
1996	\$263,727	3.5
1997	\$262,159	3.4
1998	\$251,836	3.1

Sources: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook, 2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 284; *SIPRI Yearbook, 1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 311, 318.

world). Powell’s concept of a “75%” military was essentially acted upon during the early 1990s, and even slightly exceeded. There was a significant downsizing, as indicated in Table 2.

It will be noted that during the period 1989–1998, the real level of military spending declined from approximately \$374 billion to \$252 billion—a considerable drop. When military spending is considered as a percentage of GDP, the decline is even more impressive, reaching a low point of just over 3% of GDP by 1998.

This decline in military spending was causing difficulties for the cluster of interest groups associated with the military-industrial complex. To be sure, few of the new weapons development programs begun during the Cold War were actually cancelled; the military was simply unable to part with these. Instead, money was saved in such mundane (but vital) areas as training and equipment maintenance. As a result, the military’s readiness level was reduced considerably.<sup>79</sup> Whether one wishes to view these problems as “serious” or not depends on point of view. On the one hand, the military services surely found the reduced levels of operational readiness, combined with the lowered funding, to be a humiliation. On the other hand, these deficiencies could not have been too serious, given the lack of enemies at the time.

The lowered military budgets posed additional problems: The military sought new types of weapons systems, incorporating the latest electronic targeting technology and robotics, in order to implement a planned “Revolution in Military Affairs.” But many of these modernized weapons systems could not be fully funded, given the budgetary levels that prevailed during the 1990s. The private sector element of the military-industrial complex was also negatively affected. A 1993 study noted: “The dramatic reduction in U.S. military

<sup>79</sup> These deficiencies are emphasized in William Greider, *Fortress America: The American Military and the Consequences of Peace* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998).

expenditures is presenting a serious challenge to the financial stability of U.S. defense and aerospace corporations."<sup>80</sup>

Other interest groups sided with the military-industrial complex and favored increased US force projection. This was especially true of the oil and gas sector, which sought military protection for their burgeoning investments in the resource-rich states of Central Asia (notably Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). In addition, the oil and gas companies' agenda included augmented US military presence in the Persian Gulf as well as "regime change" in Iraq, which promised to open the sizable Iraqi oil reserves for commercial development.<sup>81</sup> (Even Thomas Friedman conceded in January 2003: "Any war we launch in Iraq will certainly be—in part—about oil. To deny that is laughable."<sup>82</sup>) The oil and gas industry traditionally has maintained close ties to the military-industrial complex, owing to the industry's huge investments in drilling equipment, pipelines, and other expensive facilities—often located in unstable regions—combined with the need to protect these facilities with military force.<sup>83</sup> Once again, an array of powerful interests chafed at the "insufficient" levels of military spending and favored a shift in policy.

Thus, reduced military expenditures were generating political tensions that could be resolved only through augmented budgetary allocations. This time, there was no intense, public lobbying campaign in favor of rearmament, comparable to the previous campaign spearheaded by the CPD in an earlier era. During the 1990s, such a campaign would have lacked even a superficial credibility, given the absence of enemies. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, with little fanfare, plans were being laid for yet another round of rearmament. In 1997, a new organization was created, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which claimed "to promote American global leadership."<sup>84</sup> With close ties to the military-industrial complex, the PNAC became the main advocacy group in favor of rearmament.

In September 2000, shortly before the presidential election, the PNAC issued a detailed report entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. The report explicitly called for the US military to embrace the Revolution in Military Affairs, and to forgo older, obsolete strategies based on outmoded technology. It called for an

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<sup>80</sup> Defense Conversion Commission, *The Impact of Reduced Defense Spending on U.S. Defense Contractors* (Washington, DC: DRI/McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> See Dan Morgan and David B. Ottaway, "In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil is Key Issue: U.S. Drillers Eye Huge Petroleum Pool," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2002; Thomas Ferguson and Robert A. Johnson, "Oil Economics Lubricates Push for War," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2002; and Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

<sup>82</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "A War for Oil?" *New York Times*, January 5, 2003.

<sup>83</sup> This alliance is nicely illustrated by the career trajectory of Richard Cheney, who is closely connected to both the oil industry and the military-industrial complex. He famously served as chief executive for the oil services firm Halliburton, and had previously served as Secretary of Defense. While a member of Congress during the 1980s, Cheney was a prominent figure on the House Intelligence Committee, which was deeply involved in the covert operations of the Reagan era. Cheney's wife, Lynne Cheney, sat on the Board of Directors for Lockheed-Martin, a top military contracting firm (she resigned in January 2001). See "Monday Morning," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2001. In addition, George W. Bush (junior) has close connections to the military and oil sectors, both directly and through his father.

<sup>84</sup> See the PNAC website at: <[www.newamericancentury.org/aboutpnac.htm](http://www.newamericancentury.org/aboutpnac.htm)> .

aggressive arms buildup to accompany this transformation, which included the deployment of missile defense systems, combined with abandonment of treaties that blocked such deployment. The report proposed more extensive projection of US power abroad, especially in the Persian Gulf and southeast Asia. Above all, the PNAC document expressed alarm about the “low” level of military funding. It lamented that current spending as a proportion of gross domestic product was “less than at any time since before the United States established itself as the world’s leading power.”<sup>85</sup> *Rebuilding America’s Defenses* adopted a sharply partisan tone, casting blame on the Clinton administration for allowing this decline in spending (though, in reality, the decline had begun under President George Bush, senior).

The central recommendation of the report was a major and sustained increase in military funding. The report repeated the standard set of “rogue” states, along with China and Russia, as possible enemy targets. However, the drafters of *Rebuilding America’s Defenses* could find no *plausible* threats, sufficient to justify the planned increases, and this fact presented a problem for the overall logic of the report. There was a simple response: “At present the United States faces no global rival. America’s grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible.”<sup>86</sup> The PNAC proposed a frankly imperial strategy.

Most significantly, for this article, the PNAC report strongly hinted at the need for pretexts. With regard to the proposed upgrading of military forces, the report states: “the process of transformation ... is likely to be a long one, *absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.*”<sup>87</sup> The fact that most of the PNAC’s recommendations were later implemented by the Bush administration underscores the historical significance of this report. It should also be noted that several figures associated with the report—notably Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby—were to play key roles in the Bush administration.<sup>88</sup>

Needless to say, the hoped for “catastrophic and catalyzing event” did occur, only 12 months after the PNAC report was written, in the form of the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks. Members of the Bush administration genuinely regretted the loss of life that occurred. At the same time, it was recognized that the attacks presented an extraordinary opportunity. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice asked her staff to consider “how do you capitalize on these opportunities” that were presented, in the wake of the attacks.<sup>89</sup> The Bush administration did capitalize on the opportunity, using it as a pretext to implement the rearmament program, as called for in the September 2000 PNAC report.

Several qualifications are needed: there can be no doubt that the 2001 terrorist attacks were extremely serious events; the prospect of future attacks constitutes a genuine threat to Western and US security. These were not mere

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<sup>85</sup> Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America’s Defenses*, September 2000, available online at: <[www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf](http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf)>, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ii.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, final page. Wolfowitz and Libby are listed as “project participants.”

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Lemann, “The Next World Order: The Bush Administration May Have a Brand-New Doctrine of Power,” *New Yorker*, April 1, 2002.

fabrications. At the same time, the attacks were used to justify a series of actions—from war in Iraq to tax cuts—that had little connection with fighting terrorism. And the military buildup that resulted too seems disproportionate: by 2002, US military expenditures constituted 43% of total world military expenditures,<sup>90</sup> presenting a level of strategic asymmetry with no precedent in history. If the arms buildup continues to accelerate, the point may soon be reached where the United States will spend more than the rest of the world combined. It is difficult to see all of these actions as logical strategic responses to the terrorist threat.

The main constituency that has benefited from rearmament is of course the military-industrial complex, for whom the new political environment proved beneficial. The *Economist* notes: “For the world’s stock-markets, September 11th was a ‘buy’ signal. Stocks for defense companies soared after more than a decade in the doldrums caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall.” A military analyst with Merrill Lynch noted effusively that, in light of the attacks, “it’s *carte blanche* for the defense budget.”<sup>91</sup> The uniformed military itself has viewed the new policies with more ambivalence: senior officers have had a tense relationship with key administration officials, notably Donald Rumsfeld, and they remain wary regarding the prospect of casualties in Iraq and elsewhere. On balance, however, the armed services have been pleased with the outcome. Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker commented in January 2004 that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been quite useful: They have “allowed the army to instill its soldiers with a ‘warrior ethos’ ... it was no use having an army that did nothing but train.” General Schoomaker added that “War is a tremendous focus ... Now we have this focusing opportunity.”<sup>92</sup> No doubt the military also appreciates the augmented funding levels that followed September 11, 2001. The oil and gas companies have obtained increased US military protection for their vulnerable investments in Central Asia and the Gulf region; and there remains the possibility of future investments in Iraqi oil. Of course, the ultimate outcome of the War on Terrorism—and whether it will prove a bonanza or a fiasco for US business and military interests—remains to be seen.

Thus, the September 11 attack was a pretext of convenience, which came along at just the right time. It has enabled the full implementation of rearmament. The pretext has proven highly effective in transforming the political environment, in ways that were anticipated in advance of the attacks by the Project for the New American Century. It was indeed quite an opportunity.

## Conclusion

Upon first consideration, it is clear that the three cases examined here—US responses to the 1950 Korean invasion, the 1979 Afghan invasion, and the 2001

<sup>90</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “The 15 Major Spender Countries in 2002,” available online at: <projects.sipri.org/milex/mex\_major\_spenders.pdf>.

<sup>91</sup> “Transformed?” *Economist*, July 20, 2002. Another *Economist* article noted: “Britain’s defense industry is shifting its center of gravity to America ... Standing shoulder to shoulder with America is good for business.” From “The War Dividend,” *Economist*, September 14, 2002.

<sup>92</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, “Wars ‘Useful,’ says U.S. Army Chief,” January 22, 2004. The second quote is directly from General Schoomaker; the first is the BBC paraphrasing Schoomaker (news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3419715.stm).

terrorist attacks—have a great deal in common. In all three cases, US policymakers sought to forge a new program of military expansion, combined with renewed external intervention. In all three cases, the American public was initially unsupportive of these objectives and presented an obstacle to implementing the expansions. In response, policymakers seized upon purportedly threatening world events, and then used these manipulatively, as pretexts, to persuade the public. And finally, in all three cases this strategy worked. The public, in the end, did support the official programs of military expansion.

Overall, this conclusion must appear as a depressing one, in that it affirms the “positive” effect of propaganda and manipulation. Even in formally democratic systems, élites can act instrumentally to “create and recreate” public opinion and, in many cases, they can do so successfully. However, I will close on a more positive note. The most recent use of pretexts—associated with the current War on Terrorism—has a key difference from the previous two cases, namely, its partisan narrowness. And this may prove its undoing.

The contrast with previous crises is striking: in the Korea and Afghanistan cases, rearmament was pursued with a high degree of bipartisanship. Leaders of both parties were incorporated into the process, and bipartisanship increased the effectiveness of later propaganda efforts aimed at the public. In the current situation, however, rearmament has been the exclusive instrument of the Republican Party. The Project for the New American Century, which initially led the campaign for rearmament, directed its appeal toward Republican circles, while it sharply criticized the Clinton administration; the partisanship of the Bush administration, which followed, is even more obvious. Bush administration policies thus rest on a relatively narrow political base, far narrower than was the case during previous efforts at military expansion during the Truman, Carter, and Reagan administrations.

No doubt the Democrats would have been delighted to participate once again in the “glories” of rearmament, as they had done so many times in the past, but this option has been blocked by President George Bush. As a result, Democrats have been left with no choice but to show a measure of opposition. The effect has been considerable: for virtually the first time since the Vietnam War, pundits openly discuss official use of propaganda and deception, most notably with regard to the “weapons of mass destruction” that failed to appear in Iraq. The use of pretexts is also discussed (even in such venues as the *Washington Times*, noted above). Perhaps the experience of the Bush administration will serve to educate the public about the manipulative use of pretexts, and thus make the practice less effective in the future. Let us hope so.

