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Superpower chess: Reagan, center, with advisers in White House Situation Room

The Presidency/Hugh Sidey

Needed: Strength and Patience

From Ronald Reagan's first day on the job, photographs and clandestine reports have flowed across his desk every morning, convincing this President that a revolution in the Caribbean has been coaxed and fed by Moscow and Havana. The CIA gave the world a glimpse of that evidence last week. But documentation of a big military buildup in Nicaragua is only one fragment of the indoctrination the President has received in superpower chess.

He has listened to CIA Director William Casey narrate how the Soviet Union has exploited food, technology and credits from the free world; both men were astonished at how important these were to Soviet society. Lips pursed, head shaking in grim amazement, Reagan watched the agency's "horror show" of satellite pictures of Soviet ships and submarines coming down the ways, bow to stern, like compacts rolling off a Detroit production line.

Reagan has sat, wondering at the irony of it all, as his briefers have traced how captured American M-16s, their serial numbers clumsily altered, were shipped around the world from Viet Nam to the rebels in El Salvador. The President has observed the painstaking accumulation of evidence that Moscow's clients have used poison gas (the deadly "yellow rain") in Southeast Asia and that the Soviets have themselves employed it in Afghanistan—perhaps out of frustration that all their troops and equipment have been unable to break down a stubborn resistance by the mountain tribes to military occupation.

Reagan relished the accounts of how the CIA penetrated the Polish government and how informers, once discovered, were spirited out of the country along with their families—but not before they had disclosed Moscow's hand in the martial-law crackdown. Reagan has followed the cabled details of Leonid Brezhnev's tears and grief after the recent death of Mikhail Suslov, the hard-line ideologue of the Politburo. Some of those secret reports tell of instant "personality changes" of high Soviet diplomats when they were informed of Suslov's demise. Those diplomats grew distant, their minds back in Moscow, as they worriedly waited for the changes that inevitably follow any unexpected interruption in totalitarian authority.

Reagan has been tutored day after day by his experts that the Soviets are in a "historic decline" and a "systemic failure" that renders them, despite their power, more unpredictable and dangerous than ever. From all of this, and much more, he has concluded that we have entered two of the most perilous years of modern times and that in this period it is imperative for the U.S. to stay strong. This conviction explains why the President seems shrill about Central America and sometimes nearly fanatical in his refusal to cut defense spending. He believes that America's—and his—credibility, both with adversaries and friends, lies in the extra billions. Those dollars instantly translate in Reagan's mind into helicopters and guns, then into confidence and courage, and ultimately into victory for our side.

The danger—and it is a serious danger—is that the President may be a prisoner of his preconceptions, and that the selectively chosen evidence being shown him could simply reinforce his entrenched ideology in illusory ways. El Salvador and Viet Nam are not alike, in either geography or politics, but restraint and patience about American intervention may be as much in order as they should have been 20 years ago. If the Soviet empire is overextended, Reagan's challenge is to assist that "historic decline"—a long journey requiring quiet courage and extraordinary sensitivity.