

Intelligence in Public Media

The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983

Marc Ambinder (Simon & Schuster, 2018), 364 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

For policymakers, senior military leaders, and intelligence officers around the globe, the ultimate nightmare is the outbreak of nuclear war, making the avoidance of such the highest concern of all sane world leaders. The American public is generally aware of how close the nation came to nuclear war with the Soviet Union over strategic missiles in Cuba in 1962 but much less so of the prospect of a similar threat again just over two decades later, in 1983. Journalist, producer, and educator Marc Ambinder discusses the near-outbreak of the unthinkable in his new book, *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983*. Ambinder notes that he interviewed 100 people, including a dozen former intelligence officers with direct knowledge and eight participants in the Able Archer war game that concluded a regularly scheduled military-civilian exercise—and convinced Soviet observers that the United States was about to unleash a nuclear holocaust.

The author begins with the flowery and vague generalization that “a nuclear priesthood gave order to the earth after World War II,” (7) before focusing on his leading man, President Ronald Reagan, who was convinced early on that the only way to win a nuclear war was to strike first. The Soviets assumed as much and looked for any indications that the West was planning a nuclear attack. Perhaps to the surprise of no one, they found them, prompting their making plans to strike the first blow. During this period of “brittle brinkmanship” (11) in the early 1980s, misunderstandings and faulty information on one or both sides meant that the two superpowers lived in a fragile peace, neither trusting the other. Reagan was convinced that the Soviets had spent the 1970s honing their ability to not only deliver but also survive a nuclear strike, a conclusion that convinced US authorities that US Continuity of Government (COG) plans were too vulnerable to Soviet attack; the Pentagon estimated that the president might have only three minutes between attack notification and missile detonation.

As Ambinder notes, two facts complicated the US response to any fears of Soviet pre-emptive strikes. First,

Reagan’s faith and apocalyptic worldview (supported by frequent conversations with Billy Graham), which affected his foreign policy decisions, and second, his attempted assassination in 1981, which not only brought succession-related discussions but also pointed out the need for a designated Command Authority for the release of nuclear weapons should a decapitating first strike occur.

Even before the watershed year of 1983, Soviet authorities were making strategic decisions based on the presumption that the United States was actively planning a first strike. In May 1981, General Secretary Yuri Andropov announced that for the first time ever, the KGB and the GRU would cooperate in a worldwide intelligence operation known as Operation RYAN, a Russian acronym of sorts formed by the words for “nuclear missile attack.” Andropov made clear to Soviet residents worldwide that normal intelligence operations were to be temporarily set aside in favor of closely watching Western nuclear exercises, which in turn would affect the Russian nuclear alert status. Once KGB Deputy Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov made the East Germans aware of RYAN, they began closely watching a bellwether location for warnings of a US/NATO nuclear attack—the small US Army 501st Army Artillery Detachment in the strategic area of the Fulda Gap, West Germany, site of nuclear warheads for wartime release to the West Germans. Meanwhile, US authorities warily watched for any signs that Soviet ground forces might move into Poland to crush dissent there and perhaps to serve as an entree to force-on-force combat in Europe. The tightly-held information provided by CIA source Col. Ryszard Kuklinski, assigned to the Polish Peoples Army and familiar with Warsaw Pact war plans convinced the few US personnel in the know that such was not the Soviet plan.

During the Ivy League 82 exercise, as he watched Army Chief of Staff General William Rogers play him, President Reagan gained a true appreciation for US nuclear war strategy, known as the Single Integrated Operation Plan (SIOP), and learned about the “biscuit,” the small plastic card he carried in his wallet, that served

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as a nuclear authenticator for missile launch purposes. According to the White House Emergency Plan at that time, if the national alert level went to DEFCON 3, the president would be evacuated from the White House; Reagan, however, made clear that he would not leave the White House and would die in any surprise attack. He was stunned to learn how fragile and unreliable the entire nuclear warning and response system actually was and that “if the Soviets wanted to decapitate the government, they could.” (93) Reagan’s policy was to engage in deterrence first; if that failed, to engage in a winning war.

By June 1982, when Reagan made his first trip to London as president, to meet with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, both the Soviet and US sides in the nuclear struggle had begun to harden. In January 1983, pursuing deterrence, Reagan discussed with Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoliy Dobrynin the possibility of talking face-to-face with Andropov, unaware that defector KGB Col. Oleg Gordievsky, a British SIS source, was providing the latest information on Soviet intentions to Thatcher. But the Soviets remained cautious and suspicious, their concerns not alleviated by Reagan’s famous description of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” or by his announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which the Soviets believed afforded the United States a golden opportunity to conduct a first nuclear strike. Ambinder describes the controversial strategic defense apparatus as an “instance of exceedingly expensive technology sold privately to an uninformed leadership by a tiny group of especially privileged outsiders.” (129) Indicative of the charged atmosphere at the time was the US exercise FleetEX 83, in which US Navy warplanes purposely overflew a Soviet naval base to collect anti-aircraft radar information. The cavalier conduct of this exercise reflected the attitudes of Navy Secretary John Lehman, proponent of a 600-ship Navy and a man who took pride in scaring the Soviets.

A 1983 meeting between Andropov and former US diplomat Averill Harriman, now a private citizen, held promise in de-escalating the tensions between the two superpowers. But this positive development foundered in the wake of the Soviet shootdown of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, which killed all 269 persons aboard. CIA assessed that the Soviets knew it was a civilian airliner when they shot it down. The Air Force was not so sure, pointing out that it could have been a simple matter of misidentification, especially since the RC-135 COBRA

BALL reconnaissance aircraft the Soviets thought they were shooting down had crossed the path of KAL 007. Reagan urged a cautious response, and a 2 September 1983 NSA intercept confirmed that the Soviet fighter pilots had misidentified the aircraft and that “it was an accident.” (174)

Some three weeks later, Soviet Lt. Col. Stanislav Petrov was alerted by an emergency klaxon going off at the Russian Ground Command and Control Center at Serpukhov-15, some 70 miles southwest of Moscow. A quick look at the red-and-white warning flashing on the screen also showed five blips that might just be American ICBMs, the initial volley of the long-feared US surprise attack. If the attack were real, the two Soviet leaders whose concurrence would be needed to launch a counter-strike would have at most 16 minutes to decide what to do. Despite being a well-trained Soviet officer, Petrov was also an intelligent and experienced Soviet engineer who had designed the algorithms supporting the Okos (Eye) system that had detected the blips—and who suspected this was a false alarm, as it proved to be. A hasty Soviet general staff investigation would later determine that reflections from high clouds passing over F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, an ICBM base, had accounted for the blips. A near-nuclear exchange had been averted in large part by Petrov, who soon became known as “the man who prevented World War III.”

In early November, US forces were engaged in Able Archer 83, intended to rehearse nuclear release procedures, and the final segment of an annual exercise. The Soviets and East Germans remained unsure of how to interpret recent events, but the Soviet military had increased its readiness level several weeks before the beginning of Able Archer. The fact that B-52 strategic bombers were involved in the exercise for the first time ever prompted the conclusion that the US was about to launch nuclear strikes. In London, Gordievsky and the KGB rezidentura received a Flash message from Moscow advising that the American exercise could be a cover for a nuclear attack. When President Reagan returned to the United States from Asia in mid-November, he was unaware of the potential for war, despite numerous indicators of increasing Soviet preparedness. Although he indicated he wished to start a meaningful dialogue with the new General Secretary, Konstantin Chernenko (Andropov had died in February 1984), Reagan was surprised to learn that the Soviets

had responded to recent US exercises by dispatching 200 Soviet naval vessels from the Northern and Baltic fleets.

Thanks to a lack of traditional pre-attack indicators and the successful disguising of Gordievsky's inside information, a May 1984 *Special National Intelligence Estimate*, entitled "Implications of Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities," concluded that "Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States." In September 1984, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko visited the United States and talked at length with President Reagan. Although the meeting was not substantive in nature, it was important nonetheless, paving the way for talks between Reagan and Gorbachev, who had met with Prime Minister Thatcher earlier and characterized him as "a man with whom I could do business." (266) That nascent relationship grew into closer talks between the two world leaders, a situation described by NSC member Jack Matlock in the words, "And the world breathed a sigh of relief." (279)

Several features of *The Brink* make it attractive to readers. Ambinder gets kudos for including a "Cast of Characters" section at the front of the book, which helps readers keep the personas straight, and for writing an easy-to-read account of a critical though largely unknown period in the history of US-Soviet relations. The book is also extensively researched, especially with interviews with knowledgeable principals, and includes several interesting photographs.

Unfortunately, the book is marred by numerous typographical errors that become increasingly frustrating for readers. Often words are clearly missing from the text (e.g., "and" on pages 145 and 220), phrases are oddly constructed (e.g., "to with which to deal" on page 127), and—most annoying and inexplicable of all for a professional product—the consistent use of "ordnance" instead of "ordnance" (e.g., pages 144 and 183). A book discussing nuclear weapons should at the very least understand that those two words are not the same and should know which

one to use. Readers should also be aware that the picture of President Reagan that emerges from these pages is not generally laudatory—at times Ambinder portrays him as naïve, disconnected from reality, and as a chameleon, influenced most by whoever spoke with him last.

Ambinder's book appeared almost simultaneously with Taylor Downing's *1983: Reagan, Andropov, and a World on the Brink*, making a comparison irresistible.^a Of the two volumes, Downing's is the more expansive and includes both preceding events (an account of the Hiroshima bombing) and subsequent events (the espionage of Rick Ames and Robert Hanssen). Also, Downing's book notes the significance of former CIA chief historian Ben Fischer—author of *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 War Scare in US-Soviet Relations*—to the discussion, a source Ambinder does not even cite. Downing spoke at length with Fischer about his research and seems to agree with Fischer that, to the Soviets, the 1983 war scare was real. In contrast, *The Brink* discusses in greater detail the impact of the scare at the tactical level, particularly concerning the angst of US Army Capt. Lee Trolan, commander of the strategically-placed 501st Army Artillery Detachment. Ambinder's book also focuses on the minute details of the communications links and their fickleness and fragility, critical when so much is at stake. Finally, *The Brink* ultimately fails to deliver the same sense of suspense, anxiety, and impending doom that readers will find in such recent books as the volume by Casey Sherman and Michael J. Tougias, *Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission*, about the Cuban Missile Crisis, perhaps because the 1983 war scare was less publicized at the time.

Thus, while Ambinder's *The Brink* is an adequate study of the subject, readers looking for a deeper immersion into the nuclear crisis of 1983 will find Downing's book the more satisfying of the two.

a. Downing's book was reviewed by Douglas F. Garthoff in the September 2018 issue of *Studies in Intelligence*.



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