



David Hoffman

1983: TURNING POINT OF THE COLD WAR

Except for the Cuban missile crisis, 1983 was the tensest year of the Cold War. It was the year that U.S. President Reagan launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the year that he called the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” It was the year that a Soviet pilot shot down the Korean Airliner, Flight 007, and the year in which NATO installed the Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe. In many ways, this was the year that the Cold War reached its apex. In the fall, Reagan began to shift in a direction that would make him more receptive to doing business with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev three years later.

Reagan was a man of complexity. He could hold in his mind two views which seemed in conflict. He was both distrustful of the Soviet Union and distrustful of the theory of nuclear deterrence. In 1983, these two beliefs were tested. The path was set for dramatic change.

REAGAN

Reagan’s life in the movies and in politics was guided by a visceral anti-Communism, which he brought with him to the presidency. In 1982, he delivered a speech to the British parliament that captured his true beliefs. “It may not be easy to see, but I believe we are now at a turning point,” Reagan declared. “In an ironic sense, Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis—a crisis where the demands of the economic order are colliding directly with those of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist west, but in the home of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet Union.” He went on, “It is the Soviet Union which runs against the tide of history by denying freedom and human dignity to its citizens. It is also in deep economic difficulty... Over centralized, with little or no incentives, year after year, the Soviet system pours its best resource into the making of instruments of destruction. The constant shrinkage of economic growth combined with the growth of military production is putting a heavy strain on the Soviet people...” He added that “the march of freedom and democracy ... will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.”

Reagan’s address was given at a time of a growing nuclear freeze movement in Europe. His views of Moscow were not widely shared in Europe and they were deeply controversial in the United States. The decade of détente was over, but many Americans were not certain of Reagan’s direction. In a speech March 8, 1983 to a group of evangelical Christians meeting in Orlando, Florida, Reagan described the Soviet Union as “the focus of evil in the modern world” and urged the ministers to reject the nuclear freeze. “So in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals,” he said, “I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourself above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant



H
I
S
T
O
R
Y
P
A
R
A
D
I
S
E
S

misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil." The words "evil empire" came to embody Reagan's view of the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Reagan did not subscribe to the traditional views about nuclear deterrence. It had been an article of faith among U.S. policy-makers and presidents since the end of World War II that the United States must maintain a threat of massive retaliation and the country should build enough nuclear weapons to make the threat credible. The two superpowers had built larger and larger arsenals, driven by technology and ideology. The United States had settled on a policy, originally advanced by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, of constructing an arsenal large enough to destroy 25 percent of Soviet cities and 50 percent of its industry, which McNamara called "assured destruction." Later, a critic of McNamara added the word "mutual" to this and the policy came to be known as "mutual assured destruction," or MAD. It was a simple idea which many Americans easily grasped, the notion of two cocked pistols aimed at each other. In truth, both nations aimed largely at counterforce targets, each others' missiles—but the popular culture and legend was captured by mutual assured destruction. Moreover, the era of détente in the 1970s had persuaded many Americans that mutual assured destruction could be managed by arms control agreements such as the SALT treaties. These were given enormous importance in American thinking and were the legacy of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

Reagan's rise to power came in part because Americans began to lose faith in détente, worried by Soviet modernization programs that seemed to expand even as the SALT treaties were signed. The Soviet missiles were not as threatening as was believed at the time, but the American people were told by Reagan and others they were very threatening. Critics said the Soviet Union was using détente and SALT as a cover while preparing to fight and win a nuclear war. Hawkish defense officials and scholars who made this argument took part in a famous intelligence experiment in 1976, known as the "Team B" process, in which a group of outsiders was asked to review the raw intelligence and come up with an alternative view of Soviet intentions—that is, alternative from the regular annual analysis of Team A. The report of Team B was secret at the time, but has since been made public. It said the Soviets were determined to build a nuclear war-fighting machine.¹ Many of the members of Team B then created a group called the Committee on the President Danger to campaign against the SALT II treaty, which President Carter and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed in 1979. Reagan joined criticism of SALT II and the committee members went to work for his administration after the 1980 campaign, in which he defeated Carter. Harvard Professor Richard Pipes was the leader of Team B, and also author of key phrases cited above in the Westminster speech Reagan gave as president.²

When he ran for president in 1980, Reagan remained largely silent on the issue of nuclear deterrence. He had deeply held views but he did not talk about them. In truth, Reagan found the idea of MAD abhorrent. For a number of reasons, he did not believe in this core theory of the nuclear age. According to biographer Lou Cannon, Reagan believed in the idea of Armageddon as a Biblical account of the world's final battle.³ "Reagan was guided by both extraordinary vision and by remarkable ignorance," Cannon wrote. "He was suspicious of the traditional attempt to regulate the pace of the arms race with accords and treaties that encouraged the two superpowers to improve the quality of their offensive nuclear weapons and to increase the size of their nuclear arsenals. Unlike the traditionalists, Reagan was convinced that it was necessary to reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons on both sides and eventually to get rid of them."

This side of Reagan was not evident in his first two or three years in office when he ordered a large U.S. military buildup. Reagan's beliefs had their foundation not in some arcane military theory but in the triumph of capitalism, as he had articulated in the London speech. As his advisor Martin Anderson put it, Reagan was confident that "the productive power of the United States economy was vastly superior to the Soviet economy, that if we began a drive to update the power and scope of our military forces, the Soviets would not be able to keep pace."

The 1981 assassination attempt delayed formulation of Reagan's foreign policy. But he approved early efforts to intensify the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. Among

many different policies – including the military buildup, and the covert campaign to aid the mujahedin in Afghanistan – Reagan approved a CIA plan to sabotage the Soviet economy through transfers of technology that contained hidden malfunctions. The United States had learned from the French of a massive effort by the KGB to steal technology from abroad. This information had come from an agent the French named “Farewell,” who was Colonel Vladimir Vetrov, a 53-year-old engineer assigned to evaluate intelligence collected on Western technology through the KGB. Using a shopping list of technology which they had obtained from Vetrov, the Americans then leaked sensitive items to be sold to the Soviet Union through third parties. This included software to run the pumps, turbines and valves of the Soviet natural gas pipeline to Europe. According to Thomas C. Reed, a former secretary of the Air Force, the software “was programmed to go haywire, after a decent interval, to reset pump speeds and valve settings to produce pressures far beyond those acceptable to pipeline joints and welds.” He added, “The result was the most monumental non-nuclear explosion and fire ever seen from space.”⁴

In March 1982, Reagan took part in his first nuclear war simulation. This was to examine the command-and-control of nuclear weapons. Reed was a staff member at the White House National Security Council; he had worked on command-and-control issues in the Pentagon in the 1970s. Reed found that previous presidents had not planned very well what they would do in a real nuclear crisis. The president, who was commander-in-chief, was vulnerable if the White House were attacked. “The system as I found it would have been headless within minutes of an attack,” he said. In late February and early March 1982, the military scheduled a nuclear command post exercise, a simulation of a nuclear crisis. Reagan was briefed and the simulation was carried out over four days. Reagan did not play himself: the role of “president” fell to a stand-in. Reagan watched closely.

“The exercise itself started on a Monday morning,” Reed wrote in his memoirs. “That afternoon both the exercise and the real president came to the Situation Room to receive the threat briefing. An intelligence officer laid out the Soviet order of battle, then the warning systems began to report simulated missile launches and impact predictions. The minutes flew by until a screen in that cramped basement room began to show red dots on a map of the U.S.—simulated impacts. The first ones annihilated Washington, so this briefing was assumed to be taking place in some airborne command post over the central plains.”

“Before the President could sip his coffee, the map was a sea of red,” Reed recalled. “All the urban centers and military installations in the U.S. were gone. And then, while he looked on in stunned disbelief, he learned that the Soviet air force and the second round of missile launches were on their way in. For the next half hour more red dots wiped out the survivors and filled in the few holes in the sea of red.

“In less than an hour President Reagan had seen the United States of American disappear,” Reed recalled, adding: “I have no doubt that on that Monday in March, Ronald Reagan came to understand exactly what a Soviet nuclear attack on the U.S. would be like. It was a sobering experience, and it undoubtedly stiffened his resolve to do something about a shield against such an attack.”

In fall 1982 and spring 1983, Reagan began to listen to ideas for a shield against ballistic missile attack. Several factors pushed him in this direction. Reagan always had a strong belief in the power of American technology. He also may have been influenced by his Hollywood experience. As an actor, he portrayed a cinematic hero, Secret Service agent Brass Bancroft, in the 1940 film *Murder in the Air*. In the movie, Bancroft stops a spy from stealing a death ray known as the “Inertia Projector” which can bring down distant enemy airplanes.⁵ Reagan may also have been influenced by the suggestion of nuclear scientist Edward Teller that a laser could be used to shoot down incoming missiles.

Reagan also faced very real political challenges in 1982. Congress was balking at deployment plans for the MX missile. Reagan had come to office believing the United States faced a “window of vulnerability” to Soviet missiles—and he had pushed ahead a major defense buildup and modernization. But the political difficulties facing the MX led some advisors, and Reagan him-



self, to look for other options. At a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on February 11, 1983, the subject turned to the feasibility of missile defense. Although this was not the only response to the MX deadlock, Reagan seized on it. On March 23, 1983, he announced plans to accelerated research into missile defenses.

Reagan paid homage in the speech to deterrence. "This approach to stability through offensive threat has worked," he declared. "We and our allies have succeeded in preventing nuclear war for more than three decades." But Reagan said that in recent months, he and his advisors and the Joint Chiefs of Staff "have underscored the necessity to break out of a future that relies solely on offensive retaliation for our security." Reagan added, "Over the course of these discussions, I have become more and more deeply convinced that the human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence."⁶

Reagan was an idealist, and let some of his idealism shine through in this address, which was largely devoted to military spending. "Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them?" he asked. "Let me share with you a vision of the future which offers hope. It is that we embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive. Let us turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base, and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today."

He then asked: "What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?" He summoned "the scientific community in our country, those who gave us nuclear weapons, to turn their great talents now to the cause of mankind and world peace, to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete."

At the same time that Reagan was launching the missile defense idea, another challenge to the Soviet Union came in the Pacific Ocean. The United States had been staging psychological operations against the Soviet military and intelligence. In April-May 1983, the U.S. Pacific Fleet held its largest exercises to date in the northwest Pacific. Forty ships, including three aircraft battle groups, participated in an exercise that was one of the largest ever attempted. Among the carriers was the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. At one point the fleet sailed within 450 miles of the Kamchatka peninsula and Petropavlovsk, the only Soviet naval base with direct access to the open seas. U.S. attack submarines and antisubmarine aircraft conducted operations in protected areas—"bastions"—where the Soviet Navy had stationed ballistic missile submarines. U.S. aircraft from the carriers *Midway* and *Enterprise* carried out a simulated bombing run over a military installation on the small Soviet-occupied island of Zelenny in the Kuril Islands.⁷

These operations would have been alarming to Soviet leaders in any event, but there was an additional twist. Unbeknownst to the United States at the time, a spy ring was giving away secrets from the U.S. Navy. John Walker was the organizer, and his friend Jerry Whitworth was his chief collection agent. Whitworth was stationed on the *Enterprise* during the Pacific fleet exercise, formally known as Fleet Exercise 83-1. Although it is not known how much information reached Moscow, it is possible that the Soviet leadership was received precise messages from one of the most sensitive exercises of the Cold War. According to a 1986 Senate Intelligence Committee report, Whitworth had access to top-secret intelligence information on the *Enterprise* and passed it to the Soviets through Walker. Whitworth "provided the Soviets with a full year of operational message traffic from the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, including TOP SECRET information. He also compromised the operations order for Fleet Exercise 83-1, a unique exercise near the Soviet coast by three carrier battle groups." According to the Senate report, these leaks permitted the Soviets to gauge the true capabilities of the U.S. Navy.⁸ While the precise nature of the information Walker and Whitworth betrayed is not known, it may well have increased a sense of tension and paranoia in Moscow about American intentions.

The risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation was real.

ANDROPOV

Brezhnev died in November 1982, and within a matter of months his successor, Yury Andropov, was ill. Only three months after becoming General Secretary, Andropov had to undergo dialysis for kidney failure. Of his 15 months in power, half his time was spent in the hospital. During a working holiday in February 1983, Andropov's health suffered a sharp decline. "He had had kidney trouble all his life, and now it seemed his kidneys had given up altogether," wrote Russian historian Dmitry Volkogonov.⁹ By summer 1983, "Andropov's health was giving rise to serious concern," he added. "Painful sores appeared on his body, and signs of general debility increased... On his now irregular appearances at work, Andropov could manage to climb the few steps to the lift only with great difficulty. He was greatly embarrassed when his bodyguards or others helped him, and did not want people to know about his deteriorating condition." That summer, Andropov's colleagues had an elevator installed in the Lenin Mausoleum so he would not have to endure the stress of walking up the steps 3.5 meters.

Andropov's paranoia about a nuclear missile attack led to the establishment of Operation RYAN, or *Raketno-Yadernoye Napadenie* (Nuclear Missile Attack). This operation was launched when Andropov was still head of the KGB in 1981, Brezhnev's last year. The operation stemmed from concerns about the Reagan administration's sharp rhetoric aimed at Moscow. In May 1981, Brezhnev denounced Reagan's policies in a secret address to a major KGB conference in Moscow. At the same session, Andropov delivered a more dramatic address, saying that the new U.S. administration was actively preparing for nuclear war.

"To the astonishment of most of his audience, Andropov then announced that by a decision of the Politburo, the KGB and GRU were for the first time to cooperate in a worldwide intelligence operation codenamed RYAN," according to the British intelligence historian Christopher Andrew and former KGB agent Oleg Gordievsky.¹⁰ The GRU was responsible for monitoring any Western military preparations for a first-strike on the Soviet Union, while the KGB's task was to look for advance warning of a decision by the United States and its NATO allies to launch such an attack. The instructions went out to KGB residencies in November, 1981. According to Andrews and Gordievsky, the agents in the field viewed these instructions with some skepticism. They were less alarmed than the KGB headquarters about the risks of nuclear war. However, none were willing to challenge the Center's assessment. "RYAN created a vicious circle of intelligence collections and assessment. Residencies were, in effect, required to report alarming information even if they themselves were skeptical of it. The Center was duly alarmed by what they reported and demanded more."

In February 1983, just as Reagan was discussing the Strategic Defense Initiative with his advisors, the KGB sent residents new and detailed instructions which reflected the Center's belief in the steadily increasing nuclear threat. The instructions were dated February 17 and began by saying, "In view of the growing urgency of the task of discovering promptly any preparations by the adversary for a nuclear missile attack (RYAN) on the USSR, we are sending you a permanently operative assignment and a briefing on this question."

According to Andrews and Gordievsky, the first part of the assignment laid down seven tasks with time limits for collecting intelligence on likely indicators of preparations for nuclear attack, ranging from increases in the price paid to blood donors to heightened activity by western intelligence and security services. (The KGB had failed to grasp, however, that British blood donors are unpaid.) While many of the instructions were somewhat conventional, they also reflected the Center's "sometimes bizarre conspiracy theories about the clerical and capitalist components of Western imperialism. It suspected that Church leaders and heads of major banks might have been informed of plans for a nuclear first strike, and ordered Residencies to investigate."

The instructions also took note of the deployment of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe by the United States and its NATO allies, a response to the Soviet deployment of SS-20 "Pioneer" missiles aimed at Europe in the late 1970s. The arrival of the Pershings was especially worrisome to Moscow. According to the KGB briefing, the Pershings



H
I
S
T
O
R
Y
P
A
G
E
S

might be able to reach Moscow in a very short time, four to six minutes, which would not be sufficient for Kremlin leaders to reach their underground bunkers. This may have been an overestimate, but the Pershings did have a high degree of accuracy: they could hit a circle error probable (CEP) of 100 feet at a range up to 1,000 miles, and they flew at 6,092 miles per hour. The missiles carried a single warhead with variable yield between five and 50 kilotons.

According to Volkogonov, Andropov was consumed with the issue of the Pershing II missiles, the first battery of which were to be deployed in Germany in December 1983. "In 1983, Andropov devoted practically all of his limited time to this issue," he said. "Wholesale efforts were made to mobilize world opinion against the American move, and the Socialist and Communist Parties of Western Europe were exploited to this end."

The Kremlin's fear of the Pershing II missiles and the search for intelligence about a possible attack also extended to East Germany. The KGB assigned a major role to East German intelligence under Markus Wolf. By the early 1980s, Wolf said in his memoirs, "our Soviet partners had become obsessed with the danger of a nuclear missile attack."¹¹ He said, "Like most intelligence people, I found these war games a burdensome waste of time, but these orders were no more open to discussion than other orders from above." According to a monograph published by the CIA, Wolf created a special staff and built a round-the-clock situation center with a special link to Moscow; the center was dedicated to monitoring a "catalogue" of political and military indicators of an impending U.S. attack. The East Germans ordered construction of underground bunkers for top political, military and intelligence officials.

Andropov was also deeply worried about Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Four days after Reagan's announcement, Andropov told *Pravda* that the United States was preparing a first strike attack on the Soviet Union and he asserted that Reagan was "inventing new plans on how to unleash a nuclear war in the best way, with the hope of winning it." Andropov's harsh reaction was unprecedented. He accused Reagan of "deliberately lying" about Soviet military power to justify SDI, and he denounced the potential missile shield as a "bid to disarm the Soviet Union in the face of the U.S. nuclear threat." The CIA predicted later in the year that the Soviets would attempt to block Reagan's program without building one of their own.

At the core of Soviet concern about SDI was not that it would work. Most Soviet scientists had concluded long before Reagan's announcement that missile defenses were impossible, at least in the short term. However, the Soviet elite realized that the country was decades behind the West in high technology. Most Soviet mainframe computer designs were based on pirated IBM architecture. "The weakness of the consumer economy" in Soviet times "militated against PC development," said historian David Reynolds. "The PC and communications revolutions posed a double challenge to the Soviet bloc—economic and ideological."¹²

Soviet Chief of the General Staff Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, speaking to American journalist Les Gelb, confided, "We cannot equal the quality of U.S. arms for a generation or two. Modern military power is based on technology, and technology is based on computers. In the U.S., small children play with computers... Here, we don't even have computers in every office of the defense ministry. And for reasons you know well, we cannot make computers widely available in our society. We will never be able to catch up with you in modern arms until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we can have an economic revolution without a political revolution."¹³

In summer 1983, tensions deepened. On June 16, Andropov told the Central Committee that there had been an "unprecedented sharpening of the struggle" between east and west. "The threat of nuclear war overhanging mankind causes one to reappraise the principal goals of the activities of the entire Communist movement." On August 11, yet another dispatch from the Center urged KGB agents to focus counterintelligence on any decision being made by the west for a nuclear missile strike. The directive wanted information about any sudden increase in spying by the west, which was seen as an indicator of preparations for an attack.

FLIGHT 007

On September 1, 1983, Andropov was informed at his residence in the outskirts of Moscow that a U.S. warplane had been shot down over the southern half of Sakhalin Island. Then, at the Kremlin, he chaired his last Politburo meeting. Just before the meeting, Ustinov approached Andropov and told him, "A plane's been shot down. It turned out not to be American, but South Korean, and a civil aircraft, at that. We'll find out more and report in greater detail."

According to Volkogonov, Andropov clearly had other sources of information, and replied, "Fine. But I was told there'd been a spy plane above Kamchatka. I'm flying to the Crimea later today after the meeting. I must have a rest and get some treatment. As for the plane, you sort it out." After the three-hour meeting, Andropov went on holiday to Simferopol.

The shoot-down came at 3:26 a.m. local time on September 1, when a Soviet Su-15 fired two air-to-air missiles at the Boeing 747 jet, Korean Airlines Flight 007, which had strayed off course en route to Seoul. The plane was carrying 269 crew members and passengers. The Soviets had been tracking the plane for over an hour. The radio transmissions with the pilot were picked up by U.S. and Japanese intercepts.

The United States denounced the shoot-down as deliberate mass murder. Reagan called it "an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations."

In fact, after about two days, U.S. intelligence concluded that the Soviets probably did not know they were attacking a civilian airliner. This was acknowledged in 1988 by a State Department official, J. Edward Fox, who wrote in a letter to Congress that "we had concluded by the second day that the Soviets thought they were pursuing a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft throughout most, if not all, of the over flight." He added that "the bottom line is that the Soviets, through their own ineptitude, probably were not certain what type of aircraft they were shooting down." The Soviet air defenses in the region had been on high alert "and in a state of anxiety" after the Pacific Fleet exercises in the spring, according to the CIA, which said "the local Soviet air defense commander appears to have made a serious but honest mistake."¹⁴ According to Andrew and Gordievsky, eight of the 11 air defense tracking stations on the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island were not functioning properly.¹⁵

The Soviet reaction was to lie about the events and cover it up. Moscow did not acknowledge the incident until September 6 and delayed an official explanation for three more days. On September 9, at a press conference, Ogarkov assured that the regional air defense unit had identified the plane as an RC-135 of the type that routinely performed intelligence operations along a similar flight path. He insisted that the plane was on an intelligence mission. "The way this incident was dealt with throws light on the mentality of the Soviet leadership," said Volkogonov. "Andropov himself was silent on the issue for more than a month... The plane's 'black box' had been found and brought to the surface. It was decided to say nothing of this, either to the world's press or to Seoul, and Soviet ships were kept in the area for another two weeks to give the impression that the fruitless search was still going on."

The U.S. strategy at the time was to use the disaster to keep the Soviets on the defensive with strong rhetoric, but to keep sanctions and other retaliatory actions to a minimum. Secretary of State George Shultz flew to Madrid to meet with Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko. Shultz raised the airliner in their private, first meeting. "The atmosphere was tense," he recalled. "He was totally unresponsive." A larger meeting which followed was "brutally confrontational," Shultz recalled. "At one point, Gromyko stood up and picked up his papers as though to leave. I think he half-expected me to urge him to sit down. On the contrary, I got up to escort him out of the room. He then sat down, and I sat down. After the meeting ended, my interpreter, Bill Krimer, told me that he had been interpreting in high-level meetings with the Soviets for 17 years and had never seen anything remotely like it."

Relations had indeed gone into a deep freeze. Reagan had seized on the shoot-down to broadly indict the Soviet system. The United States had attempted to embarrass Soviet officials and



challenge their lies. The Soviet leaders saw the episode as a provocation and believed it was a deliberate attempt to trip them up. On September 29, Andropov issued one of the most harsh condemnations ever of the United States. The Reagan administration, he said, is on “a militarist course that represents a serious threat to peace....if anyone had any illusion about the possibility of an evolution for the better in the policy of the present administration, recent events had dispelled them completely.”

FALSE ALARM

Unbeknownst to the United States, the Soviet armed forces experienced a major false alarm in the nuclear missile attack warning system on September 26, 1983 at the top-secret early warning station Serpukhov-15 south of Moscow. The station monitored satellites which in turn watched for signs of a missile attack. On that night, Stanislav Petrov, deputy chief of the department for combat algorithms, was filling in for another commander. Seven satellites in orbit above the Earth were positioned to monitor the American missile fields, usually for a period of about six hours. Each satellite was a cylinder, six feet long and five feet around, and sent streams of data to the command center. The brain of the center was the M-10, the best super-computer that existed in the Soviet Union, which analyzed the data and searched for signs of a missile attack.¹⁶

On this night, one of the satellites was reaching the highest point of its orbit, about 19,883 miles above the Earth. The satellite system was known as Oko, or “Eye,” but the spacecraft were known to Petrov by simple numbers, one through nine. The satellite approaching its apogee was No. 5. From space, it scanned the very edge of the Earth, using infrared sensors to detect a missile launch. The satellite could spot the heat given off from a rocket engine against the black background of space.

At 12:15 a.m., Petrov was startled. Across the top of the room was a thin, silent panel. Most of the time no one even noticed it. But suddenly it lit up, in blood red letters: LAUNCH. A siren blared, a fierce wake-from-the-dead wail. Petrov was jolted. On the big map with the North Pole, a light at one of the American missile bases was illuminated. Everyone froze. The electronic panels showed a missile launch. The board said: “high reliability.” This had never happened before.

The operators at the consoles on the main floor jumped up, out of their chairs. According to Petrov, they turned and looked up at him. He stood, too, so they could see him. He started to give orders. He wasn't sure what was happening. He ordered them to sit down, and start checking the system. He had to know whether this was real, or a glitch. The full check would take 10 minutes. But if this was a missile attack, they could not wait 10 minutes to find out. As they scrambled, Petrov scrutinized the monitors in front of him. If there was a missile, sooner or later they would see it. What trajectory? There was no sign of it. Petrov ran through the possibilities in his mind. If just one missile, could it be an accidental or unauthorized launch? He concluded it was not likely. He knew of all the locks and precautions, and just one person could not launch a missile. Even the idea of two officers conspiring to launch a missile seemed impossible. And if one missile was launched, he thought, what did that mean? This is not the way to start a nuclear war. For many years, he had been trained that a nuclear war would start only with a massive strike. He said it again, to himself: this is not the way to start a nuclear war.

He had a microphone in one hand, part of the intercom system to the main floor. With the other hand, he picked up the telephone to call his superiors, who ran the larger early warning system, which also included ground-based radars. Petrov had to reach his own conclusion quickly; the supervisors would want to know what was happening. He was not through with his own checks, but he could not wait. He told the duty officer, in a clipped tone: “I am reporting to you: this is a false alarm.” He didn't know for sure. He only had a gut instinct. “Got it,” the officer replied. Petrov was relieved; the officer did not ask him why.

Two minutes after the first alert, and just after he had declared the alert a false alarm, with the phone still in his hand, the duty officer still on the line, Petrov was jolted again. The panel flashed: Another missile launched! Then a third, a fourth, and a fifth. Now, the system had gone into overdrive. The additional signals had triggered a new warning. The blood-red letters on the panel began to flash: MISSILE ATTACK, and an electronic blip was sent automatically to the higher levels of the military. Petrov was frightened. His legs felt paralyzed; the cushioned arm chair had turned into a hot frying pan. He was stricken, and had to think fast.

Petrov knew the key decision-makers in a missile attack would be the General Staff. In theory, if the alarm were validated, the response would be ordered from there. The Soviet missiles would be readied, the targets fed in, the gyroscopes in the guidance systems spun up, and the silo hatches opened. The Soviet leadership would be alerted. There would be so little time to make a decision, and so little time to flee.

The siren wailed. The red sign flashed. Petrov made a decision, based on his experience and his instincts. He knew the system had glitches in the past; there was no visual sighting of a missile through the telescope; the satellites were in the correct position. It was probably too early for radars to see anything, but there was nothing from the radar stations to verify an incoming missile. He told the duty officer again, "This is a false alarm." The message went up the chain.

The emergency was over. The sirens stopped. There was no nuclear missile attack. There was no retaliation.

THE DAY AFTER

A few days after the false alarm, Andropov's health took another turn for the worse. He was in the Crimea, and went for a short walk in the park. The lightly dressed general secretary had become tired and taken a breather on a granite bench in the shade. His body became thoroughly chilled, and he soon began shivering uncontrollably. Volkogonov quotes Academician Yevgeny Chazov as saying that when he examined Andropov in the morning, he found widespread inflammation, requiring surgical intervention.

"The operation was successful, but his organism was so drained of strength that the post-operative wound would not heal... His condition gradually worsened, his weakness increased, he again stopped trying to walk, but still the wound would not heal. ... Andropov began to realize that he was not going to get any better."

Chazov wrote in his memoir, "On September 30, 1983 the final countdown on Andropov's health began. From October 1983, Andropov stopped exercising direct control of the Politburo, the Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet. He stopped coming to the Kremlin."

Tensions grew still deeper with the United States. Shultz recalled, "At a long session with the president in mid-October, I told him that the absence of dialogue, even though the reasons were well understood, was causing worry both here and among the allies." Reagan said, "If things get hotter and hotter and arms control remains an issue, maybe I should go see Andropov and propose eliminating all nuclear weapons." Shultz replied, "Without an arsenal of nuclear weapons, the Soviets are not a superpower." Reagan did not go.¹⁷

In the fall, a war scare frenzy gripped both the Soviet Union and the United States. Soviet attacks on Reagan reached a fever pitch. Moscow compared him to Hitler and alleged that he had ties to the mafia. The Soviet media repeated over and over again that the danger of nuclear war was higher than at any time since World War II. Among other things, the government televised a Defense Ministry film that depicted a warmongering America bent on world domination. The film showed U.S. nuclear explosions, and various U.S. missiles interspersed with scenes of war victims, Soviet war memorials and words of Moscow's peaceful intentions.



The author Suzanne Massie recalled visiting the U.S. and Canada Institute in Moscow in late September. "I found when I got there that they were desperate; they were backed in a corner, and they were very worried."¹⁸

The fear of war had also taken hold in Europe and the United States. The nuclear freeze movement was running strong and more than 2 million people demonstrated on October 22-23. Also, ABC television was scheduled to broadcast in the United States a film titled "The Day After" about the result of a Soviet nuclear attack. The film had an impact on Reagan's thinking. He wrote in his diary for October 10, 1983: "In the morning at Camp David I ran the tape of the movie ABC is running on November 20. It's called 'The Day After' in which Lawrence, Kansas, is wiped out in a nuclear war with Russia. It is powerfully done, all \$7 million worth. It is very effective and left me greatly depressed. So far they haven't sold any of the 25 ads scheduled and I can see why... My own reaction: we have to do all we can ... to see that there is never a nuclear war."

At the White House, Jack F. Matlock of the National Security Council met October 11 with Sergey Vishnevsky, a columnist from *Pravda* whom Matlock had known from tours in Moscow. At a private lunch, Vishnevsky told Matlock, according to a memo Matlock wrote afterwards: "The state of U.S.-Soviet relations has deteriorated to a dangerous point. Many in the Soviet public are asking if war is imminent. He himself is worried and personally uncomfortable because now he must write nothing but propaganda about the U.S. rather than the more objective stories he prefers..." Vishnevsky also said Andropov's September 28 statement "was virtually unprecedented and is a reflection of the leadership's current frustration..." While the point of the warning was, in part, to prepare the Soviet people for belt-tightening in a new round of military competition, Vishnevsky said "the leadership is convinced that the Reagan administration is out to bring their system down and will give no quarter; therefore they have no choice but to hunker down and fight back."¹⁹

Several other key events came in October. Robert C. McFarlane was appointed Reagan's national security adviser, succeeding William P. Clark, and was immediately thrust into two near-simultaneous crises. On October 23, a truck laden with the equivalent of over 12,000 pounds of TNT crashed through the perimeter of the compound of U.S. Marines at the Beirut airport. The explosion killed 241 U.S. military personnel and was the largest single loss of life by the military during Reagan's term. On October 25, the United States invaded the small Caribbean island of Grenada to oust a Marxist regime there.

Sometime in this month, Reagan also received a top-secret summary of the Operation RYAN materials that had been provided by Gordievsky to the British. The materials were considered so sensitive that they were brought by hand by CIA director William Casey directly to the president.²⁰

Also at this time, Reagan received a full briefing on the Single Integrated Operational Plan, the secret nuclear war plan of the United States, which includes a complex procedure for presidential decision-making in a crisis. Reed says Reagan also received such a briefing in 1982 in conjunction with the exercise, but others have said the 1983 session was Reagan's first full briefing.

In early November 1983, the KGB grew increasingly anxious about a surprise nuclear attack. This worry may have been spurred by a major NATO nuclear command post exercise, Able Archer 83, which was planned for November 2-11. The exercise was to test the procedures for command and communications in the event of war. The exercise had been held annually, but this year there were plans to upgrade it and bring in President Reagan and Vice President Bush, as well as the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to make the rehearsal seem more realistic.

Able Archer was to focus on an attack in Europe and included a practice drill to take NATO forces through a full-scale simulated release of nuclear weapons. On November 5, the KGB Center in Moscow sent to residencies an inquiry about "regarding possible operations by the USA and its allies on British territory" in preparation for a surprise attack. The attached instruc-

tions insisted that the residencies watch for any signs of nuclear attack decision-making, such as unusual activity at the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street, or changes in the work schedule at the British Defense Ministry. The KGB Center implored the residencies, "Surprise is the key element in the main adversary's plans and preparations for war in today's conditions. As a result it can be assumed that the period of time from the moment when the preliminary decision for RYAN is taken, up to the order to deliver the strike, will be of very short duration, possibly 7-10 days."

On the same day, Politburo member Grigory Romanov spoke at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses to commemorate the October Revolution. He said, "Perhaps never before in the postwar decades has the situation been as tense as it is now.... Comrades! The international situation at present is white hot, thoroughly white hot."²¹

McFarlane, who had been national security advisor only for a few weeks, moved to downgrade the Able Archer exercise, and removed Reagan from participating. He wanted to avoid a misunderstanding with the Soviets. In the middle of Able Archer, the KGB sent a flash telegram to both KGB and GRU residencies in Western Europe, mistakenly reporting an alert at U.S. bases Europe. According to Andrew and Gordievsky, "Moscow Center suggested that possible reasons for the alert might be heightened security following the death of over 240 Marines in a Beirut bombing two weeks earlier, and forthcoming U.S. army maneuvers. But it clearly implied that an alternative explanation was the beginning of a countdown toward nuclear first strike."

Tensions lingered even after Able Archer. The first cruise missiles and Pershings arrived in Europe, and were deployed on time. The Soviet delegation walked out of the negotiations on intermediate-range missiles in Europe to protest the deployments. Reagan wrote in his diary that U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Arthur Hartman came by and confirmed "Andropov is very much out of sight these days." Shultz returned from Europe in early December, and "I found President Reagan thinking again about his desire to eliminate nuclear weapons." Shultz told two aides, "This is his instinct and his belief. The president has noticed that no one pays any attention to him in spite of the fact he speaks about this idea publicly and privately. I told the president yesterday that I would study the proposition. We owe him an answer. The president believes this is the way to go. If we disagree, we have to demonstrate why."²²

Reagan was shifting. His nuclear abolitionist views were bubbling to the surface. In his memoirs, he recalled, "Three years had taught me something surprising about the Russians: many people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans. Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. In fact, I had difficulty accepting my own conclusion at first. I'd always felt that from our deeds it must be clear to anyone that Americans were a moral people who starting at the birth of our nation had always used our power as a force for good in the world..."

"During my first years in Washington, I think many of us in the administration took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves, considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them. But the more experience I had with Soviet leaders and other heads of state who knew them, the more I began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike; because of this, and perhaps because of a sense of insecurity and paranoia with roots reaching back to the invasions of Russia by Napoleon and Hitler, they had aimed a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons at us.

"Well, if that was the case, I was even more anxious to get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and try to convince him we had no designs on the Soviet Union and Russians had nothing to fear from us."²³

Reagan's shift became public in a speech January 19, 1984, delivered from the White House and beamed live to Western Europe. In this address, Reagan appealed for cooperation with the Soviet Union. He didn't mention communism, nor the Korean airliner, nor the evil empire. He suggested that if a hypothetical Ivan and Anya from the Soviet Union would meet a Jim and Sally from America, they would share common interests. The speech marked the turning point



for Reagan, and he never went back to the harsh rhetoric of earlier years. He was ready for change. 📁

Notes

- ¹ Donald P. Steury, ed., *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1996). See p. 325-429, especially "Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View, Report of Team B," p. 365.
- ² Richard Pipes, *VIXI: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), is Pipes' account of these events. There are many others.
- ³ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), see chapter. 13, "Focus of Evil."
- ⁴ Thomas C. Reed, *At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War* (Presidio Press, 2004). This event was also described in an article by the author February 27, 2004 in *The Washington Post*.
- ⁵ Several works have described these earlier influences on Reagan, including Cannon, and Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and his Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005).
- ⁶ Address by the President to the Nation, The Oval Office, March 23, 1983, White House transcript.
- ⁷ Benjamin B. Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum" (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1997). There are several additional sources for some of these events, including Seymour M. Hersh, *The Target is Destroyed: What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It* (Vintage Books, 1987).
- ⁸ *Meeting the Espionage Challenge: A Review of United States Counterintelligence and Security Programs* (Washington, DC: Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).
- ⁹ Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for An Empire* (Free Press, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975-1985* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993).
- ¹¹ Fischer, "Conundrum."
- ¹² David Reynolds, *One World Divisible* (W.W. Norton, 2000). See Chapter 14.
- ¹³ As quoted in Fischer, "Conundrum"
- ¹⁴ See Fischer, "Conundrum," Hersh, *The Target is Destroyed*, and for the Fox letter, *New York Times*, January 13, 1988, page 9.
- ¹⁵ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story* (Harper Collins, 1990), p. 594
- ¹⁶ Interview with Stanislav Petrov, January 2006.
- ¹⁷ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State* (Charles Scribners Sons, 1993), p. 372.
- ¹⁸ Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober, *The Reagan Presidency: An Oral History of the Era*, see comments of Suzanne Massie, p. 224-225.
- ¹⁹ Matlock's memo to file, accessed at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
- ²⁰ Information provided by confidential source in intelligence.
- ²¹ Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (University of Missouri Press, 1997).
- ²² Shultz, p. 376.
- ²³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (Pocket Books, 1990).