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# 1983: The most dangerous year

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1983: THE MOST DANGEROUS YEAR

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
University of Kentucky  
2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts in History**  
**Department of History**  
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**THE GRADUATE COLLEGE**

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ABSTRACT

**1983: The Most Dangerous Year**

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A series of otherwise unrelated events culminated to make 1983 the most dangerous year the world has ever known, with the United States and the Soviet Union even closer to war than during the much more well-known events of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis of 1983 arose from a sequence of accidents, misunderstandings, and mistakes. From highly publicized events such as President Ronald Reagan's application of morality to foreign policy to the Soviet Union's attempt to discover NATO's secret attack plans, an extraordinary confluence of events brought the two superpowers closer to nuclear exchange than is commonly believed. More than ten separate events drove the United States and Soviet Union on a collision course in a battle of wills, the outcome of which provided a *de facto* end of the Cold War nearly a decade before it was considered officially over. Due to the lack of open communication between the two superpowers, the world was largely unaware of the significance of these events as they unfolded.

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## PROLOGUE

During World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States were cautious allies, bound together by the old adage, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Even before the euphoria of victory had faded, however, the world realized it had been polarized by the emerging superpowers. In the ensuing years, the United States and the Soviet Union fought with words, with boycotts, with proxy combatants in such places as Vietnam and Afghanistan, and on several occasions nearly with nuclear weapons. While many people consider the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 to have been the closest the world came to nuclear war, the situation was much more precarious two decades later, when a series of otherwise unrelated events culminated to make 1983 the most dangerous year the world has ever known.

Unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war of 1983 would not have arisen from two opponents who were unable to resolve a single issue, but instead would have been caused by a sequence of accidents, misunderstandings, and mistakes. From President Ronald Reagan’s high-profile application of morality to foreign policy to the covert Soviet attempt to discover NATO’s attack plans, an extraordinary confluence of events brought the two superpowers closer to a nuclear exchange than is commonly believed. An escalating spiral of separate occurrences drove the United States and Soviet Union on a collision course in a battle of wills, the outcome of which provided a *de facto* end of the Cold War nearly a decade before it was considered officially over.

## CHAPTER 1

### NEW TECHNOLOGIES OF WAR

The era of détente that spanned most of the 1970s was marked by numerous successful negotiations and agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. In addition to the well-known Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement I, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement, and the Threshold Test Ban Treaty were all negotiated in this era and represented the first protocols that sought to actually regulate the existing nuclear weapons of the two superpowers.

The complexities of these negotiations were staggering, with enormous variations of perspective. The most notable began immediately, with the first word of the title of one of the agreements: “strategic.” What exactly defined a strategic weapon, as opposed to a tactical or theater one? The Soviets argued that any weapons capable of targeting the territory of the other side were strategic. By this rubric, U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Europe were strategic but Soviet intermediate-range missiles in Europe were not. The Soviet Union’s chief allies were adjacent to its territory, allowing Moscow to position its weapons so that its nuclear “umbrella” covered its allies from sites within the USSR; thus the Soviets had no forward-deployed nuclear arms in the 1970s. The United States, on the other hand, was bound to extend its defense across two oceans to include Japan, South Korea, and Western Europe and had relied upon its forward-deployed nuclear weapons systems for decades. Additionally, from the perspective of the European nations whose fates were in the hands of the superpowers, virtually all the weapons under discussion could reach their territory and thus could be considered strategic.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Smoke, *National Security and the Nuclear Dilemma: An Introduction to the American Experience in the Cold War* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 162-3.



terms of the SALT I treaty defined the term “strategic” to apply to any “ballistic missiles capable of ranges in excess of the shortest distance between the northeastern border of the continental United States and the northwestern border of the continental USSR.”<sup>2</sup> This restriction on the scope of the SALT treaties left Europe open for the development and deployment of short-range and intermediate-range missiles. The Soviet Union moved first, with “unrestrained deployment in European Russia in 1977 of the new SS-20 medium-range nuclear missile, targeted on Western Europe,” but the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) soon moved to match this capability.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet mobile intermediate-range missile was identified by the Warsaw Pact as the RSD-10 Pioneer and known to NATO personnel as the SS-20 Saber. The first SS-20 systems were fielded on March 11, 1976; it took approximately five months for the first units to become fully operational. The SS-20 replaced and augmented the SS-4 and SS-5 missiles of the early 1960s, which had been matched against U.S. Pershing I missiles of the same era. Thus, immune from the SALT treaties, the SS-20 provided the Soviet Union with a marked advantage in mobile intermediate-range nuclear missile abilities.

In February 1978, NATO analysts determined that their European nuclear arsenal had become deficient and began evaluating options for advancement. After a brief review of weapons in development provided by the Pentagon, the decision was made to take a dramatic leap forward.<sup>4</sup> On December 12, 1979, NATO’s Secretary General, Joseph Luns, announced that the Soviets’ monopoly on intermediate-range ballistic

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<sup>2</sup> "Interim Agreement Between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Certain Measures With Respect to the Limitation of Offensive Arms," Treaty Number 92-24, Ex. L (92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 1972), Agreed Statement A.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew White, *Symbols of War: Pershing II and Cruise Missiles in Europe* (London: Merlin, 1983), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

missiles would be ended.<sup>5</sup> Two sophisticated systems would be utilized in concert: Pershing II mobile intermediate-range missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from permanent installations. Pershing IIs were significantly smaller than their Soviet counterparts, making them easier to transport and conceal. The Pershing II was also more accurate than any comparable missile. In the arithmetic of nuclear warfare, increased accuracy equates to the need for fewer missiles to ensure the target is hit. Technologically, the Pershing II far outclassed the SS-20, and ostensibly provided NATO with increased capability.

NATO's nuclear strategy was described as "flexible response." For nuclear deterrence to be successful, it had to be credible. One way to increase credibility was to provide multiple echelons of response, varying from short-range, small-yield tactical battlefield systems to long-range strategic bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>6</sup> With this range of options, NATO forces could conceivably match any Warsaw Pact action without committing to full-scale annihilation warfare. The fear at NATO headquarters was that Soviet forces could employ weapons up to intermediate-range level while issuing diplomatic assurances that the war would not be further escalated. This, in turn, could have resulted in NATO's reluctance to employ strategic weapons and a Warsaw Pact victory in a limited nuclear engagement in Europe. Ironically, these fears virtually mirrored those felt in the Kremlin.

The Soviets received notice in late 1979 of a weapon that was not scheduled to be fielded for four more years. Furthermore, the missiles in question were comparable to weapons already employed by the Soviets. Despite all this, the Soviet Union reacted to

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Pry, *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 3.

<sup>6</sup> White, *Symbols of War*, 4.

the announcement as if it were the Cuban Missile Crisis turned back on them. On June 22, 1981, Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov publicly condemned the Pershing IIs, saying the missiles were an attempt by the United States to safeguard North America by shifting the focus of World War III to Europe. “Everyone knows,” Ustinov asserted, “that the chief purpose of the scheme to deploy the new U.S. missiles in Western Europe is, by unleashing a new world war about whose preparation the Pentagon strategists are talking so cynically, to subject the Federal Republic of Germany and other allies to a destructive retaliation strike and try to sit it out.”<sup>7</sup> A less rational but equally likely reason for the Soviet’s disquiet could have been the presence of nuclear weapons on German soil, given Germany’s betrayal of the Soviet Union in 1941 and Russians’ long memories of such transgressions.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet Union had first deployed missiles of this category to Eastern Europe in 1977, and already had in place far more missiles than were necessary to repel any invasion by ground forces. Publicly, the Soviet Union denied the feasibility of limited nuclear warfare. In the official Soviet Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* in 1981, Defense Minister Ustinov wrote, “Could anyone in his right mind speak seriously of any limited nuclear war? It should be quite clear that the aggressor’s actions will instantly and inevitably trigger a devastating counterstrike by the other side. None but completely irresponsible people could maintain that a nuclear war may be made to follow rules adopted beforehand with nuclear missiles exploding in ‘gentlemanly manner’ over strictly designated targets and sparing the population.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Symbols of War*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Steele, *Soviet Power: The Kremlin’s Foreign Policy – Brezhnev to Chernenko* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 43.

Regardless of their public position, Soviet military leadership would have been remiss to rely on the “right mind” of their wartime opponents. Weapons do not exist without the plans to use them. Warsaw Pact war plans released by the government of Poland in 2005 provide significant insight into the intended use of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). According to one plan, referred to as “Seven Days to the River Rhine,” the Warsaw Pact would have responded to a European invasion by NATO conventional forces with nuclear strikes on major Western European cities.<sup>10</sup> Details of this plan revealed that France and the United Kingdom would not have been targeted by nuclear weapons, implying that Warsaw Pact planners considered the use of INF in terms of a limited, winnable nuclear exchange.

Soviet leadership also considered the use of INF by NATO forces. Yuri Andropov, both as director of the KGB and General Secretary of the Communist Party, was told by his analysts that the Pershing II would be able to annihilate Moscow in six minutes, with only minimal warning. The satellites designed to detect missile launches were all directed toward the United States, and would have to be repositioned or supplemented in order to observe Pershing II launch sites in West Germany and Tomahawk cruise missile sites spread across Western Europe from Italy to England. It would take up to two minutes for ground-based radar systems to detect the incoming missiles, and another minute for the warning to be issued. Communist Party leaders could only conclude that, with the Soviet military effectively decapitated and/or key strategic sites destroyed, the United States would have won a nuclear war.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Watt, “Poland Risks Russia's Wrath with Soviet Nuclear Attack Map,” *The Guardian*, 26 November 2005, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 5.

Soviet leaders organized a flurry of diplomatic and propaganda activity intended to prevent or delay a nuclear war in the early 1980s. The Soviets supported United Nations Resolution 36/100, titled “Declaration on the Prevention of Nuclear Catastrophe,” that declared first use of nuclear weapons to be a crime against humanity.<sup>12</sup> In March 1982, they proposed that both the United States and Soviet Union pull their nuclear missile submarines back from their forward patrol areas to reduce the threat of short-notice missile attacks.<sup>13</sup> General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev publicly pledged not to use nuclear arms first, declaring “the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics assumes an obligation not to be the first to use nuclear weapons.” Boldly moving without guarantee that the United States would do the same, Brezhnev pronounced this position immediately in force: “This obligation shall become effective immediately, on the moment it is made public from the rostrum of the General Assembly.”<sup>14</sup> The implied challenge to the United States to reciprocate was clear. On May 27, 1983, less than six months before the scheduled arrival of Pershing II missiles in West Germany, *Pravda* published a warning that “deployment of these missiles would... sharply aggravate nuclear confrontation, and would increase the risk of the outbreak of war.”<sup>15</sup> The White House read these measures as if they were propaganda posturing intended to undermine the deployment of the Pershing II missiles. In this, they were correct, except for underestimating the real fear in the Kremlin. The day after the first Pershing II missiles arrived, Andropov announced that their new SS-21 Scarab mobile missile systems would

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations Resolution 36/100, “Declaration on the Prevention of Nuclear Catastrophe,” *Resolutions and Decisions Adopted by the General Assembly during its Thirty-Sixth Session, 15 September-18 December 1981, 16-29 March, 28 April, and 20 September 1982* (New York: United Nations, 1982), 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> “Excerpts from Remarks by Brezhnev on Missiles,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1982, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Nossiter, “Soviet Forswears Using A-Arms First,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1982, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 17.

be forward-deployed to Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic.<sup>16</sup> This move exemplified the arms-race mentality of the era. In simplistic terms, the SS-20 provoked the Pershing II, which in turn provoked the SS-21 in a continuing cycle of escalation.

In early 1981, an American technological advance caused the western world to marvel while the Soviets recognized a terrifying new threat: the United States had launched the space shuttle *Columbia*. Launched on April 12, 1981, *Columbia* completed thirty-six orbits in a little over fifty-four hours before landing safely.<sup>17</sup> Surely, the Soviets reasoned, this could only be a template for a space bomber. The idea had been around for decades; plans for a rocket-powered *Amerikā Bomber* had been presented to Hitler's *Luftwaffe* in the early 1940s. The vehicle would have been able to launch from Germany and utilize a technique called "dynamic soaring" or "skip-gliding" to bounce along the upper atmosphere and deliver its payload on New York City. The plane would glide to a rest approximately 12,000 miles from its point of origin.<sup>18</sup>

NASA's space shuttle program was not seen as capable of generating a profit, and the Soviets expected that the only thing in which capitalists would invest without expected return was military equipment. Efraim Akin, a scientist with the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Institute of Applied Mathematics, outlined how quickly the Soviet thought process turned to military views. "Very early our calculations showed that the cost figures being used by NASA were unrealistic. It would be better to use a series of expendable launch vehicles. Then, when we learned of the decision to build a Shuttle

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<sup>16</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), 548.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis Jenkins, *Space Shuttle* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 2001), 266.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

launch facility at Vandenberg for military purposes, we noted that the trajectories from Vandenberg allowed an overflight of the main centers of the USSR on the first orbit.” According to the calculations of the Institute of Applied Mathematics, the Shuttle would be able to enter Soviet airspace from orbit approximately three and a half minutes after launch from the Vandenberg Launch Site. This timeline would be shorter than submarine-launched ballistic missiles off the coast (approximately ten minutes) or intermediate-range ballistic missiles from West Germany (approximately six and a half minutes). As a result, the Soviet military reacted as if the Shuttle was intended to be a first-strike weapon. “Because of our suspicion and distrust we decided to replicate the Shuttle without a full understanding of its mission,” said Akin.<sup>19</sup>

One of the announced physical capabilities of the Shuttle particularly troubled the Soviets: the Shuttle could launch with 30 tons of cargo, and return with 15 tons. Yuriy Mozzhorin, the director of the Soviet Union’s Central Scientific Research Institute for Machine Building (TsNIIMash), remarked, “All this was very unusual: the mass they had been putting into orbit with their expendable rockets hadn’t even reached 150 tons per year, and now they were planning to launch 1,770 tons per year. Nothing was being returned from space and now they were planning to bring down 820 tons per year.”<sup>20</sup> To the Soviets, this suggested that the space shuttle program would be used to place experimental laser weapons into orbit. The effects of orbit could not be adequately simulated on Earth, so it would be necessary to test them in space and be able to retrieve them to make adjustments and modifications.

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<sup>19</sup> Bart Hendrickx and Bert Vis, *Energiya-Buran* (Chichester, UK: Praxis, 2007), 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Another peculiarity of the Shuttle design required by the U.S. Air Force was its ability to travel 1,200 miles under its own power, enabling it to return to Vandenberg after one trip around the Earth. This feature was designed to quickly service polar-orbiting intelligence satellites or even capture enemy satellites without providing enough notice for the Soviets to react. Additionally, this capability was required as a safety measure to allow the Shuttle to complete the “Abort Once Around” maneuver in the event that a main engine failure resulted in an incorrect and unrecoverable orbit.<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet Union’s top scientist, President of the Academy of Sciences and member of the Central Committee, Mstislav Keldysh, urged that the Soviet Union pursue its own reusable space vehicle. Many in the Central Committee, including General Secretary Brezhnev and Defense Minister Ustinov, felt that the USSR must match any threats posed by the U.S. Shuttle. These perspectives may have been manipulated by Keldysh, who was eager to advance Soviet practical sciences. When the Institute of Space Sciences was unable to justify the pursuit of a Soviet shuttle, Keldysh tweaked the wording, saying “We do not see any sensible scenario that would support the Shuttle for scientific uses,” reinforcing the option of military uses.<sup>22</sup>

Two years and four launches after the initial demonstration flight of the *Columbia*, what had been a horrifying Soviet suspicion became even more dreadful when the United States launched its second Space Shuttle, the *Challenger*, on April 4, 1983. The *Challenger* flew three missions during 1983, and *Columbia* flew one.<sup>23</sup> There had been no overt signs that the system was intended to be a weapon, but even so the success of the orbiters represented a significant technological gap for the entire world to see. The

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Jenkins, *Space Shuttle*, 266.



overall situation was a quite similar to events that occurred more than twenty-five years earlier when the Soviet Union demonstrated its long-range missile capability with the launch of the first man-made satellite, *Sputnik*. John Gaddis compared the shocking effect of the *Sputnik* launch to that of Pearl Harbor and the North Korean invasion of South Korea. The United States was within range of Soviet missiles, which could be armed with nuclear warheads. The warning time of an impending attack had been several hours when only bomber aircraft were available; missiles reduced that time to less than half an hour.<sup>24</sup> The *Sputnik* launch of 1957 resulted in the perception of a “missile gap” that invoked serious fear in the population of the United States, just before the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba and the crisis that took the world to the brink of nuclear war. The U.S. Space Shuttle flights contributed to a similar atmosphere of anxiety and fear in the Soviet Union, and foreshadowed the war scare that developed throughout 1983.

While the 1970s produced the first real regulations on existing nuclear weapons, the early 1980s proved that the era of hopeful negotiations was over. New and potentially frightening technological developments perpetuated the arms race and harkened back to the Cuban Missile Crisis, previously the most dangerous era of U.S.-Soviet relations. Along with the escalation in arms technology, the Soviet Union and the United States each selected new leaders who were predisposed to distrust each other.

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<sup>24</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, Rev ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182.

## CHAPTER 2

### NEW MEN IN POWER

While several of the events of 1983 had their roots in prior years, the crisis began to build momentum on November 12, 1982. On this day, two days after the death of Leonid Brezhnev, former KGB chairman Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov ascended to the pinnacle of Soviet power as General Secretary of the Communist Party.<sup>25</sup> Andropov's resumé included three years as ambassador to Hungary, during which he participated in the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. This event had a significant impact on Andropov, resulting in a predilection for military intervention that his associates termed a "Hungarian complex."<sup>26</sup> Andropov returned to Moscow in 1957 to head the Foreign Affairs department of the Central Committee that dealt with other fraternal socialist countries.<sup>27</sup> For ten years, Andropov worked the intrigues of Soviet politics to ingratiate himself with those in power, resulting in his surprise appointment as Chairman of the Committee for State Security, better known as the KGB.<sup>28</sup>

As Chairman of the KGB, Andropov immediately displayed an aversion to intelligence information that did not conform to his preconceived notions. Andropov was deeply concerned with the "Prague Spring" reform movement that began on January 5, 1968, and focused his agency's efforts on undermining the dissidents. Oleg Kalugin, a senior KGB official posted in Washington, D.C., reported "absolutely reliable documents" that proved no western agency was manipulating the Czechoslovakian

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<sup>25</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 272.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 398.

<sup>27</sup> Zhores Medvedev, *Andropov* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

reforms. Andropov ordered these reports kept from the Politburo, and when Kalugin returned to Moscow he discovered the directive that “my messages should not be shown to anyone, and destroyed.” Instead, Andropov directed the KGB to foment “the fear that Czechoslovakia could fall victim to NATO aggression or to a coup.” On August 18, 1968, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland agreed on military intervention in Czechoslovakia—the largest military action in Europe since World War II—based on spurious information provided by Andropov’s KGB.<sup>29</sup>

Andropov continued his war against dissidents, especially within the Soviet Union and wherever its defectors could be located. The KGB targeted Rudolf Nureyev and Natalia Makarova, dancers who defected from the Kirov Ballet in 1961 and 1970, respectively, without significant success. Such intents, dubbed “special actions,” represented the dedication of “enormous amounts of time and resources...to tracking down defectors and preparing to kill and maim them.”<sup>30</sup>

Eleven years after the suppression of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, Andropov again used his position to influence Soviet military intervention abroad. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet General Staff feared the United States would relocate its assets from Iran to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Andropov capitalized on this possibility to press Brezhnev for intervention. The threat of U.S. missiles in Afghanistan that could range into Kazakhstan and Siberia was too much to bear. The announcement of the planned development and deployment of intermediate-range Pershing II missiles by NATO forces was twisted to validate this fear. Andropov also demonstrated his hawkish nature through his vehement response to opposition.

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<sup>29</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 257.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff, foresaw the political repercussions, arguing: “We would align the entire Islamist East against us and suffer political damage around the world.” Andropov shouted him down harshly, “Focus on military affairs! Leave policy-making to us, the party, and Leonid Ilyich [Brezhnev]!”<sup>31</sup> Rather than face the potential of nuclear missiles stationed along the southern border of the Soviet Union, Brezhnev approved the movement of the Red Army into Afghanistan.

Andropov’s militant opposition to liberalization and dissent had grown to epic proportions, though his true sentiments were largely unknown in the West. When Andropov replaced Leonid Brezhnev as General Secretary, biographical information on him was most notable for its obvious inconsistencies. Details as mundane as Andropov’s build and appearance were unverified, but were published with colorful commentary to obscure the lack of actual facts. In an article for *The New Republic*, Edward Jay Epstein compared the various depictions of Andropov in the media. A concise example of the disparity of reporting focused on Andropov’s birthplace. Epstein wrote, “The *Washington Post* initially reported that he was ‘a native of Karelia,’ a Soviet province on the Finnish border. The *New York Times* gave his birthplace as the ‘southern Ukraine,’ which is hundreds of miles to the south. And *Time* said he had been born in ‘the village of Nagutskoye in the northern Caucasus.’ His birthplace was thus narrowed down to an area stretching from Finland to Iran.”<sup>32</sup> The reasons for this uncertainty included the KGB’s disinformation apparatus and the necessity of western media to rely on anecdotes from Russian emigrants without the ability to substantiate them.

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<sup>31</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 262-4.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Jay Epstein, “The Andropov Hoax,” *The New Republic*, 7 February 1983.

Soviet leadership had, for decades, acted on a mentality of skepticism and suspicion that cast a pall over Soviet relations with virtually every other country. The era of leaders who lived through World War II regarded the Nazis' surprise attack on June 22, 1941, as the greatest trauma of their lives. They would not allow themselves to misread an enemy's intentions so severely again.<sup>33</sup> To their considerable sorrow, Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov had trusted that their Nazi Counterparts, Adolf Hitler and Joachim von Ribbentrop, would honor their commitment to the Nonaggression Pact of 1939. Two decades later, Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev was shocked by President Kennedy's reaction to the medium-range ballistic missiles deployed to Cuba, resulting in his public humiliation and ouster as General Secretary after backing down to U.S. pressure. Successive Soviet leaders were determined not to repeat these mistakes. Unwilling to allow an appearance of vulnerability as détente soured in the late 1970s, the Soviet General Staff elevated its intelligence apparatus to a wartime footing. By the end of Leonid Brezhnev's term as General Secretary, the Kremlin walls were firmly buttressed by distrust and resentment.

Most Soviet leaders expected that any future nuclear war would not begin as an unprecedented, Pearl Harbor-style attack, but rather as a tense political situation that escalated out of control, similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>34</sup> The breakdown of détente included several such situations, one of which was the movement of Soviet troops into Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviets considered this a minor stabilization action similar to the suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and the 1968 "Prague

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<sup>33</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 106.

<sup>34</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 529.

Spring.”<sup>35</sup> The Politburo deemed the intervention in Afghanistan so insignificant that no one was consulted on the potential U.S. response. Even though Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, was in Moscow at the time, he was not informed of the invasion until he heard about it on a radio news broadcast.<sup>36</sup> Foreign Minister Gromyko believed that “the American reaction, whatever it might be, was not a major factor to be taken into consideration.”<sup>37</sup> Secretary General Brezhnev, for his part, assured Dobrynin that “it’ll be over in three to four weeks.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike those previous interventions, the Afghanistan crisis escalated unexpectedly in various directions. President Jimmy Carter’s responded by withdrawing the SALT II treaty from consideration by the Senate, cancelling a grain trade agreement that would have benefited both countries, and boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympics hosted by Moscow. President Carter went so far as to describe Soviet troops in Afghanistan as “the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War.”<sup>39</sup> To the Soviets, the fact that a military intervention in an adjacent country could have such far-reaching consequences was an indicator that tensions could flare at any time and that they must take steps to be prepared.

In May 1981, Soviet Premier Brezhnev addressed an audience of combined KGB agents and officers of the GRU, the Red Army’s military intelligence branch. Brezhnev warned the assembly that the Soviet Union and the United States were on the nuclear brink. Following Brezhnev at the podium was KGB chairman Andropov, who made a groundbreaking announcement. Some of his remarks were reported by Oleg Gordievsky,

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<sup>35</sup> John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 109, 185.

<sup>36</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 439.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>39</sup> Gaddis, *Cold War*, 211.

a KGB colonel who had been working for British intelligence since 1974: “The new American administration, he [Andropov] declared, was actively preparing for nuclear war.”<sup>40</sup> For the first time in history, the two primary intelligence organizations, the KGB and GRU, were to cooperate in an extensive new mission. The name of the operation was enough to command the full attention of the audience: “Nuclear Missile Attack,” abbreviated RYAN from its Russian name, “*raketno-yadernoye napadenie*.” In some sources, the word “surprise (*vnezapnoye*),” is added to the title, resulting in the less English-friendly appellation “Operation VRYAN.”<sup>41</sup> To add emphasis to his message when it was distributed by telegram to KGB residences worldwide, Andropov declared, “not since the end of the Second World War has the international situation been as explosive as it is now.”<sup>42</sup>

Operation RYAN, the “Assignment to Discover NATO Preparations for a Nuclear Attack,” was the largest Soviet intelligence effort since World War II, and took priority over any other KGB and GRU activities. The creators of RYAN had assembled a list of events that were deemed indicators of an impending nuclear attack, and subdivided that list into “Immediate tasks of Residencies for Collecting Information and Organizing their Work” and “Principle Prospective Directions for the Residency to Pursue its Work of Collecting the Information Needed to Discover the Adversary’s Preparations for RYAN.” Among the tasks designated as immediate were identifying locations, routes, and methods for the evacuation of government officials; determining levels of preparedness of Civil Defense shelters; measuring an increase in the blood supply maintained by

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov’s Instructions: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975-1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 67.

<sup>41</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Oleg Kalugin, *Spymaster: My Thirty-two Years in Intelligence and Espionage Against the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 353.

hospitals expecting mass casualties; monitoring traffic at locations frequented by employees of key government installations during their off-duty hours; and observing routine traffic patterns around key government installations.<sup>43</sup> In their details of these tasks, KGB leaders in Moscow Centre demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of western medical procedures when they instructed their agents to report any significant increase in the price paid to blood donors.<sup>44</sup> It was not customary in either the United States or the United Kingdom for blood donors to receive monetary compensation.

The second list, “Principal Prospective Directions,” included suggested instructions on how to carry out the tasks on the first list. Some of these suggestions were based on the fundamental differences between western capitalist and eastern Communist societies, lending credence to the maxim, “we fear that which we do not understand.” The conspiratorial views of Moscow Centre under Chairman Andropov were disseminated throughout the Soviet intelligence apparatus as part of Operation RYAN. KGB agents were instructed to monitor financial institutions, under the impression that they might be in the confidence of the U.S. government: “Bearing in mind the very considerable knowledge possessed by the heads of international and the larger national banks, examine the possibility of obtaining information about RYAN from such circles.” Similarly, the KGB suspected that the U.S. government might have been in collusion with the church, and agents were charged with “assessing the degree of likelihood that the heads of national churches and international church organizations, and the leadership and institutions of the Vatican abroad would be aware of preparation for a

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 71-2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



nuclear attack and clarifying possibilities of obtaining information about RYAN from these circles.”<sup>45</sup>

KGB headquarters sent a supplemental message to its residencies on August 12, 1983, identifying several activities as potential indications of impending nuclear war. Titled *Permanent Operational Assignment to Detect Signs of NATO Preparations for a Nuclear Attack on the U.S.S.R. as Reflected in the Activity of Special Services of the NATO Bloc*, the document augmented the indicators suggested by the original Operation RYAN brief and identified such events as an increase in covert insertions of agents into the Soviet Union, an increase in contacts between NATO intelligence agencies, increased disinformation operations directed against the Soviet Union, or upgrading the security elements at government installations. Most interesting among the potential indicators of impending nuclear attack were two items indicative of the Soviet Union’s tendency to ascribe its own values to its opponent. The KGB’s worldwide network was directed to watch for “reinforcement of repressive measures by the punitive authorities against progressive organizations and individuals” and “restrictions on the use of telephone and telegraph network.”<sup>46</sup>

The KGB’s field agents stationed abroad did not always agree with the suspicions behind Operation RYAN. Although not inclined to support the premise that the United States was planning a surprise nuclear war, KGB agents were even less inclined to risk their careers by debating their instructions. In some cases, RYAN assignments were relegated to junior officers and not fully supported. The KGB’s Chief-of-Station in London, Arkadi Guk, assigned the colossal task of monitoring the movement of official

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>46</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 13-14.

cars and lighted windows at government and military facilities and investigating the evacuation routes of important personnel and their families to one junior officer who did not have access to personal transportation or permission to travel outside London.<sup>47</sup> While it is unknown whether or not other KGB stations put forth more effort than London, none were willing to sacrifice their careers by contradicting Moscow Centre's assessment. Another common flaw was that potentially negligible or spurious information was reported to higher headquarters, which in turn became even more alarmed and sought more information.<sup>48</sup> The tendency to provide whatever was requested, whether or not it was valid, was recognized within the Soviet intelligence community. During the tumultuous time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, one political intelligence officer was quoted in the September 24, 1991, issue of *Izvestia* as saying, "In order to please our superiors, we sent in falsified and biased information, acting on the principle 'Blame everything on the Americans and everything will be OK.' That's not intelligence, it's self-deception!"<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the Kremlin was prepared for a 1983 in which the United States was the definitive enemy. Andropov and his government were predisposed to view any and all American actions with suspicion and distrust. They based their policies on the assumption that the United States was actively plotting their doom, which gave the Soviet Union the feeling that they were involved in a fight for survival.

Just as there was a new man with a new perspective in the Kremlin, there was a departure from previous attitudes in the White House. President Harry Truman had established the first overall U.S. policy toward communist states when he approved NSC-

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 81.

<sup>48</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 131.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, 214.

68 in 1950. Inspired heavily by the writings of George Kennan, NSC-68 outlined the concept of “containment.” Essentially, the policy at this time assumed an aggressive expansionist Soviet mentality bent on world domination that had to be resisted with military action to maintain the status quo, as demonstrated in Korea and Vietnam.<sup>50</sup> By the early 1970s, containment was replaced by “détente,” roughly translated into “relaxation” or “easing of tensions.” A new era of diplomacy began, with the successful negotiation of the SALT I treaty, Biological Weapons Convention, Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Helsinki Accords, and the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project.<sup>51</sup> This era of good feelings waned under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who was sincerely concerned with human rights in the Soviet Union and the Red Army’s activities in Afghanistan. Soviet leaders expected to be able to deal with Reagan as they had with Nixon, not knowing that Reagan would take Carter’s concerns even further.<sup>52</sup>

Ronald Reagan disagreed fundamentally with the philosophy of both the “containment” and “détente” approaches to relations with the Soviet Union. In 1976, Reagan characterized détente as “a one-way street that simply gives the Soviets what they want with nothing in return.”<sup>53</sup> From his perspective, containment and détente shared a fundamental flaw: both assumed the Soviet Union was an unavoidable presence in the world. Rather than finding ways to coexist with the Soviet Union, Reagan argued that the United States should be trying to change the Soviet system. Reagan believed that communism was doomed to fail, and described it in 1975 as “a temporary aberration

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<sup>50</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* Vol. 2 (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 99-100.

<sup>52</sup> James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 27.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”<sup>54</sup>

Reagan sought to overturn previous notions of U.S.-Soviet relations by changing the language, ideas, and thought processes used to discuss the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup>

President Reagan wanted to engage with Soviet leadership, but felt that if he extended the olive branch with the world as it was it might be interpreted by the Soviet Union as a reward for bad behavior. Reagan addressed the tough stance his administration initially took in his autobiography, “there was a new management in the White House along with a new realism regarding the Russians, and until they behaved themselves, they could expect more of the same.” Reagan recognized that this was an unhelpful attitude, and tried to change. He wrote, “It was dangerous to continue the East-West nuclear standoff forever, and I decided that if the Russians wouldn’t take the first step, I should.”<sup>56</sup> Reagan initiated correspondence with Leonid Brezhnev on April 24, 1981, with little success. Brezhnev’s response, as recorded by Reagan, was unfriendly, “He said he, too, was against making immediate plans for a summit, repudiated everything I’d said about the Soviet Union, blamed the United States for starting and perpetuating the Cold War, and then said we had no business telling the Soviets what they could or could not do anywhere in the world.”<sup>57</sup> Reagan continued to believe that the United States and Soviet Union should have a dialogue, but would not attempt to open channels until he thought the conditions were right. Reagan wrote, “we had to send as powerful a message as we could to the Russians that we weren’t going to stand by anymore while they armed and financed terrorists and subverted democratic

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 269.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 273.

governments. Our policy was to be one based on strength and realism. I wanted peace through strength, not peace through a piece of paper.”<sup>58</sup> Reagan sought to engage the Soviets, but not until the United States could set the terms. He wanted to be proud of America’s foreign policy, and it was important to him to be doing what he thought was “right.” This concept of viewing foreign policy through the lens of morality characterized the third and final chapter of U.S.-Soviet relations, frequently dubbed “rollback.”

On January 17, 1983, President Reagan defined his approach when he approved NSDD-75. The Reagan Administration used National Security Decision Directives (NSDD) to establish official internal policy on matters of defense, intelligence, and foreign policy. NSDD-75, titled “U.S. Relations with the USSR,” detailed a three-pronged strategy that focused American policy on actively seeking change within the government of the Soviet Union. Reagan’s administration intended to contain and reverse Soviet expansionism; nudge the Soviet political system “toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the privileged elite is gradually reduced”; and engage in negotiations with the Soviet Union to protect U.S. interests, especially in times of Soviet political succession.<sup>59</sup>

NSDD-75 also included an emphasis on morality and values. “U.S. policy must have an ideological thrust which clearly affirms the superiority of U.S. and Western values of individual dignity and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy over the repressive features of Soviet Communism.”<sup>60</sup> The Reagan Administration recognized that such a dramatic departure from previous policy

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>59</sup> Robert McFarlane and Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994), 372.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 374.

would require long-term commitment and likely be met with domestic resistance. “In the absence of dramatic near-term victories in the U.S. effort to moderate Soviet behavior, pressure is likely to mount for change in U.S. policy. There will be appeals from important segments of domestic opinion for a more ‘normal’ U.S.-Soviet relationship, particularly in a period of political transition in Moscow.”<sup>61</sup> NSDD-75 codified a new perspective on relations with the Soviet Union, but its contents remained largely unknown until it was declassified in 1994. It was nearly two months before the new tone got its first public exposure.

On March 8, President Reagan gave an address to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. This speech was primarily concerned with his own personal religious beliefs, but as with most presidential missives, the Soviet Union and communism were prominent. An ongoing issue was the debate over the proposed nuclear arms freeze suggested by the Soviets. Many religious groups supported the freeze, arguing that it could be the first step in reducing or eliminating these weapons. The National Association of Evangelicals had not yet publicly announced its position. Given the venue, the President felt that it would be appropriate for him to convey his moral opinion of communism: “Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness – pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.” Later, President Reagan expounded on the specific issue of the nuclear freeze: “So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 379.

pride -- the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves 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 misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.”<sup>62</sup>

This speech was by far President Reagan’s most overt use of morality in foreign policy decisions. By characterizing the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” Reagan made a calculated gesture to send two messages at once. Over the objections of his long-time political advisor, Stuart Spencer, and even his wife Nancy, Reagan said those words “with malice aforethought... I wanted to let [Soviet leader Yuri] Andropov know we recognized the Soviets for what they were.”<sup>63</sup> Not only did Reagan serve notice to the Soviet Union, he indicated that compromise with the Soviets (specifically the nuclear freeze) was tantamount to a deal with the devil.

Ironically, at the time of President Reagan’s condemnation of the Soviet Union as “the focus of evil in the modern world,” he had only met with two Soviet leaders, on two occasions, nearly a decade apart. The first meeting occurred on June 23, 1973, when President Richard Nixon hosted Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev in his home in San Clemente, California, during Ronald Reagan’s term as governor, and the men met briefly at a reception.<sup>64</sup> Despite this extremely limited interaction, Reagan’s anti-Soviet stance was firm during the first days of his administration. Within days of his inauguration, Reagan casually remarked to reporters after a news conference that détente was nonproductive for the United States, and that Soviets “reserve unto themselves the right

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<sup>62</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), 363-4.

<sup>63</sup> Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 269.

to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat” in order to attain their self-declared goal of world domination. On the way back to the Oval Office, Reagan turned to his national security advisor, Richard Allen, and asked, “Say, Dick, they do lie and cheat, don’t they?”<sup>65</sup>

Reagan’s personal experience with Soviets was so limited that it caught the attention of the recently-appointed Secretary of State George Shultz: “It finally dawned on me that President Reagan had never had a real conversation with a top Communist leader, and that he wanted to have one.”<sup>66</sup> Shultz brought up the topic in private conversation with Reagan, offering to arrange a meeting with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador to the United States since 1962. On February 15, 1981, less than a month after the aforementioned news conference, Ambassador Dobrynin arrived at the State Department for a routine meeting. He was surprised and delighted to be invited instead to meet the President. Dobrynin was smuggled into the living quarters of the White House, where he, Reagan, and Shultz talked for two hours.<sup>67</sup> This was Reagan’s second meeting with a Soviet government official, and the first with significant interaction.

Just a few weeks after the “Evil Empire” speech, on March 23, what could have been an innocuous argument for support of his budget proposal became groundbreaking when President Reagan revealed his intention to surpass the protection afforded by Mutual Assured Destruction and pursue a missile defense program. The only recognized defense against nuclear missile attack was the knowledge that any such attack would be met with such devastating retaliation that it would be impractical to use such weapons.

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<sup>65</sup> Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 221



The variety of nuclear arms, including ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, intermediate-range nuclear missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and aircraft-delivered nuclear bombs and cruise missiles, made it virtually impossible for any armed force to believe itself capable of successfully preempting its adversary's retaliatory strike. Thus, the safety of the world, according to his conceptual approach, depended on all parties with access to nuclear weapons being sufficiently rational to understand the unacceptable consequences of their actions. In what came to be known as the "Grand Vision" speech, President Reagan advocated an active defense when he 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?"<sup>68</sup>

Reagan knew that this would be an expensive, expansive undertaking. He made no claims of an estimated time of delivery, or even any assurances that the goal was attainable. With an eye fixed on the distant future, Reagan stated, "current technology has attained a level of sophistication where it's reasonable for us to begin this effort. It will take years, probably decades of effort on many fronts."<sup>69</sup> Much like President John F. Kennedy's bold proclamation on May 25, 1961, of the goal of landing a man on the moon, President Reagan announced only the first steps of the massive effort to follow: "I am directing a comprehensive and intensive effort to define a long-term research and

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<sup>68</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security, March 23, 1983," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

development program to begin to achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles.”<sup>70</sup>

The general idea for the Strategic Defense Initiative had formed in Reagan’s mind while he was merely a Presidential hopeful in 1979. Reagan was among a small contingent of visitors to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) under Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado. After being impressed by the technology represented by the tracking systems and security procedures, an unknown individual among the visitors asked the base commander what would be done in response to a nuclear attack against the United States. The reply was that the missiles could only be tracked and warnings issued; there was no defense available. Martin Anderson, one of Reagan’s policy advisors who was present on the occasion, described Reagan’s mood on the flight back to Los Angeles: “He [Reagan] slowly shook his head and said, ‘We have spent all that money and have all that equipment and there is nothing we can do to prevent a nuclear missile from hitting us.’” Reagan contemplated the dilemma throughout the flight, and had resolved by the time the aircraft landed, “We should have some way of defending ourselves against nuclear missiles.”<sup>71</sup>

Unfortunately for President Reagan, the vagaries of timing resulted in his use of the phrase “evil empire” and revealing a plan for space-based defenses at nearly the same time as *Return of the Jedi* opened in theatres nationwide. Much to President Reagan’s chagrin, the nickname “Star Wars” was applied to his Strategic Defense Initiative by certain members of Congress and the media. Senator Ted Kennedy is widely believed to have first used the term on the Senate floor, accusing the President of “employing Red-

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: Norton, 2007), 288.

scare tactics and reckless ‘Star Wars’ schemes.” This quote was disseminated nationally in the *Washington Post* on March 24, 1983.<sup>72</sup> The nickname was accepted by the vast majority of the population, and subconsciously a strong theme of science-fiction fantasy was attached to SDI, marking one of very few communications failures of the so-called “Great Communicator.” When asked his opinion of the appellation in 1985, President Reagan confirmed that he disliked it. The nickname was “first used in an effort to denigrate the whole idea,” he explained, describing it as the “sound of an image of destruction back and forth” that was incompatible with his vision of a purely defensive system intended to prevent just such destruction.<sup>73</sup>

Reagan intended his rhetorical campaign to strengthen the position of the United States and thereby increase the likelihood of successful negotiations with the Soviets; the actual result was to spur the paranoia of the Soviet Union. The strong words of Reagan’s first news conference provoked a complaint from Ambassador Dobrynin, who expressed his concern that such an “unprecedented and unprovoked statement” would “undoubtedly make a most unfavorable impression” in Moscow. Dobrynin wondered, “How is he going to do business with us?” Alexander Haig, President Reagan’s first Secretary of State, explained that Reagan had not intended to be confrontational and had just been expressing his own beliefs and opinions. Knowing how Soviet leaders equated their personal perspectives with state policy, Dobrynin responded that this explanation only made things worse.<sup>74</sup> By applying the language of morality and righteousness, President

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<sup>72</sup> Lou Cannon, “President Seeks Futuristic Defense Against Missiles,” *Washington Post*, 24 March 1983, A1.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Linenthal, *Symbolic Defense* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 15.

<sup>74</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 490-491.

Reagan articulated a foreign policy he could be proud of, but neglected to consider how the Soviets would feel about being demonized.

Two men rose to power within two years of each other, each owing a significant portion of his success to how firmly he opposed the other. Each brought his preconceived notions of the duplicity and aggression of the other, and an urge to increase his own relative strength. General Secretary Andropov was guided by his absolute belief in Marxism-Leninism and his experiences chasing dissidents, and President Reagan was influenced by his faith in Christianity and his interactions with the House Un-American Activities Commission in the late 1940s. The conflicts between such diametrically opposed leaders were inevitable, and began in early 1983.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FIRST CRISIS

While the focus on the world's tensions was on Europe and the missiles to be deployed there, the United States was flexing its muscles in the northwest Pacific without significant fanfare. In February 1983, the massive aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* and its battle group participated in the annual joint U.S.-South Korean exercise "Team Spirit." Upon completion of the exercise, the *Enterprise* group made port in Japan. It departed Japan on March 25, apparently bound for the United States. Instead, the *Enterprise* sailed northward to meet the carriers *Midway* and *Coral Sea* with their respective escorts to conduct FleetEx 83-1. In total, the combination of the three carrier battle groups comprised "the largest fleet exercise conducted by the Pacific Fleet since World War II," according to Admiral Robert Long, the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC). Additionally, the conglomeration of approximately forty ships, complete with 23,000 crewmembers and 300 aircraft, was the most powerful naval armada ever assembled.<sup>75</sup>

For about two weeks, the ships and sailors of FleetEx 83-1 swept counter-clockwise through the North Pacific, within a few minutes flight of the Soviet coast. U.S. aircraft and ships attempted to provoke their Soviet counterparts into reacting, allowing U.S. Naval Intelligence to study Soviet radar characteristics, aircraft capabilities, and tactical maneuvers.<sup>76</sup> In an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the unspoken intent of this exercise was stated quite succinctly: "In classical naval theory, a

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<sup>75</sup> R. W. Johnson, *Shoot-down: Flight 007 and the American Connection* (New York: Viking, 1986), 55.

<sup>76</sup> David E. Hoffman, *Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 64.

demonstration of this kind shows your prospective opponent that he is outclassed off his own coastline and had better stick close to home in he knows what is good for him.”<sup>77</sup>

As the exercise approached its conclusion, the USS *Midway* performed a particularly intimidating maneuver. All electronic emissions were shut off, and the ship sailed quietly toward the Kurile Islands. Without an electronic signal to track, the only way the Soviets could have known its location would be by direct visible observation, which they did not have. When the *Midway* reappeared southeast of Kamchatka, the Soviets were “clearly surprised.” On April 4, the exercise escalated again when at least six U.S. Navy aircraft flew over one of the Kuriles.<sup>78</sup> The particular island in question, known as Zelyoni to the Soviets and Habomai-Shoto to the Japanese, is only about ten square miles and is the largest of a set of islands called the Habomai Rocks, within twenty miles of Japanese territory (see Figure 1: “Japan-USSR: Northern Territories”). There was virtually nothing on the island except a small Red Army outpost. The Soviets were outraged, and ordered a retaliatory overflight of U.S. territory in the Aleutian Islands. The Soviet Union also issued a demarche, a formal diplomatic note of protest, which accused the United States of repeated penetrations of Soviet airspace.<sup>79</sup>

The Kurile Islands had been occupied by the Soviet Union since World War II, despite several of them being claimed by Japan. This disagreement over the legitimate owner of the islands added a layer of political intrigue to the military exercise. Had the jets flown over established Soviet territory, the issue could have been handled much more

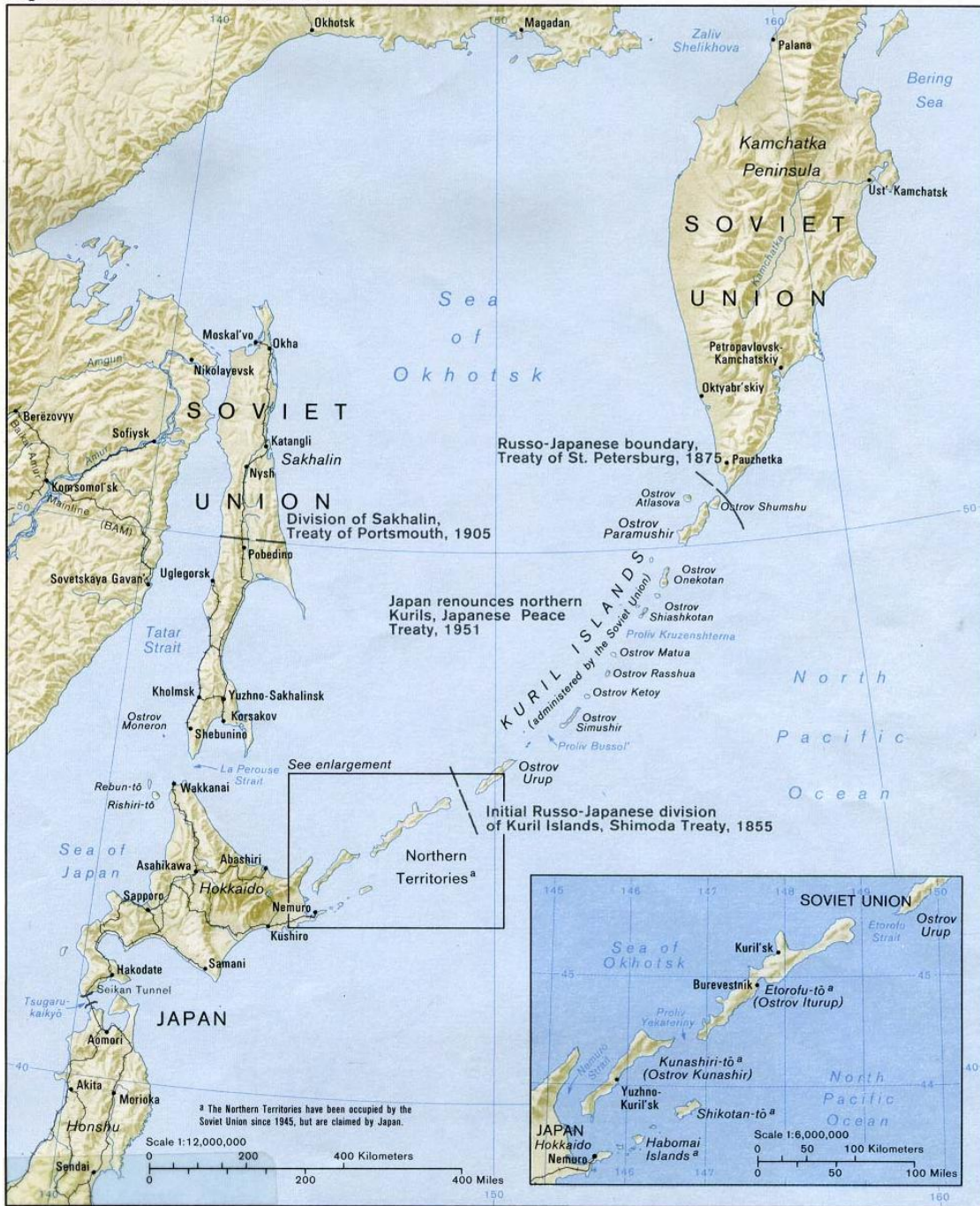
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<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 55.

<sup>78</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, *"The Target is Destroyed": What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It* (New York: Random House, 1986), 18.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

**Japan-USSR: Northern Territories**



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**Figure 1:** Central Intelligence Agency, "Japan-USSR: Northern Territories," 1988.

easily. If the U.S. State Department issued an apology or even an explanation to the Soviet Union regarding the overflight, it would have been a tacit recognition of the sovereignty of the Soviet Union over the Kuriles. The State Department could not suggest that the overflight had been accidental without implying that the U.S. Navy was incapable of finding its location on a map, and could not assert that the overflight had been intentional without admitting to a potentially provocative act. The U.S. State Department was content to leave the questions unanswered, as one official admitted: “We never got an answer [from the Navy] and we didn’t want to know. It could have been either one—a deliberate or accidental overflight. We wanted to stay away from the sovereignty issue.”<sup>80</sup>

The outcome of this territorial imbroglio was as unclear as its beginnings. More than three weeks after the Soviets issued their demarche, on April 29, the State Department’s Office of Soviet Union Affairs, directed by Thomas W. Simons, Jr., met with the Soviet embassy’s Oleg Sokolov. The United States replied with a concise two-paragraph message that was fairly insubstantial. The Soviet’s demarche was called “inappropriate,” because “the United States fully respects the requirements of international law and the safety of aircraft operations, and affirms that its policy is to avoid intrusions into Soviet airspace.” The U.S. State Department then issued its own protest over the Soviet’s Aleutian Islands airspace intrusion. The real message of this meeting was nonverbal, and may not have been accurately received. The U.S. protest was issued with what has been described as “a smirk and a quizzical shrug.” According

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 19.



to one of the State Department diplomats present, “We were trying to say, ‘It won’t happen again.’ I’m not sure Sokolov got the message.”<sup>81</sup>

In his testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1984, Admiral James Watkins advocated pressuring the Soviet Union even more:

Our feeling is that an aggressive defense, if you will, characterized by forward movement, early deployment of forces, aggressiveness on the part of our ships, is the greatest deterrent that we can have. And the Soviets really understand that. We can get their attention with that concept.... We can make a difference. Kamchatka is a difficult peninsula. They have no railroads to it. They have to resupply it by air. It is a very important spot for them, and they are naked as a jaybird there, and they know it.<sup>82</sup>

The Soviet leadership was indeed aware of the vulnerability in their Far East Military District, and was significantly distressed by the increased activity of the U.S. Navy so near the home of the Soviet Pacific Fleet.

The Soviet Air Force made a valiant effort at responding to the efforts of the U.S. Navy, but was generally unsuccessful. The U.S. pilots knew how much time they had before the Soviets would arrive, and were clear long before. Weeks of such taunting had stressed the nerves of the Soviet pilots. According to Gennady Osipovich, the deputy commander of an interceptor regiment based on Sakhalin Island, the egregious flyover of Zelyoni Island lasted at least fifteen minutes while the island was cloaked in fog. The failure of the Soviet pilots to detect and intercept the U.S. aircraft resulted in an official investigation. Osipovich described the process as further increasing the level of stress at the air base: “After that incident, a commission flew out to the regiment and gave us a dressing-down. They really berated us.”<sup>83</sup> In the future, Soviet pilots of the Far East

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>83</sup> Hoffman, *Dead Hand*, 66.

Military District were determined to avoid such embarrassment, and they would have an opportunity to put their intentions into effect five months later.

Early in the predawn hours of September 1, Korean Airlines Flight 007, a massive Boeing 747 carrying 269 passengers and crew from New York to Seoul, lumbered through the darkened sky. Most notable among its passengers was Congressman Larry McDonald, a staunch anti-communist representing a conservative district in Georgia that was home to several defense contractors. Representative McDonald was part of a Congressional delegation bound for Seoul to attend a ceremony commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the United States-South Korea mutual defense treaty. His associates flew Korean Airlines Flight 015 from Los Angeles to Seoul via Anchorage; a flight that was so similar to Flight 007 that the passengers were able to intermingle at the Anchorage terminal while both aircraft were prepared for the trans-Pacific leg. Representative McDonald stayed on board KAL 007, surely asleep in his first-class accommodations. Had he disembarked, it is likely that Representative McDonald would have had his ticket changed to join his colleagues on Flight 015, and thereby saved his life.<sup>84</sup> Flight 007 took off at 4:00 AM local time in Anchorage. Four and a half hours later, the aircraft and all aboard were destroyed by two air-to-air missiles fired from Gennadi Osipovich's Sukhoi-15 interceptor.

The airliner had inarguably violated Soviet airspace. The reasons why remain unclear and have been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories, some of which are still held by a small but determined following. When the airliner departed Anchorage, Alaska, where it had landed to refuel roughly halfway through its fifteen hour flight plan, it almost immediately went off course. While the truth behind KAL-007's final flight

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 3-4.

may never be known, explaining the course the aircraft took as anything other than an intentional violation of Soviet airspace requires an extremely unlikely, but not impossible, confluence of mistakes.

The most plausible explanation, as postulated by amateur investigator Harold Ewing and presented by Seymour Hersh, involves a combination of errors and intentional deception by a previously distinguished flight crew. Flight engineer Kim Eui Dong was the crewman responsible for programming the Inertial Navigation System. The Inertial Navigation System is based on a series of notional waypoints that are really nothing more than predetermined sets of coordinates. A flight plan is a sequence of segments between waypoints selected to be as efficient as possible while still maintaining a routine track. The coordinates for these waypoints had to be manually entered prior to each flight. In one case, a data-entry error led to one set of coordinates being ten degrees off. When the redundant systems noted the discrepancy in input, an error indicator would have activated, although it would not have indicated where the fault was to be found. At this point, the flight engineer must have demonstrated exceptional negligence by simply canceling the reported error.<sup>85</sup> Thereafter, all INS computers appeared to be properly programmed. Pilot Chun Byung-in, for his part, intentionally avoided the first programmed checkpoint in an attempt to fly more quickly and efficiently. Thus, any warnings of course deviation would have been both expected and ignored.

Continuing his efforts to improve the efficiency of his flight path, Captain Chun attempted to reprogram his INS, but succeeded only in changing the programmed latitude while keeping the previously entered erroneous longitude. As a result, the airliner maintained a flight path that was roughly parallel to its original plan, except it was bound

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<sup>85</sup> Hersh, *"The Target is Destroyed,"* 200.

directly for Seoul instead of circumventing Soviet airspace. Assuming Captain Chun did enter his own personal flight plan information, there would no longer be any way for his crew to recognize there was a problem. Discrepancies between observed and expected weather, time, distance, and other minor factors would have been discounted as the natural result of a planned deviation. In the event these deviations were observed and were a point of concern, it would still have been highly unlikely that junior officers on board would have questioned their captain.<sup>86</sup>

There is evidence supporting the supposition that this flight path was at least to some extent intentionally chosen. The flight manifest and other documents produced and filed in Anchorage clearly display discrepancies that would be difficult to explain under any circumstances, and even more so when considering the results of those changes. If these changes had been made deliberately, what would have been the intended result? The Flight Release Sheet shows the last-minute cancellation of an unidentified 1,800 pounds of cargo, which could have been a factor of some recalculation, but certainly not to the extent other documents show. As noted, the intended route was identified by a series of notional waypoints. The distance, time, and expected fuel consumption between each waypoint are the result of a computerized calculation factoring in the weight of the aircraft, expected altitude, and expected weather conditions. An additional safety buffer is added to compensate for the unforeseen, and the ensuing recommendations are usually accepted as accurate. On this day, however, the fuel plan was drastically altered. The computerized recommendation of 255,800 pounds was simply stricken, and new numbers were entered by hand on the Flight Release Sheet. The crew indicated that they ordered 4,100 pounds less than the flight plan suggested, but the Weight and Balance Manifest

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 208.

clearly indicates that 263,700 pounds of fuel had been bunkered, 7,900 pounds more than originally planned.<sup>87</sup>

Regardless of the reasons, KAL 007 not only entered Soviet airspace, but carried its oblivious passengers over the Soviet ICBM testing range on the Kamchatka Peninsula and toward the headquarters of the Soviet Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok, where roughly one-third of the Soviet's nuclear submarines were based. The effect on the Soviets was a feeling of disbelief that transitioned quickly into panic, as what they believed was a U.S. reconnaissance plane overflew some of their most sensitive sites.

It was common for U.S. Air Force intelligence-gathering aircraft to penetrate Soviet airspace. Typically, flights of this type followed an elliptical pattern, crossing into Soviet territory briefly and then arcing back out well before an armed response could be mounted. Most of these flights fell under the operation designated "Cobra Ball," an electronic surveillance mission that collected telemetry data on Soviet radar and missile systems.<sup>88</sup> Because of the size of the Soviet Union, long-range missiles could be tested entirely within their territorial boundaries. In order to monitor these tests, specially modified U.S. Air Force RC-135s were on call to study the characteristics of these missiles as they came down in the vicinity of the Kamchatka peninsula. Frequently, the Cobra Ball flights required longer duration than normal and the aircraft needed to be refueled in flight. Refueling was conducted outside Soviet radar range, so as not to appear too provocative. On this particular night, U.S. intelligence services received indications that a new SS-25 missile was going to be tested. A Cobra Ball mission was rushed into the air, but no Soviet missile test occurred. After several hours on station

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<sup>87</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Hersh, *"The Target is Destroyed,"* 37.

without contact, the RC-135 crew reported nothing significant as they turned for home. Unfortunately, the RC-135 was custom-built to track incredibly fast-moving objects at great distances but had virtually no ability to detect other nearby aircraft, such as KAL 007. Soviet long-range radars had been tracking the Cobra Ball flight as fairly routine. They saw the usual figure-eight patterns that took the aircraft into and out of radar coverage. They saw the RC-135 leave the area for a longer than usual time, as when the aircraft was being refueled, and they saw an aircraft reenter Soviet airspace approximately within the area of the Cobra Ball activity. Their radar, identified by NATO as “Tall King,” was notoriously inaccurate at determining the height and size of distant objects and would not have been able to distinguish between the U.S. Air Force RC-135 and the Korean Airlines 747.<sup>89</sup> It was only natural for the radar operator to assume the target being tracked was the RC-135 as it continued through Soviet airspace.

*Protivo Vozdushnoi Oborony* (PVO), the Soviet air defense network, was already strained by the paranoia endemic in the Kremlin. Should Andropov’s Operation RYAN fail to detect the preparations for a nuclear surprise attack, only the diligence of the radar operators at PVO would be able to forewarn the motherland. Tension and frustration grew together in air defense headquarters as multiple interceptors simply failed to find the target. Donald Zagoria, a Soviet-affairs expert from Hunter College in New York, postulated in *Newsweek* magazine that Soviet air defense officers were goaded onward by fear of failure, “nobody wants to take responsibility for letting out an intruding plane.”<sup>90</sup> An SA-5 surface-to-air missile battery on Sakhalin Island was placed on alert. At 3:12 AM, the Su-15 pilot finally reported visual contact with KAL 007. “I saw two rows of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>90</sup> Steven Strasser et al, “A Ruthless Ambush in the Sky,” *Newsweek*, 12 September 1983, 27.

windows and knew that this was a Boeing. I knew this was a civilian plane. But for me this meant nothing. It is easy to turn a civilian plane into one for military use,” recalled Osipovich in December 1996. Osipovich was completely correct in this statement. The RC-135, the type of aircraft the Soviets must have believed the aircraft to be, was in fact a variation of the Boeing 707. Considering the basic similarities in airframe design, the two aircraft could easily have been mistaken for one another. The obvious indicators would be the four-engine configuration, the wings based at the bottom of the fuselage, and the tapering tail. Given that the encounter occurred at night, the Soviet pilots intercepting the aircraft would have had no frame of reference for distinguishing the size of the target. Only the 747’s unique “hump” at the forward end of the top of the fuselage would have conclusively indicated that a mistake had been made.

Three minutes after Osipovich claimed visual contact, the airline pilot routinely reported his position to Tokyo air controllers and requested permission to climb to 35,000 ft. A corresponding message from the Soviet fighter confirms the aircraft rose at that point, passing through 33,000 ft six minutes later. At this point, radar operators in Hokkaido became aware of the discrepancy. KAL-007 had reported its location as 115 miles south of Hokkaido, but their radar signature was 115 miles *north* of Hokkaido.<sup>91</sup> These same radar operators also saw the radar signature of an unidentified aircraft approach and merge with the signal known to be KAL-007 at 3:25 AM. The fighter fired warning shots from its machine gun, but may not have been loaded with any illuminating tracer rounds, making it virtually impossible for its warning to have been seen. No messages of distress were received by Japanese air traffic control until after KAL-007 had been hit by the Su-15’s missile, when an unintelligible garble marked KAL-007’s last

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<sup>91</sup> William R. Doerner and Ed Magnuson, “Atrocity in the Skies,” *Time*, 12 September 1983, 17.

communication. Ground radars tracked the slow descent of the 269 passengers and crew members of KAL-007 for twelve hellish minutes before losing the signal below the horizon.<sup>92</sup>

The Soviets never denied the act, nor did they claim it had been a tragic mistake. Instead, they made no immediate statement. One Soviet spokesman later dismissed the international outcry as “hullabaloo” and blamed the United States and the Central Intelligence Agency for using a civilian airliner full of innocent travelers as a spy mission.<sup>93</sup> Anatoly Kornukov, the officer who ordered Osipovich to fire, said in 1998, “I will always be sure that the order was given correctly.” On September 10, 1983, the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov held a press conference in Moscow explaining the Soviet action. “The conclusion was made at Soviet anti-aircraft command posts: an intelligence aircraft is approaching the Soviet Union’s airspace,” Marshal Ogarkov explained. “How can this be a question of a mistake in this case? It is perfectly evident that this aircraft’s flight was controlled, I would say precisely controlled. And therefore this flight was premeditated.”<sup>94</sup> This argument is based on two key assumptions. In the first place, it assumed the aircraft was on an intelligence-gathering mission. Second, it assumed that because the flight was controlled it was where it intended to be.

Given the atmosphere of paranoia in the Kremlin, Soviet leaders simply could not accept the tragedy at face value. Oleg Gordievsky, a former KGB station chief in London who was the highest ranking KGB officer to defect, revealed that a telegram arrived from KGB headquarters at Moscow Centre on September 4. This telegram

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 29.



indicated that the shoot-down of KAL 007 was being used by the Reagan administration for propaganda purposes to foment anti-Soviet sentiment worldwide.<sup>95</sup> Soviet leaders may have believed that KAL 007 really was on a spy mission for the CIA, and projected an air of indifference to the loss. They even went so far as to investigate the backgrounds of the passengers, looking for connections to intelligence services.<sup>96</sup> Once they had leapt to this conclusion, Soviet leaders were able to see other evidence pointing to a conspiracy against them. The scathing indictment from the Reagan Administration arrived in Moscow nearly as quickly as initial investigation reports from the North Pacific, and the use of the incident as anti-Soviet propaganda made the Soviets more confident in their assessment:

This conclusion is confirmed by all subsequent actions of the U.S. administration. Its leaders, including the U.S. president in person, launched a malicious and hostile anti-Soviet campaign over a very short time, clearly using a prearranged script. Its essence has been revealed in its concentrated form in the televised speech of U.S. president R. Reagan on September 5—to try to blacken the image of the Soviet Union.<sup>97</sup>

The Soviet Union faced condemnation from all sides as the world lost patience with its stance. President Reagan focused the response with his address of September 5. Reagan summarized the situation from the U.S. perspective, with personal commentary: “It was 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.”<sup>98</sup> The world began to see that Reagan’s fierce invective about the “evil empire” may have been more accurate than they ever imagined. The Canadian government and

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<sup>95</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 85.

<sup>96</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 31.

<sup>97</sup> Hersh, “*The Target is Destroyed*,” 164-165.

<sup>98</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Soviet Attack on a Korean Civilian Airliner, September 5, 1983,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), 1228.

the International Federation of Airline Pilots' Associations supported a ban on flights by the Soviet Union's national airline, Aeroflot. The United States had already banned Aeroflot after the invasion of Afghanistan, but strongly urged other countries to deny Aeroflot access. Canada's threat carried special weight, as Aeroflot's Cuban flights regularly refueled at Gander International Airport in Labrador, and the loss of this privilege would have been politically embarrassing. Several countries were reluctant to commit to the ban, but the symbolic sentiment of condemnation was intact.<sup>99</sup>

Tryggvi McDonald, son of Congressman Larry McDonald, spoke at a rally in Washington on September 7. Timed to coincide with the official memorial service in Seoul, which was attended by more than 100,000 people, this rally was so vehement that an effigy of Andropov was burned on the sidewalk in front of the White House.<sup>100</sup> In New York, Soviet flags were burned in front of the United Nations building.<sup>101</sup> Both *Newsweek* and *Time* ran sensationalistic covers that further enflamed the American general public, while NBC-TV aired a special report titled "Shot from the Sky."<sup>102</sup> More than 3,500 people attended the memorial service for Congressman McDonald in Washington, where some speakers derided President Reagan's "tame response."<sup>103</sup> One Congressman, Philip Crane of Illinois, was reported by the *Los Angeles Times* referring to those responsible for the shoot-down as "psychopathic subhumans. They are obscene. They violate the laws of God and nature."<sup>104</sup> South Korean ambassador to the United

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<sup>99</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 127.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>101</sup> Doerner and Magnuson, "Atrocity in the Skies," 13.

<sup>102</sup> Hersh, "*The Target is Destroyed*," 118.

<sup>103</sup> William Farrell, "Conservatives Gather to Remember Georgian," *New York Times*, September 12, 1983. A-10.

<sup>104</sup> Ronald Ostrow, "McDonald Rites Turn into Anti-Soviet Rally," *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 1983. A-16.

States, Lew Byong Hion, pushed for a tougher response from President Reagan.<sup>105</sup> For the Reagan administration, the downing of KAL 007 provided the political impetus to push forward several defense-related programs, including an overall defense budget that was a 22 percent increase over the previous year and included such divisive issues as the production of the MX missile and the development of a new nerve gas weapon designated “Bigeye.” The latter overturned President Richard Nixon’s pledge of 1969 to end chemical weapons production.<sup>106</sup> President Reagan asked that Congress “ponder long and hard the Soviets’ aggression as they consider the security and safety of our people, indeed all people who believe in freedom.”<sup>107</sup> For the ardent anti-communists that made up the core of Reagan’s supporters, this was not nearly enough.

The president that had been staunchly in the right wing of American politics for more than thirty years found himself in the unexpected position of struggling to soothe anti-Soviet sentiment. During the previous administration, he had criticized Carter’s grain embargo and negotiated a new deal only months before the KAL 007 incident. Although pressured to do so, the administration understood that cancelling the contract would subject Reagan to the same criticisms he had made of Carter and have a disastrous impact on the market price of grain and, by extension, the American farmers who grew it. Even without an official statement on the subject, the expectation that the contract would be cancelled caused significant disruption to the prices of grain and soya.<sup>108</sup> Reagan had the option of cancelling a contract between the Soviet Union and the Caterpillar Tractor Company, but knew that there were other corporations capable of filling the order, such

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<sup>105</sup> Farrell, “Conservatives Gather to Remember Georgian,” A-10.

<sup>106</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 123.

<sup>107</sup> Hersh, “*The Target is Destroyed*,” 162.

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *Shoot-down*, 122.

as Japan's Komatsu.<sup>109</sup> The final result would be more damaging to American business than Soviet prestige. Another factor Reagan had to consider was the emplacement of the Pershing II and ground-based cruise missiles in Europe. An overly harsh response from the Reagan White House could endanger the arms-control talks, resulting in European opinion turning against those missiles.<sup>110</sup> Reagan sought to elevate the power and prestige of the United States relative to the Soviet Union and thereby strengthen his negotiating position. With the world's outrage focused on Moscow, he realized that objective. Further pressure on the Soviets would likely only provoke their obstinacy and intransigence.

Soviet leaders in turn worried that the KAL 007 incident would become a rallying point for the United States, as the destruction of the USS *Maine* had encouraged the Spanish-American War and the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* had helped move President Woodrow Wilson into World War I. Andrei Gromyko, Soviet foreign minister from 1957 to 1985, described a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz on September 8 as more of a confrontation. "It was probably the sharpest exchange I ever had with an American Secretary of State, and I have had talks with fourteen of them."<sup>111</sup> Shultz greeted Gromyko with no smile and no handshake, and angry outbursts were reported from both sides of the table.<sup>112</sup> This increase in tensions fit perfectly into the paranoia of the Soviet leadership, who believed nuclear war would not be an abrupt surprise but would come as a result of uncontrollable escalation. General Secretary

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>111</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 32.

<sup>112</sup> Hersh, "The Target is Destroyed," 170.

Andropov characterized the United States as pursuing “dangerous, inhuman policies” and a “militarist course that poses a grave threat to peace.”<sup>113</sup>

Three weeks after President Reagan denounced the Soviets as “inhuman,” “barbaric,” and “provocative” because their air defense branch severely overreacted to a possible threat, PVO was again at center stage. In the early morning hours of September 26, the Soviet’s surveillance satellites reported to “Serpukhov-15,” the secret control bunker 55 miles from Moscow, that they had detected the launch of five Minuteman II intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>114</sup> According to the “Oko” (“Eye”), as the satellite system was known, the prophesied surprise nuclear attack had begun.

Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov was the officer in charge on that particular night, and only through his hesitation was the world spared nuclear holocaust. The “Eye” was reporting the distinctive heat signatures, called “thermal blooms,” of launches in the vicinity of known Minuteman II silos in Montana. Lt. Col. Petrov struggled to understand; his training and common sense told him that a nuclear war would begin with a massive first-strike. He should have seen hundreds of missiles approaching from perhaps dozens of locations as U.S. strategic forces tried to overcome the defenses of population centers and missile sites to destroy their targets before Soviets could mount an organized response. Lt. Col. Petrov had written the response plan himself and knew just how little time he had to notify his superiors of the impending attack. The Oko system reported launch signals, but corresponding radar systems could not provide useful input until the missiles had achieved enough altitude to be visible above the horizon. As radar stations continued to report negative contact, Lt. Col. Petrov took bold action. He picked

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<sup>113</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 37.

<sup>114</sup> Thomas Fields-Meyer, “Death Watch,” *People Magazine*, 14 June 1999.

up the hotline to call his superiors, and reported that there was no attack. On his own initiative, Lt. Col. Petrov determined the warning to be a false alarm and cancelled the alert.<sup>115</sup> "I had a funny feeling in my gut," Petrov said. "I didn't want to make a mistake. I made a decision, and that was it."<sup>116</sup> Even though this appeared to be the best course of action, Lt. Col. Petrov spent the next fifteen minutes in the greatest imaginable torment. If he had been wrong, he had doomed his country. Terror gave way to relief as the quiet of the night continued unbroken.

An investigation of the alarm revealed that the system had observed sunlight reflecting off clouds over the site. Thorough investigation found several other flaws in the Oko, and also found a political trap. Allegedly, these flaws were known when the system was implemented in late 1982 and the operations staff was told to ignore them. They were told the flaws would be repaired later, because it was critical to install the system as soon as possible.<sup>117</sup> The flaws reflected badly on the leadership who had formulated and implemented the system, so the man who discovered the flaws when he potentially averted nuclear war was made the scapegoat. Any significant attention, either reward or punishment, directed toward Lt. Col. Petrov would necessarily have focused unwanted attention on the flawed system he had been operating. Thus, he was unofficially forgotten and transferred to a lower profile position without reward, reprimand, or promotion. Ten years later and still a lieutenant colonel, Stanislav Petrov retired to his only benefit from the country he served: an apartment with a telephone on the outskirts of Moscow. It was another decade before a more fitting award was bestowed by the Association of World Citizens, an international peace group. In 2004,

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<sup>115</sup> Roman Schmalz, *My Life in Stalin's Russia: A Collection of Memoirs* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2007), 28-9.

<sup>116</sup> David Hoffman, "I Had a Funny Feeling in My Gut," *Washington Post*, 10 February 1999, A19.

<sup>117</sup> Hoffman, *Dead Hand*, 8.

Stanislav Petrov was given the World Citizen Award for “a unique act of heroism that saved the world.” As part of the award ceremony, Petrov was allowed to address the General Assembly of the United Nations.<sup>118</sup> Officially, the government of Russia has denied that any one man played so vital a role in the prevention of nuclear war.<sup>119</sup>

The Soviet General Staff, however, did not have to wait as long as Lt. Col Petrov to receive their rewards. As the sun rose on September 26, 1983, they knew that Pershing II missiles would be deployed in Western Europe within sixty days and their most sophisticated early-warning system was less than worthless.<sup>120</sup> What should have been a reassuring safeguard became an illustration that it could be more productive to do nothing.

Despite being the only side to fire a shot, the Soviet Union clearly lost the first crisis. The U.S. Navy had displayed more presence in the North Pacific than it had since World War II, and gave the Soviet Union only perfunctory acknowledgement of an airspace intrusion. The Soviets’ paranoid overreaction resulted in the deaths of 269 civilians, and provoked widespread condemnation. As fears of nuclear war grew, the Soviet leadership also learned its early-warning satellite system was flawed, and its operators were likely to disregard protocols. Tensions continued to worsen, and a more dangerous second crisis period began.

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<sup>118</sup> Douglas Mattern, “Five Minutes to Save the World,” Association of World Citizens, 30 January 2006.

<sup>119</sup> Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, “Press Release,” 19 January 2006.

<sup>120</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 37.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SECOND CRISIS

In March 1979 leftist revolutionaries on the relatively small and lightly populated island nation of Grenada overthrew the existing government. Relations were established with the Soviet Union and Cuba almost immediately, and a month later a shipment of arms and ammunition arrived from Cuba along with 50 military advisors to help strengthen the new regime. These 50 were joined by 400 more Cuban soldiers in September, sent to help train the Grenadian army. Another 300 Cubans arrived in December to help construct a new airport with an enormous runway capable of hosting the world's largest cargo aircraft.<sup>121</sup> As the regime solidified, support also came from Moscow. Hudson Austin, a Grenadian general identified in President Reagan's diary as the "top villain on Grenada,"<sup>122</sup> wrote to Chairman of the KGB Yuri Andropov in early 1982 to thank him for the Soviet Union's assistance and to request training for four Grenadian intelligence agents.<sup>123</sup>

The new airstrip construction project at Point Salines evoked particular concern in the United States. The public purpose was to support increasing tourism, but there had been no corresponding investment in the tourist trade in the area, no new hotels, no new attractions.<sup>124</sup> Design plans indicated that the Point Salines airport was not intended to be primarily a military airfield: fuel storage facilities were above ground, and there were no significant fortifications. This would certainly not preclude the airstrip from being used

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<sup>121</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 116.

<sup>122</sup> Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 192.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Seabury and Walter McDougall, eds., *The Grenada Papers* (San Francisco: ICS, 1984), 19-20.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Connaughton, *A Brief History of Modern Warfare: The True Story of Conflict from the Falklands to Afghanistan* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2008), 80.



by military aircraft, however.<sup>125</sup> As a result, the Reagan Administration suggested it would be useful in the movement of Soviet or Cuban troops and materiel. According to President Reagan, Grenada was “a Soviet-Cuban colony being readied as a major military bastion to export terror and undermine democracy.”<sup>126</sup> Ludlow Flower, the U.S. chargé d’affaires in Barbados, described the situation from the U.S. perspective: “It isn’t the airport *per se* that bothers us. Lots of islands around here have airports of comparable size. It is that the airport in Grenada was primarily financed and built by the Cubans, who tend not to do these things out of a sense of Christian charity....”<sup>127</sup>

The internal politics of Grenada revolved around two personalities, both of whom considered themselves to be true Marxists. Maurice Bishop, the prime minister, was a socialist democrat who developed a persona as a populist hero, described by some as “Grenada’s Che Guevara.” His deputy prime minister, Bernard Coard, allegedly derived his power through support from Moscow, and buttressed his position with his skills at organization and administration.<sup>128</sup> Bishop and Coard competed for dominance while they attempted to reorganize Grenada’s economy. Ambassador Frank Ortiz arrived in Grenada on March 22, 1979, to discuss the support the United States would offer. Peace Corps volunteers could be available within two weeks, and specific projects could be funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development office on Barbados or the Caribbean Development Bank. Additionally, the embassy had the authority to disburse up to \$5,000 for small projects from the Special Development Activities fund.<sup>129</sup> On

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<sup>125</sup> Mark Adkin, *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 110.

<sup>126</sup> Alan McPherson, *Intimate Ties, Bitter Struggles: The United States and Latin America Since 1945* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006), 93.

<sup>127</sup> Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 111.

<sup>128</sup> Connaughton, *Brief History of Modern Warfare*, 78.

<sup>129</sup> Jorge Heine, *A Revolution Aborted: The Lessons of Grenada* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 189.

April 13, Bishop used this offer as part of his anti-United States propaganda effort. In his first major speech, Bishop declared that Grenadans “have always striven to develop the closest and friendliest relations with the United States,” but the United States was only willing to provide \$5,000 worth of aid. Bishop went on, “Sisters and brothers, our hospitals are without medicines.... Is [that] all the wealthiest country in the world can offer?” Furthermore, Bishop read a paper from Ambassador Ortiz that indicated the United States would not allow Grenada to seek aid from or establish diplomatic relations with Cuba. Bishop’s response was unequivocal, as he announced, “We reject entirely the argument of the American Ambassador.... If the government of Cuba is willing to offer us assistance, we would be more than happy to receive it.”<sup>130</sup> Thus Bishop aligned his new regime with Fidel Castro’s Cuba, and set in motion his own downfall. Coard seized an opportunity to advance his hard-line goals by arresting Bishop on vague charges on October 19, 1983. The population protested, and was suppressed by Coard loyalists in Soviet tanks that had been provided by Cuba. In an attempt to defuse the situation Prime Minister Bishop came forward to surrender. For reasons unknown, he and several civilians in his party were summarily executed on the spot.<sup>131</sup>

Decision-makers in Washington, D.C. were left with little opportunity for deliberation. The United States had to have a response to this bloody coup. In the words of the *New York Times*, anything less than military intervention would have depicted the United States as “a paper tiger in the eyes of both friendly and hostile Latin American countries.”<sup>132</sup> The Reagan administration felt that military intervention was necessary, and that course of action resulted in another forced decision: the United States not only

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 192

<sup>131</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan*, 247.

<sup>132</sup> Connaughton, *Brief History of Modern Warfare*, 85.

had to intervene, that intervention had to be spectacularly successful. The cost of failure would have been much higher than merely the loss of Grenada to the Communist bloc. A transition in political system in any country was significant to both the United States and the Soviet Union. To some extent, both sides recognized the “domino theory” as it had been articulated by President Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>133</sup> In a meeting in Grenada’s embassy in Moscow on March 10, 1983, Soviet Chief of the General Staff Marshall Nikolai Ogarkov said, “Over two decades ago, there was only Cuba in Latin America, today there are Nicaragua, Grenada, and a serious battle is going on in El Salvador.”<sup>134</sup> The Soviet Union clearly hoped that Grenada was but one of many “island dominoes” to fall its way.

President Reagan was cognizant of another aspect of the Grenada situation that could have catastrophic symbolic impact: at the time of Coard’s coup there were roughly 600 American citizens enrolled in St. George’s University School of Medicine.<sup>135</sup> These American citizens were potentially in mortal danger from the comprehensive curfew declared by General Austin. No civilians were authorized to be outside their homes, and the penalty for violation was death.<sup>136</sup> The revolutionary government of Grenada had made assurances that the students would not be injured, but those assurances were given by people who had undoubtedly not expected Prime Minister Bishop and his entourage to be murdered in the streets. The potential for a reenactment of the Iran hostage crisis that had been so damaging to President Carter and the prestige of the United States was immediately evident. President Reagan wanted to restore the image of the United States

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<sup>133</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 142.

<sup>134</sup> Seabury and McDougall, *Grenada Papers*, 190.

<sup>135</sup> Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 87.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

abroad, and knew that he faced disaster if he was held powerless by a small group of Marxist fanatics on an otherwise relatively insignificant island.<sup>137</sup>

An impression of failure and impotence clung to the U.S. military following the unsatisfactory resolution of the Vietnam War and the abject failure of Operation Eagle Claw, the mission to rescue the American hostages held in Iran. U.S. Armed Forces appeared incompetent, unready, and unreliable in the early 1980s.<sup>138</sup> Another loss would further degrade the prestige of the U.S. military and weaken foreign policy regarding hostile states. Given the location of Grenada, the United States could bring to bear overwhelming military power relatively easily with success all but guaranteed. The expected result for the United States was demonstrated primacy in the Caribbean and a national feeling of self-respect and self-confidence, much like the United Kingdom had felt following its successful intervention in the Falklands. Events on another sea, the Mediterranean, further reinforced the call to arms. On October 23, a truck loaded with explosives detonated in Beirut, killing 241 U.S. Marines, the most casualties suffered in one day by the United States since the Vietnam War.<sup>139</sup> President Reagan struggled with the decision to send more troops into harm's way, but the final determination was made while considering the two operations separately. Reagan told his advisors, "If this was right yesterday, it's right today, and we shouldn't let the act of a couple of terrorists dissuade us from going ahead."<sup>140</sup> President Reagan believed the United States needed a powerful show of force as soon as possible.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>138</sup> John Spanier and Steven Hook, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998), 208.

<sup>139</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan*, 239.

<sup>140</sup> Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 121.

On the evening of October 24, the order was issued for Operation Urgent Fury to commence the next morning. Nearly 6,000 U.S. combat troops, with roughly 14,000 more in supporting roles, selected from some of the most elite units of the U.S. Armed Forces and accompanied by more than one hundred helicopters, would meet an opposing force of some 1,500 underpaid, underequipped, undertrained Grenadian regulars.<sup>141</sup> The results were predictable, even given the underachievement the U.S. military had displayed in the previous thirty years, and the campaign was officially concluded on November 2.<sup>142</sup>

Grenada itself was certainly no great prize in the world struggle, but the symbolic value of victory there had a significant impact on the prestige of the Reagan administration, and bolstered the morale of anti-communists. According to one Reagan Administration official, "Grenada showed that it could be done. [The U.S. invasion] proved that boldness and determination could defeat the Communists."<sup>143</sup> The success of Urgent Fury was the linchpin of a strategy that became known as the Reagan Doctrine, a directive "to nourish and defend freedom and democracy and to communicate these ideas everywhere we can," and to support "those fighting for freedom against communism wherever we find them."<sup>144</sup> The swiftness and thoroughness of the invasion also led to a wealth of information, both in the form of internal documentation and captured Warsaw Pact weapons materiel. Although these documents provided little exploitable intelligence, pertaining as they did to a toppled regime, the propaganda victory was real.

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<sup>141</sup> Connaughton, *Brief History of Modern Warfare*, 88.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>143</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 345.

<sup>144</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 6, 1985," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1988), 135.

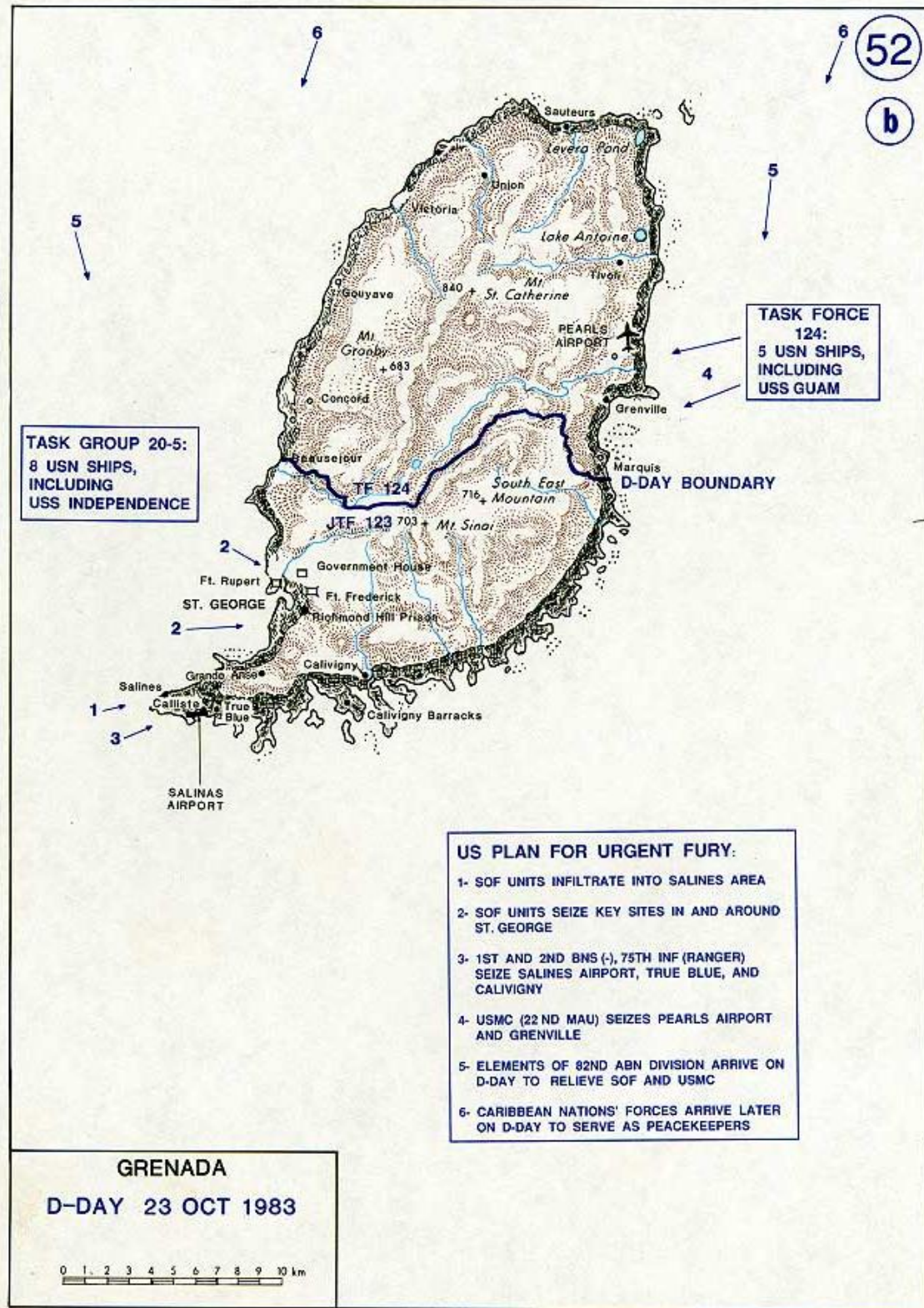


Figure 2: United States Military Academy. "Invasion of Grenada by U.S. and Caribbean Nations," 1983.

Mark Adkin, a retired British infantry officer and Barbados Defense Force Caribbean Operations officer who participated in the planning and execution of the intervention, described the intelligence coup: “Never before had a Western power been given such access to the secret workings of a communist state through its own papers.”<sup>145</sup> The true importance of these documents was in their support of President Reagan’s assertions. Many of these documents were displayed at Andrews Air Force Base for journalists’ perusal. President Reagan remarked bitterly in his autobiography, “reporters would have found evidence of everything we were saying. But very few did. Instead, for several days, most of the news commentators focused on claims that the landings in Grenada had been reckless.”<sup>146</sup> A selection of these documents was also collected and published in 1984 as *The Grenada Papers*.

Public opinion in the United States, which had been ambivalent before the invasion, was jubilant afterward. Television cameras showed returning students from St. George’s University School of Medicine disembark their airplane and express their joy at being back in the United States by kneeling down to kiss the tarmac.<sup>147</sup> At a ceremony held at the White House, about 400 of the rescued medical students met with 40 of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who had taken part in Urgent Fury. President Reagan recorded the event in his autobiography: “When some of the students later came to the White House and embraced the soldiers who had rescued them, it was quite a sight for a former governor who had once seen college students spit on anyone wearing a

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<sup>145</sup> Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 310.

<sup>146</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 456.

<sup>147</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan*, 249.

military uniform.” President Reagan described the occasion in his diary as “the most wonderful South Lawn ceremony we’ve ever had.”<sup>148</sup>

The planning and execution of Urgent Fury was far from flawless, with numerous opportunities for disaster to befall U.S. personnel. For the most part, those potential disasters were avoided due to either the exceptional efforts of U.S. small-unit leaders or the general ineptitude of their Grenadian opposition. In cases where the difficulties in the field proved to be insurmountable, the lessons learned resulted in changed policies. Despite those flaws, overall strategic goals were met: the revolutionary regime was overthrown, key individuals were captured, U.S. persons and interests were protected, and potential communist expansion in the Caribbean was thwarted.

For his part, President Reagan kept his word to the American public and his troops when he dealt a final blow to the inevitable comparisons with Vietnam. Instead of becoming mired in a protracted conflict pursuing an ideological insurgency, U.S. forces were withdrawn as soon as the Grenadian government was restored. The invasion and occupation had taken less than two months, and U.S. combat troops were home by Christmas.<sup>149</sup> Exploitation of the captured documents confirmed what President Reagan had said, that “we got there just in time.” The planned armament of Grenada detailed in the documents suggested that, in as little as two more years, an invasion like Urgent Fury would have been much less successful.<sup>150</sup> While it is unlikely that Grenada would have ever been in a position to pose a direct threat to the United States, the revolutionary government of Coard had been moving toward a militarized garrison state. In a speech to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society on December 12, President Reagan concisely

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<sup>148</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 456-57.

<sup>149</sup> McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, 276.

<sup>150</sup> Adkin, *Urgent Fury*, 310.



described the state of the U.S. Armed Forces: “Our days of weakness are over. Our military forces are back on their feet and standing tall.”<sup>151</sup> For the U.S. military, the return from the abyss of Vietnam had begun.

The Soviet Union’s view of Grenada was similar to that of the United States: Grenada was more important symbolically than literally. Many historians, including John Diggins, have argued that Grenada was wholly unnecessary to the Soviet Union, at best a second, redundant Cuba.<sup>152</sup> This perspective does not consider evidence from the documents recovered during the aftermath of Urgent Fury. The documents published as *The Grenada Papers* reinforced the assessment that the Soviet Union supported Grenada’s Marxists as an expansion of worldwide Communism.<sup>153</sup> Grenada was not a duplicate Cuba, but another comrade in the anti-imperialist socialist revolution. The Soviet Union interpreted the U.S. intervention in Grenada as a possible template for future counter-revolutionary activities. Similar invasions of Cuba or Nicaragua could be forthcoming, or even anti-Communist attacks worldwide.<sup>154</sup> The Soviet Union understood the statement that had been made by the Grenada invasion: the United States would not only wage an arms race of sophisticated technology, but also employ its armed forces directly to combat communism. Andropov’s suspicions of the United States appeared to be validated, and U.S.-Soviet relations became even more strained.

Adding to the belief that U.S. operations in Grenada were a rehearsal for larger actions, there was a significant surge in ciphered communications between London and

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<sup>151</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society in New York City, December 12, 1983,” *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), 1686.

<sup>152</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan*, 249.

<sup>153</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 456.

<sup>154</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 37.

Washington. This had been identified by the KGB as an indicator of impending nuclear attack. In reality, the messages were notes of protest. Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Thatcher were outraged that Britain's closest ally would conduct an armed invasion of a Commonwealth member without British support.<sup>155</sup> This intervention was interpreted so seriously in Moscow that Soviet Vice-President Vasili Kuznetsov accused President Reagan of "making delirious plans for world domination" and "pushing mankind to the brink of disaster."<sup>156</sup>

Far from the Caribbean battleground, NATO forces in Europe were preparing for Able Archer '83. Able Archer was one of several annual NATO exercises that replicated the outbreak of hostilities in Europe between the Warsaw Pact and NATO forces. It had not been particularly interesting in previous years, and was not expected by most U.S. analysts to be noteworthy in 1983. In the Soviet Union, however, alarm was spreading throughout the senior leadership.

The 1983 iteration of Able Archer was in keeping with President Reagan's intention to improve the U.S. military's readiness and capability. More extensive and encompassing than ever before, Able Archer '83 was originally planned to include roles for Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the supreme commander of NATO, and even extended to Vice-President Bush and President Reagan themselves. The first sign that anyone in the United States began to recognize the true degree of threat the Soviets were feeling was the reduction of the scale of Able Archer '83, apparently at the urging of National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 132.

<sup>157</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 38.

The reduced-scale Able Archer '83 was what is known as a “command-post exercise.” Exercises of this type are a rehearsal of command and control procedures more than actual troop movements. Able Archer '83, intended to simulate nothing less than World War III, included the release of intermediate-range ballistic missiles such as the Pershing II. In reality, the Pershing II systems had not yet been fully fielded, so the roles of Pershing II units were played hypothetically. Notional Pershing II units and real-world infantry and armor units intermingled in the exercise, but only in concept and not execution.<sup>158</sup>

The report of Pershing II units in the field ahead of schedule and the lack of visible signs of major troop movements shocked the Soviets, who assumed that they were the victims of an elaborate operation of deception. The Pershing IIs were expected to arrive in Europe within weeks, so the early delivery of some systems was not inconceivable. “Even a single Pershing II armed with a ‘third generation’ nuclear weapon... could paralyze strategic communications in Moscow and beyond with a powerful electromagnetic pulse. One Pershing II, or a few, secretly smuggled into Western Europe for a surprise attack during Able Archer, could in the Soviet view tip the strategic balance.”<sup>159</sup>

Soviet intelligence services, already whipped into a frenzy by the paranoid directives of Operation RYAN, took note of every anomaly. Intercepts of NATO communications revealed unfamiliar message formats and procedures, which were interpreted as an attempt to disguise the real intent of NATO forces. One of the tenets of the exercise was to elevate NATO nuclear forces to DEFCON 1, the level at which

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<sup>158</sup> Jeffrey Richelson, *A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 385.

<sup>159</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 34.

nuclear war would be conducted. At this level, the safety mechanisms preventing nuclear launch would have been disabled. The DEFCON 1 order was only for exercise purposes, but it is unclear whether or not the Soviets understood that, or if they believed it.<sup>160</sup> KGB officials reasoned that the Able Archer exercise would be an excellent cover for a nuclear first strike; preparations could be carried out in full view of the Soviet Union as long as they were masked as an exercise.<sup>161</sup> A detailed KGB directive from February 17, 1983, part of Operation RYAN, suggested just such an eventuality: preparatory measures were “to be carried out with the utmost secrecy (under the guise of maneuvers, training, etc.) in the shortest possible time.”<sup>162</sup>

On November 6, KGB headquarters in Moscow issued another warning about the intent of the United States to launch a nuclear missile attack. In order to be effective, a nuclear attack must be such a surprise that the opponent is unable to launch a retaliatory strike. Based on this premise, the KGB asserted, “it can be assumed that the period of time from the moment the preliminary decision for [surprise nuclear missile attack] is taken, up to the order to deliver the strike, will be very short duration, possibly 7 - 10 days.” If Able Archer '83 was intended to be a cover for the initiation of nuclear war, the KGB predicted it could begin in as little as three to six days.<sup>163</sup> With so little time left, Soviet officials demanded an ever-increasing flow of information. Any irregularity was scrutinized and used to justify suspicions. The Soviet intelligence apparatus was caught in a self-escalating cycle, culminating in the order to alert their own nuclear forces. Nuclear-capable attack aircraft in East Germany were placed on stand-by, and strategic

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>161</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 132-33.

<sup>162</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 78.

<sup>163</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 41.

forces across the Soviet Union were likely alerted as well. Soviet standard procedures in such circumstances were to move fueled aircraft into position for take-off, recall essential personnel from leave, increase base security, and review classified war plans. The alert would have been disseminated throughout the Soviet defense apparatus, from the Chief of the General Staff to the many base security guards.<sup>164</sup>

In the midst of Able Archer '83, the Soviet General Staff's attention was distracted from events in Western Europe by another potential indicator of an impending nuclear attack. Soviet nuclear attack submarines routinely patrolled along known transit routes of U.S. nuclear missile submarines. In a wartime environment, the attack submarines would deploy their nuclear torpedoes to destroy the missile submarines before they could vanish into the quiet depths or launch their payloads. In a peacetime scenario, the Soviets would track and target the U.S. boats in the same manner, stopping short of actually firing any weapons. Similarly, U.S. anti-submarine efforts attempted to target those Soviet attack submarines, hoping to provide safe passage for the missile submarines. In order to develop a clear image of the undersea world, sonar arrays are often towed behind a boat or ship, providing distance between the sonar device and the noises generated by the craft itself.

Around November 4, Soviet Victor III class attack submarine *K-324* somehow became fouled in the towed sonar array of the U.S. Navy frigate *USS McCloy*.<sup>165</sup> The submarine was forced to surface, less than 500 miles off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, and in full view of the U.S. Navy antisubmarine crews that had been tracking

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>165</sup> Norman Polmar and Kenneth Moore, *Cold War Submarines: The Design and Construction of U.S. and Soviet Submarines* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2004), 160.

it.<sup>166</sup> The Soviet General Staff was aghast. Not only was their submarine fleet quickly becoming a laughingstock as their boat was towed for four days toward Cuba on the surface, but they had lost their coverage of the American ballistic missile submarines and any knowledge of where those boats may be.<sup>167</sup> The fact that *K-324* was able to retain control of an unknown amount of USS *McCloy*'s sonar array and deliver it to the Soviet Navy at Cienfuegos, Cuba was small comfort to the Kremlin.<sup>168</sup> Soviet commanders were all too aware that they had lost the ability to track U.S. ballistic missile submarines, feared to be destined to participate in the surprise nuclear missile attack that would begin at the conclusion of Able Archer '83.

Able Archer '83 continued as planned until its conclusion on November 11, with its NATO participants completely unaware of the escalating threat in the Soviet Union. If the United States had been aware of the Soviet alert, there would certainly have been some type of diplomatic outreach to defuse the situation as it was happening, an early end to the exercise, or a leak to the press afterwards that accused the Soviets of dangerous warmongering. A National Intelligence Estimate produced in March 1984 titled *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict, 1983-1993* did not reference the event, suggesting the true danger was not yet understood four months after the incident. Another National Intelligence Estimate, *Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities*, produced in May 1984, clearly referenced the Soviet alert, but dismissed it as propaganda: "Soviet talk about the increased likelihood of nuclear war ... has been deliberately manipulated to rationalize military efforts with domestic audiences and to

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<sup>166</sup> B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. "Defense Dept. Says Soviet Sub May Have Hit a U.S. Sonar Device," *New York Times*, 5 November, 1983, Sec. 1, Page 10.

<sup>167</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 40.

<sup>168</sup> Polmar and Moore, *Cold War Submarines*, 160.

influence Western political elites. Some Soviet military activities have also been designed to have an alarming or intimidating effect.”<sup>169</sup>

Based on the timelines provided by the KGB that predicted NATO’s surprise attack, Able Archer ’83 ended with little time to spare. Cold War historian and former CIA officer Dr. Peter Pry suggested that “if Able Archer ’83 had continued, perhaps even by as little as another twenty-four hours, the West might have unwittingly stumbled into a nuclear holocaust.”

The Soviet Union perceived the invasion of Grenada as a precursor to possible future military interventions elsewhere in the communist sphere, and feared that Able Archer ’83 was just such an operation disguised as an exercise. The failure of its submarine to maintain contact with the U.S. Navy’s ballistic missile submarines provided the United States with just the opportunity the Soviet Union feared. During the second crisis of 1983, KGB colonel and British informant Oleg Gordievsky, the highest ranking KGB officer ever to defect, asserted that the world “had without knowing it, come frighteningly close – certainly closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis” to nuclear war.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Pry, War Scare, 42-43.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 44.

## CHAPTER 5

### PERCEPTIONS AND DEPICTIONS

Adding to the significance of this chronology of potentially provocative events was the manner in which the Soviet Union perceived those events. Soviet leaders looked at the world through “Marxism-Leninism-tinted glasses” and forced the world to fit their theoretical models. Marxism-Leninism predicted that imperialist capitalist socioeconomic systems were destined to fail. By the 1980s, those who were alive during the Bolshevik Revolution were nearing the ends of their lives. The expectation of seeing their prophecy fulfilled led Soviet leaders to believe the collapse of the United States was imminent. It was anticipated in the Kremlin that U.S. leaders had come to the same conclusion, and might become desperate and unstable. In a document summarizing the efforts of the KGB in 1982 and 1983, this perspective was overtly stated:

One of the reasons for the increased aggressiveness of imperialism, especially American imperialism, is the deepening economic and social crisis in the capitalist world. The slowing down in the growth rates for industrial production, together with continuing technological progress, have led to permanent mass unemployment and to exacerbation of other social problems. The prospect of a worsening of these trends is frightening the imperialists. They are seeking an escape from the difficulties they have created in their own ways, including that of war.<sup>171</sup>

Based on its ideological doctrine, the Soviet Union was predisposed to interpret the statements and actions of capitalist powers as threatening, and as 1983 drew to a close, it was apparent to the Soviet Union that it was besieged on all sides.

Soviet covert intelligence had been thwarted in its ability to determine the secret surprise nuclear attack plans. American nuclear missiles were being installed in Germany that could reach Moscow before sufficient alarm could be raised. The

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<sup>171</sup> Andrew and Gordievsky, *Comrade Kryuchkov's Instructions*, 6.



American president had declared the Soviet Union to be the target of a righteous crusade. The United States even had “space bombers” on hand to rain death down on the motherland. American military power was at its highest level in decades, whereas Soviet equipment had been demonstrated to be unreliable and Soviet personnel had dared to defy standing orders. The foreign intelligence plan for 1984, distributed throughout KGB offices in November 1983 stated, “The threat of an outbreak of nuclear war is reaching an extremely dangerous position. The United States is involving its NATO allies and Japan in pursuing its aggressive designs.”<sup>172</sup> Since this document would have been closely guarded and intended for internal use only, there was no need for propagandist hyperbole. This statement represented the mentality of Soviet leadership in the closing weeks of 1983.

One of the most dangerous aspects of the crisis of 1983 was the nearly complete failure of the United States to recognize there was a crisis. President Reagan was aware that Moscow was beginning to feel cornered, but did not fully appreciate the intensity of those feelings. In his autobiography, Reagan described the surprise he felt over what he had learned about the Soviets’ perspective after three years in the White House: “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.”<sup>173</sup> As NATO forces carried out Able Archer ’83, British agent and KGB Colonel Oleg Gordievsky became increasingly agitated. CIA historian Fritz Ermarth characterized Gordievsky as “disturbed by the trend of events and the atmospherics,” and angry that his reporting was apparently not being taken seriously

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<sup>172</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 310.

<sup>173</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 588.

in London and Washington.<sup>174</sup> In his diary entry of November 18, Reagan wrote “I feel the Soviets are so defense minded, so paranoid about being attacked that without being in any way soft on them we ought to tell them that no one here has any intention of doing anything like that. What the hell have they got that anyone would want?”<sup>175</sup>

Early in 1984, the widely-distributed news magazine *Time* reported an announcement from the much more obscure *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that the fabled “doomsday clock” had been moved forward to three minutes before midnight, the closest it had been since 1960.<sup>176</sup> It was about this time that President Reagan seemed to grasp what could have happened: “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 aimed a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons at us.”<sup>177</sup> Reagan’s reaction to a revised CIA assessment from early 1984 illustrated the flaw in the administration’s reasoning. Significantly influenced by Gordievsky’s reports, this CIA assessment detailed the intentions and efforts of the KGB to discover NATO’s plans for the imminent nuclear war. After reading the document, Reagan asked his National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane for his opinion. McFarlane, for his part, “did not think the highest Soviet leaders could put credence in a completely nonexistent U.S. intention to attack.” Reagan remained pensive, saying, “I don’t see how they could believe that – but it’s something to

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<sup>174</sup> Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 78.

<sup>175</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 199.

<sup>176</sup> “Three Minutes,” *Time*, 2 January 1984, 59.

<sup>177</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, 588-9.

think about.”<sup>178</sup> The Reagan Administration clearly did not understand that Soviet fears of NATO aggression were no less dangerous because they were based on perception instead of reality.

The threat of nuclear war hung so heavily on the American psyche that it became the topic of several major films in 1983. The most noteworthy of which was *The Day After*, a made-for-television movie produced by ABC Television that attracted an audience estimated to be 100 million viewers.<sup>179</sup> These movies not only reflected the concerns of the populace, they also may have been influential in shaping President Reagan’s policy toward the Soviet Union.

On March 20, 1983, NBC viewers saw *Special Bulletin*, a television special that brought the nuclear threat into the homes of the public as never before. According to the numerous disclaimers, a “realistic depiction of fictional events” played out before that evening’s viewers. Several techniques were used to enhance the realism and simulate live, extemporaneous speech, such as showing actors struggle with lines and occasionally talk over each other.<sup>180</sup> The film made an obvious comment on the absurdity of the entire concept of nuclear deterrence and “mutual assured destruction” when the terrorists threatened to detonate a nuclear bomb to save the world from nuclear bombs, and the government responded with a general reluctance to accept the severity of the danger. Although not specifically about nuclear war, *Special Bulletin* brought a realistic view of the devastation caused by nuclear weapons into the homes of viewers at a critical time, between Reagan’s “Evil Empire” and SDI speeches.

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<sup>178</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1991* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 67.

<sup>179</sup> Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*, 96.

<sup>180</sup> *Special Bulletin*, DVD, Directed by Edward Zwick, 1983 (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010).

*WarGames*, the only nuclear war film of 1983 that was a major theatrical release, opened in theaters on June 3 and featured several stars of the era, including Matthew Broderick, Dabney Coleman, and Ally Sheedy. Regardless of the appeal of these personalities, early reviews of the film described it as “not really about people as much as it's about fear and jeopardy. However, because it immediately connects with our nightmares about thermonuclear war and a world ordered by unreliable computers, it grabs us where we're most vulnerable.”<sup>181</sup> *WarGames* featured a prominent nonhuman character: the computer known as the War Operation Plan Response, or WOPR. The computer was installed as a result of a simulation in which some nuclear missile launch control officers refused to fire their missiles, even under threat of their own lives.<sup>182</sup>

*WarGames* proved to be ahead of its time on several fronts. During development, the question was raised as to whether or not it would even be possible for a simulation to be mistaken for the real thing. Coincidentally, just such an event occurred.<sup>183</sup> In fact, there were three false alarms generated by computer malfunction prior to the release of *WarGames*. During a system test on November 9, 1979, a simulation program inexplicably appeared on the main screens and was transmitted to other strategic installations. The false alarm was detected and cancelled only six minutes after it began, but it proved it was possible. Two other false alarms, both in June 1983, were caused by faulty components.<sup>184</sup> Additionally, the process that led to the replacement of human

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<sup>181</sup> Vincent Canby, “WarGames: A Computer Fantasy.” *New York Times*. 3 June 1983.

<sup>182</sup> *WarGames*, DVD, Directed by John Badham, 1983 (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>183</sup> “Loading WarGames,” Special features of *WarGames*, DVD, Directed by John Badham, 1983 (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>184</sup> Comptroller General's Report to the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, *NORAD's Missile Warning System: What Went Wrong?* (Gaithersburg, MD: General Accounting Office, 1981), 3.

operators by machines is remarkably similar to that of Stanislav Petrov, who defied all procedures by refusing to launch his missiles.

*Testament* began as a short story, and its translation into film grew from an American Playhouse production for public television to a Paramount Pictures-funded film released to limited theaters on November 4, 1983. The storyline was based on a mother's nightmare, as her family's regular routine was shattered by the unpredicted flash of a nuclear explosion in nearby San Francisco. *Testament* focused on the tragedy and sadness of nuclear war rather than the horror. Noticeably absent from the film were any significant scenes of death or injury, although caskets and funerals were common sights. There was a clear theme of loss, as beloved objects such as journals, teddy bears, friends and family occasionally vanish.<sup>185</sup> An interview with cast members for the twentieth anniversary edition related a letter sent from Lukas Haas to President Reagan. Seven years old at the time, Haas dictated his words while his mother typed. "Just imagine how you would feel if you were a kid and had to worry about nuclear war," Haas wrote to his president. "Does your wife Nancy think the bombs are good too? Because I saw her on the drugs program and she doesn't want kids to die from drugs so why should she want them to die from bombs?" In a postscript, Haas added that he was in a movie in theaters called *Testament* about a nuclear bomb.<sup>186</sup>

As with *Testament*, *The Day After* began with ordinary Midwestern families carrying out their mundane routines in Lawrence, Kansas. In the background, news reports suggested mounting tensions in Europe, but specific provocations were never mentioned. Fears and frustrations mounted, while the population wondered, "where does

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<sup>185</sup> *Testament*, DVD, Directed by Lynne Littman, 1983 (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

<sup>186</sup> "Testament at Twenty," Special features of *Testament*, DVD, Directed by Lynne Littman, 1983 (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

one go from Kansas City? To the Yukon? Tahiti?” Without warning, the missiles of nearby Whiteman Air Force Base launched. Not all immediately realized the implications, but some people did: enemy missiles were either already on the way or would be soon as retaliation. The expected missiles arrived, and resulted in an extraordinarily graphic depiction of nuclear holocaust. Interspersed throughout the narrative were explanations of some of the technical jargon associated with nuclear war, including “extended deterrence,” “launch on warning,” and “electromagnetic pulse.” The prognosis for the future was grim, with most of the population showing obvious physical injuries and even more severe psychological wounds.

Even the development of the movie was significant due to the unique nature of its subject matter. The director, Nicholas Meyer, started from the perspective that nuclear war was “such a terrible dilemma that none of us can really bear to think about it. So if you make a movie about it, the audience will go anywhere their minds can rationalize to avoid confronting the movie. They'd rather talk about the music or talk about how Jason Robards was brilliant – anything, other than the subject. So as a director I found myself engaged in a counterintuitive exercise of trying NOT to make a good movie.” Meyer did all he could to avoid those pitfalls. “I didn't want people talking about the music – which is why after the opening credits there is no music.” Of more than eighty speaking parts, only fifteen were Hollywood actors; the rest were locals, which reduced the distractions caused by notable faces in the crowds.

What was intended to be a four-hour presentation over two nights was halved. The director argued that the movie would be more powerful as a one-night event, and eventually the executives agreed. Meyer recalled, “What they didn't tell me is that all the

advertisers had fled. General Mills, General Motors, General Foods – all the Generals had headed for the hills. So suddenly the advertising revenues that were anticipated became completely moot. That's how it became a two-hour movie as it always should have been." With a shortage of advertisements sold, the decision was made that the movie would not be interrupted by commercials after the nuclear explosions. The result intensified the experience for the audience. "The subject matter was so powerful at that point that to cut to a commercial would have been ludicrous," Meyer indicated. "Even they – the ubiquitous 'they' – were overwhelmed by the incongruity of going to ads for oven cleaner after annihilation." By intent and by default, the broadcast grew in strength. Eventually, the movie would be released theatrically in more than forty countries.<sup>187</sup>

President Reagan was allowed the opportunity to screen *The Day After* at Camp David on October 10, and recorded his reaction in his diary. "It is powerfully done," he wrote, "all \$7 million worth. It's very effective and left me greatly depressed. So far they haven't sold any of the twenty-five spot ads scheduled and I can see why. Whether it will be of help to the 'anti-nukes' or not, I can't say. My own reaction was one of having to do all we can to have a deterrent and see there is never a nuclear war."<sup>188</sup> The Reagan Administration capitalized on the opportunity this movie made by having George Shultz appear on ABC immediately following the broadcast to transition the dialogue from anti-nuclear weapons propaganda to show "why we must keep on doing what we're doing."<sup>189</sup> There may have been an unintended consequence, however; the Secretary of State's appearance discussing nuclear war amplified the horror by bridging the gap

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<sup>187</sup> Jon Niccum, "Fallout from 'The Day After,'" 19 November 2003. [http://www.lawrence.com/news/2003/nov/19/fallout\\_from/](http://www.lawrence.com/news/2003/nov/19/fallout_from/) (accessed 12 January 2011).

<sup>188</sup> Reagan, *Reagan Diaries*, 186.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

between fiction and fact.<sup>190</sup> Nikolai Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff and highest-ranking military officer, also had an opportunity to view the film. During a fairly ordinary press conference, a western reporter asked Marshal Ogarkov if he had seen *The Day After*, to which Ogarkov replied, "I have seen the film and I believe that the danger it depicts is real."<sup>191</sup> According to Nicholas Meyer, the Reagan administration confirmed that *The Day After* had a long-term impact on the president: "When he signed the Intermediate Range Weapons Agreement at Reykjavik (in 1986) with Gorbachev, I got a telegram from his administration that said, 'Don't think your movie didn't have any part of this, because it did.'"<sup>192</sup>

These movies resonated with American people by showing how suddenly their ordinary lives could be irrevocably shattered, and how helpless they would be to protect their families if anything happened. The anger and frustration of the general populace was put into words in *The Day After*, when one survivor shouts, "We knew the score, we knew all about bombs and fallout, we knew this could happen for forty years and no one was interested!"<sup>193</sup> None of these movies discussed the reasons behind the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, and none dealt with the specific issues that escalated into nuclear exchange.

Three days after *The Day After*, the first Pershing II missiles arrived in West Germany. The same day, November 23, Soviet representatives walked out of the intermediate-range nuclear forces negotiations. The Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, or

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<sup>190</sup> FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 229.

<sup>191</sup> John F. Burns, "Comments by Soviet Marshal Point up Public's War Jitters," *New York Times*. 11 December 1983. Sec 1, Pg 1.

<sup>192</sup> Niccum, "Fallout from 'The Day After.'"

<sup>193</sup> *The Day After*, DVD, Directed by Nicholas Meyer, 1983 (Los Angeles, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2004).



START, were the next to be abandoned on December 8, when the Soviets refused to set a date to resume talks. On December 15, they also refused to set a date to resume talks on reducing conventional arms.<sup>194</sup> U.S.-Soviet relations were at their lowest ebb, without a formal arms-control negotiation in progress for the first time in fourteen years.

On January 16, 1984, Reagan made his first overt gesture toward relieving tension with the Soviet Union with his “Address to the Nation and Other Countries on United States-Soviet Relations.” Reagan’s words were conciliatory for the first time, and focused on the human beings who faced each other. “Neither we nor the Soviet Union can wish away the differences between our two societies and our philosophies, but we should always remember that we do have common interests and the foremost among them is to avoid war and reduce the level of arms.” Reagan went on to describe a hypothetical, chance encounter between a Russian couple, Ivan and Anya, and an American couple, Jim and Sally. In his overly simplistic metaphor, the two couples walk away having learned that they had more commonalities than differences.<sup>195</sup> While this speech was a step in the right direction, it did little to thaw relations with the Soviets. In his memoirs, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin wrote, “At any other time, such a speech by an American president would have been regarded as a tangible step toward improving relations with the Soviet Union. But with all the other negative factors, to say nothing of the imminent presidential election, it was hard to believe in Reagan’s sincerity.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 375.

<sup>195</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation and Other Countries on United States-Soviet Relations, January 16, 1984,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 41, 44.

<sup>196</sup> Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, 551.

Ambassador Dobrynin's logic was sound; President Reagan recognized the problems U.S.-Soviet relations could cause in the elections. Former vice president Walter Mondale, who was pursuing the Democratic nomination for the 1984 Presidential election, introduced the tensions with the Soviet Union as a campaign issue. "It's three minutes to midnight, and we are scarcely talking to the Soviets at all," Mondale alleged. Mondale promised that his administration would have regular contact with Moscow, as opposed to President Reagan, who "may become the first president since Hoover never to have met with his Soviet counterpart."<sup>197</sup>

In her memoir *My Turn*, Nancy Reagan indicated that her husband "hadn't intended to wait almost five years before he started meeting with his Soviet counterpart." The reason Mrs. Reagan gave for the delay was the relatively rapid succession of Soviet leaders; Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko were all in office during President Reagan's first term. After the much-younger Mikhail Gorbachev acceded to power, Nancy "encouraged Ronnie to meet with Gorbachev as soon as possible. ... So yes, I did push Ronnie a little. But he would never have met Gorbachev if he hadn't wanted to."<sup>198</sup> Nancy suggested that it had always been Reagan's intention to meet with the Soviets, but he had not considered the time to be right. By late 1983, however, Reagan began to feel that he should wait no longer. In his diary, President Reagan used the word "sobering" twice over a three week span, regarding his November 18 briefing with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey on the complete nuclear war contingency plan and

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<sup>197</sup> Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 79.

<sup>198</sup> Nancy Reagan, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989), 336-337.

his December 9 briefing on Soviet offensive power and nuclear war plans.<sup>199</sup> The time was approaching for the negotiations President Reagan had been wanting but unable to pursue.

George Shultz's memory of President Reagan's attitude toward negotiations with the Soviet Union was quite similar to the one recorded by Nancy Reagan. Shultz related a story of events that occurred on February 12, 1983, while he was Secretary of State:

[President Reagan] recognized how difficult it was for him to move forward in dealing with [the Soviet Union and China]. He realized, I thought, that he was in a sense blocked by his own White House staff, by the Defense Department, by Bill Casey in the CIA, and by his own past rhetoric. Now that we were talking in this family setting, I could see that Ronald Reagan was much more willing to move forward in relations with these two Communist nations—even travel to them—than I had earlier believed.<sup>200</sup>

Shultz promoted negotiations with the Soviets, and produced a detailed memorandum for the president in March 1983 titled, "U.S.-Soviet Relations: Where Do We Want to Be and How Do we Get There?" that asserted that there was "a chance to ... make some progress toward a more stable and constructive U.S.-Soviet relationship over the next two years or so." Shultz also counseled restraint, fearing that "if we warmed up the U.S.-Soviet relationship, our European allies might jump out in front of us and try to move much faster than would be warranted or wise. We would have to move together so that the Soviets would not get an opportunity to split our alliance."<sup>201</sup> Shultz arrived in Sweden on the same day as Reagan's conciliatory speech, and found himself working to restrain the enthusiasm. "Such talk," Shultz wrote, "raised expectations that would lead to disappointment if nothing happened." Shultz described the U.S. strategy as "easy to

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<sup>199</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 199, 204.

<sup>200</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 164.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

state but difficult to implement,” and explained that “we needed to maintain the strength of our position and the cohesiveness of our alliance, and we also needed to show that we were ready for any reasonable dialogue with the Soviets.”<sup>202</sup>

The day after President Reagan’s first conciliatory speech, he seized another opportunity to explore increased relations with the Soviet Union. Robert McFarlane arranged for Suzanne Massie, author and amateur Sovietologist, to initiate unofficial contact between the United States and the Soviet Union. To add credibility to her mission, she asked to meet President Reagan before her flight to Moscow. Reagan was immediately intrigued by this woman’s commonplace approach to international relations and emphasis on the Russian people.<sup>203</sup> Massie was described by historian James Mann as “Reagan’s window on the Soviet Union,” and provided the personal experiences Reagan needed to guide him as he tried to reduce tensions with Moscow.<sup>204</sup> The actual impact of Massie’s unofficial diplomacy is unclear – the National Security Council’s leading Soviet specialist, Jack Matlock, considered Massie a marginal figure – but she continued to serve as an intermediary for the two superpowers throughout the Reagan Administration.<sup>205</sup>

While the Soviet political system predicted the need to launch a preemptive nuclear first strike, it also undercut the ability to do so. General Secretary Andropov had been in a precarious state of health since experiencing kidney failure in February 1983, and was described by a West German photographer in July as “a man with the mark of death on his face.” By the time U.S. forces had liberated Grenada in October, Andropov

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>203</sup> Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, 84.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

was a permanent resident of a VIP suite in a Moscow hospital. Andropov clung to power, issuing directives by telephone, memoranda, and through his inner-circle of associates. Former KGB officer Oleg Gordievsky characterized Andropov at this point as a “morbidly suspicious invalid brooding over the possible approach of a nuclear Armageddon.” Andropov knew he was dying, and was in a position to contemplate nuclear war without concern for his own personal survival.<sup>206</sup>

In all likelihood, the political turmoil surrounding Andropov’s deterioration and eventual death on February 9, 1984, was the single most influential factor that reduced the nuclear war fears that peaked in 1983. Four days after Andropov’s death, seventy-two year old Konstantin Chernenko, described as a “walking mummy,” was elected to replace him as General Secretary.<sup>207</sup> Chernenko held the post until his death, only thirteen months later. Chernenko was the last General Secretary who had lived through the Bolshevik Revolution, and he was replaced by the much younger Mikhail Gorbachev, fifty-four years old at the time.<sup>208</sup> During this period of uncertainty, Kremlin leaders were concerned with things other than international affairs: “Most of them, because of their old age, began to think more about their health, reduction of their workload, and retirement perks than about the preservation of Soviet power.”<sup>209</sup> Reagan was now facing his fourth General Secretary of the Communist Party, a position that prompted him to remark, “How am I supposed to get anyplace with the Russians, if they keep dying on

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<sup>206</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 45.

<sup>207</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 276.

<sup>208</sup> Gaddis, *Cold War*, 229.

<sup>209</sup> Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 277.

me?”<sup>210</sup> Despite Reagan’s implied desire for stability in the Soviet Union, it was likely just this instability that contributed to the prevention of nuclear war.

During the critical period of late 1983, the Soviet Union was a ship without a captain. The appointed leaders were not competent or trusted to make critical decisions, and their associates were not willing or able to seize the initiative. The first field exercises involving ground-launched cruise missiles – long an Operation RYAN indicator – were conducted on March 9, 1984, at RAF Greenham Common in the United Kingdom. The KGB’s London field office failed to forecast the exercise, resulting in station chief Arkadi Guk’s panicked exclamation, “What’s going on? The enemy are preparing for atomic war and we have no one in the residency!” Despite Guk’s alarmist interpretation and one of the first substantial results of Operation RYAN, there was virtually no response from the post-Andropov Kremlin.<sup>211</sup> As the threat of nuclear war diminished throughout the remainder of the Cold War, it is quite possible that Soviet bureaucratic inertia had saved the world.

During the year 1983 the United States and Soviet Union came closer to a nuclear war than even during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Given the new technologies and hard-line positions of those involved, a war in 1983 would likely have been even more dangerous. The Soviet Union was headed by the man who initiated a paranoid impossible mission to discover nonexistent war plans; the United States was led by a lifelong anticommunist who believed “containment” and “détente” were too soft. The United States was surging ahead technologically with the deadly and precise Pershing II missile, the mysteriously capable space shuttle program, and a lofty plan for a missile-

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<sup>210</sup> Gaddis, *Cold War*, 228.

<sup>211</sup> Pry, *War Scare*, 47.

defense system. The U.S. military regained its footing with elaborate operations like FleetEx 83-1, Urgent Fury, and Able Archer '83. All this occurred while launching a rhetorical offensive against the so-called "evil empire." The Soviet Union's insecurity manifested as violence, with an attack on a Korean Airlines jet that resulted in the deaths of 269 civilians, and heightened alert levels among their nuclear forces. The Soviet Union felt cornered by the events of 1983, with no apparent recourse except to initiate a preemptive nuclear war. Only President Reagan's relaxation of the rhetorical pressure and General Secretary Andropov's eventual demise due to kidney failure forestalled that outcome. Throughout 1984 and until the end of the Cold War, U.S.-Soviet relations improved dramatically from those of 1983, the most dangerous year.

APPENDIX  
CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| May 1972 -           | ABM and SALT I treaties exemplify era of détente                                 |
| March 11, 1976 -     | SS-20 mobile intermediate range missiles deployed to Eastern Europe              |
| March 13, 1979 -     | Maurice Bishop's New Jewel Movement takes power in Grenada                       |
| December 12, 1979 -  | NATO announces plan to deploy Pershing II intermediate range missiles            |
| December 21, 1979 -  | Soviet Union begins armed intervention in Afghanistan                            |
| January 20, 1981 -   | Ronald Reagan inaugurated as 40 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States     |
| April 12, 1981 -     | Space Shuttle <i>Columbia</i> launched   |
| May 1981 -           | KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov announces Operation RYAN                              |
| November 12, 1982 -  | Yuri Andropov becomes General Secretary of the Communist Party                   |
| January 17, 1983 -   | President Reagan signs National Security Decision Directive 75                   |
| March 8, 1983 -      | Reagan speaks to Nat'l Association of Evangelicals (Evil Empire speech)          |
| March 20, 1983 -     | <i>Special Bulletin</i> airs on NBC  |
| March 23, 1983 -     | Reagan speaks on defense and national security (SDI speech)                      |
| March 25 - April 7 - | United States Navy conducts FleetEx-83-1 in North Pacific                        |
| April 4, 1983 -      | Space Shuttle <i>Challenger</i> launched   |
| June 3, 1983 -       | <i>WarGames</i> theatrical release   |
| August 12, 1983 -    | Supplemental Operation RYAN instructions issued                                  |
| September 1, 1983 -  | Korean Airlines Flight 007 shot down   |
| September 26, 1983 - | Soviet early-warning system "Okol" failure                                       |
| October 10, 1983 -   | Reagan previews <i>The Day After</i>   |
| October 25, 1983 -   | Operation Urgent Fury initiated  |
| November 2 - 11 -    | NATO conducts Able Archer '83 exercises in Europe                                |
| November 4, 1983 -   | Soviet submarine Victor III failure; <i>Testament</i> limited theatrical release |
| November 20, 1983 -  | <i>The Day After</i> airs on ABC to a record audience                            |
| November 23, 1983 -  | Pershing II mobile intermediate range missiles arrive in Europe                  |
| December 8, 1983 -   | Soviets suspend arms reduction talks   |
| January 16, 1984 -   | Reagan speaks on U.S.-Soviet relations (conciliatory speech)                     |
| January 17, 1984 -   | Reagan meets author and amateur Sovietologist Suzanne Massie                     |
| February 9, 1984 -   | Soviet General Secretary Yuri Andropov dies                                      |
| March 9, 1984 -      | United States Air Force tests cruise missiles at Greenham Common                 |



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