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Jack Anderson

Soviets Get Point of Technical Status

American negotiators at the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) talks in Geneva noticed a curious thing at the close of each day's sessions in the eighth-floor conference room: The freshly sharpened pencils placed on the table by the American team at the start of the meeting had all disappeared.

The mystery was easily solved: The Russians were taking the pencils. And the explanation for this petty theft was equally simple. When asked why he had lifted the two "U.S. Government" pencils sticking out of his pocket, a Soviet negotiator told his American questioner in a matter-of-fact tone: "Ours don't work very well. The lead is no good, and we don't have erasers."

The purloined pencils were in themselves obviously small potatoes. "Better Leads Than Reds" is hardly a triumphant U.S. slogan possibility for a conference involving limitations on weapons that could blow up the world. But the pencils illustrated an underlying fact about SALT that's often overlooked. The United States enjoys a technological superiority over the Soviet Union in virtually every sphere, large or small, and the Russians are keenly aware of it.

Whether it's pencils, chewing gum, blue jeans, automobiles or nuclear missiles, the Soviets are invariably playing catch-up to U.S. technical genius. When national or ideological pride cannot deter a Soviet official from pilfering pencils, it is clear the Russians' inferiority complex is deeply ingrained.

They have an almost superstitious respect for our technology, an American negotiator told our associate Dale Van Atta.

Some of the U.S. advantages that be-

came evident at the SALT talks, particularly our satellite information-gathering capabilities, cannot be detailed for obvious security reasons. But others can be disclosed in a general way.

The Russians' nuclear submarines, for example, are noisy rattletraps when matched against the practically silent U.S. subs. Our computerized radar systems make the Soviets' look like an ox cart compared to a Lincoln Continental, one source told us.

A knowledgeable Senate aide noted that the Russians' best sea-launched missiles are about as sophisticated as the U.S. models now rusting in the Brooklyn Navy Yard — junked long ago when technological advances made them obsolete.

Even though the Soviets have concentrated their scientific talent on military matters for decades, they still find themselves in the same position as the Red Queen in "Alice Through the Looking-Glass" — running hard just hoping to stay in the same relative position. For instance, in 1970 the United States worked out a way to arm its Minuteman III missiles with more than one warhead — MIRVs — each capable of hitting a different target. It took the Soviets five years to "MIRV" their land-based missiles.

In 1971, we perfected MIRV missiles for our nuclear submarines. The Russians spent eight years closing that gap.

A top-secret Central Intelligence Agency report on SALT lays out the Soviets' viewpoint this way: "The Soviets unquestionably continue to have enormous respect for the technical and industrial strength of the U.S. They have witnessed the U.S. mobilize this strength to great effect in the past. Today the

U.S. is pursuing force modernization programs of which the Soviets are vocally and, we believe, genuinely fearful."

When the Russians contemplate our technological and production capability in areas covered by the SALT agreements, "it could frighten them enormously," the CIA report concludes.

The Russians' lag in skills that are taken for granted in the United States, while obviously known to the Soviets themselves, is revealed only occasionally to our intelligence agencies. For example, when a top Soviet pilot flew his MIG jet to Japan several years ago to defect, American interrogators were astonished to learn that he had been taught only a few primitive fighter-plane tactics. He couldn't even drive a car.

And when the SALT agreement was finally agreed on at the Vienna summit and each side withdrew to prepare its own copy of the treaty, the American team produced its version quickly, using high-speed word-processing machines that corrected errors almost instantaneously. The Americans then sat around for hours waiting for the Russians to prepare their copy on manually operated machines, with painstaking corrections of every typing error. The correct manuscript was then fed into 1950s-vintage duplicating machines.

The Russians do, of course, eventually catch up in areas that are regarded as vital — more important than pencils with good lead and erasers. But part of the Soviets' hardnosed attitude in the SALT negotiations stems from their basic insecurity, their feeling that they are and always will be technologically inferior.