

Yes, We Have no Mañanas

U.S. and USSR Prepare for Doomsday

Fifth Estate Collective

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The message relayed by the U.S. Strategic Air Command headquarters' computer was unmistakable—Soviet missile attack! SAC B-52 bomber engines roared to life, their bomb bays laden with 20-megaton thermonuclear weapons; intercontinental ballistic systems were switched to command function—all that was necessary was the order from the President and the Armageddon of World War Three would commence.

This is not a fanciful scenario, but one that occurred on June 6 of this year, the result of a computer malfunction (the second one in a week and the third within seven months) which transmitted a “false signal” indicating the United States was under attack by Soviet missiles.

A Pentagon spokesman said the June 6 error was discovered within “three minutes” and “all systems returned to normal” once the mistake was detected. Reports of this frightening mishap were relegated to the back sections of U.S. newspapers, but the gravity of the situation struck harder in other parts of the globe. The potential target, the Soviet Union, quickly condemned the incident as part of the “militaristic and chauvinistic fever that has been gripping America for more than half a year,” while in London, British legislators stated that the malfunction put the world “on the brink of nuclear extinction.”

English newspapers ran banner headlines such as “14 Minutes from Nuclear Destruction.” In the U.S. the only public response was the call of Sen. John Tower, R-Tex., for a congressional investigation of the false alarms.

Directive 59 Alters “Balance of Terror”

The *Fifth Estate* noted the increased dangers of nuclear war (FE #301, Feb. 26, 1980, “Carter’s Phony War Crisis: Cold War II Hides Nuclear Danger”) because of the error-prone nature of the technology of nuclear weaponry, the demands of an economy based ever more on military spending, and Carter’s confrontational politics based on his electoral needs. Even while these few months have passed, those tendencies have developed in an ever more dangerous degree culminating in the President’s Directive 59 which dangerously alters the “balance of terror” both nations have operated under for the last 25 years.

The Directive, an order signed by Carter in July, calls for the developing of weaponry accurate and powerful enough to hit and destroy Soviet missiles in their silos and for the creation of a U.S. capacity to wage “limited” nuclear war through “pinpoint strikes” on Soviet military and command targets. Although it is perhaps hard to imagine a more dangerous and insane policy than the prevailing one of MAD (“mutually assured destruction”), Presidential Directive 59 is just that and contains the ingredients for precipitating a full-scale war.

In the same FE article mentioned above, we discussed how military policy makers have been “re-evaluating” the MAD strategy for a decade, beginning during the Nixon administration, as one that is “inadequate” in world affairs since both sides allegedly are forestalled from utilizing the weapons. The “logic” of the present policy is that neither side will launch a surprise attack on the other since each have their population and industrial centers

equally vulnerable to an immediate second strike retaliation which would carry with it an assured devastation of the aggressor nation.

First Strike “Almost Irresistible”

Directive 59 is a radical departure from this “balance” and would give the U.S. a first-strike strategy based on an ability to make Russian missiles vulnerable to attack and destruction. This would leave the Soviet Union in the position of having no option of returning the destruction in the event of a nuclear attack on them by the United States. This greatly increases the chances for war since in a situation of crisis or confrontation, if either side thought that its missiles had become vulnerable to a surprise attack, pressures for launching a first, pre-emptive strike would become as the *New York Times* put it “almost irresistible.”

In the *Times* of August 17, 1980, Paul N. Warnke, President Carter’s former arms control and disarmament director, called the new strategy “apocalyptic nonsense,” adding that the decision to adopt strategies of limited war will of necessity give rise to larger wars. Warnke said, “It lowers the threshold to using nuclear war weapons because each side starts to think about using its weapons before they are hit.” Warnke told the *Times* that if both sides equip themselves to fight a limited nuclear war, “they will end up fighting an all-out nuclear war that nobody could win.”

But the Dr. Strangeloves of the Pentagon and the Kremlin are oblivious to the doomsday predictions of Warnke and others, which to most of us would seem to be the only logical outcome of the armament strategies of both sides. Escalation has always been the name of the game in the arms race and it was super-hawks U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown and national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski who convinced President Carter that Moscow has already adopted a strategy similar to that contained in Directive 59.

The two argued that theoretically (it is not even known whether this is actually the case or not) the Kremlin has abandoned MAD and is striving to develop the capacity to eliminate the U.S. Air Force’s 1,054 land-based missiles in their silos, basing their new deterrent on their ability to survive a nuclear strike by the U.S. The two war-planners further contended that Moscow now believes the best deterrent to nuclear attack is to convince the U.S. that it could both fight and survive a war, which dictates that the U.S. must develop a “countervailing strategy” which will convince the Russians that the U.S. could outlast them in a nuclear confrontation with the weaponry which remains after a first strike.

Playing the Right Trump Card

The mind reels that human beings could actually contemplate decisions the result of which could mean the deaths of hundreds of millions or perhaps even billions and to be so blind as to believe that these weapons of destruction will never be used if they just play the right trump card.

Both camps operate under a so-called “defense” posture which states that the risk of attack by the other is so high that each must run the risk of incinerating the planet in order to assure each nation’s “national security.” In this country, these assumptions formed the central foreign policy myth of the 1940s and ‘50s—that the Soviet Union was bent on “world conquest” and domination of the U.S. and although this is no longer enunciated in such strident terms by any other than those of the far right, it is this myth alone which justifies the continuing brinkmanship and the militarization of our lives.

In real terms, the Soviet Union does not now nor did it ever pose an actual military threat to the United States. The creation of this mythology came after World War II and was necessitated both as the justification for keeping the U.S. on a permanent war economy and to assure that Russia, as a potential rival, would remain in the weakened position she emerged from in the war.

This is not to portray the Soviet Union as a “gentle giant” desiring peace in a world surrounded by enemies. Soviet imperialism does pose a threat to the U.S. empire, but in the same manner as all other capitalist nations do—through economic competition. Its state capitalist economy is directly involved in the world market and is subject to the same pressures which effect all other national capitals. The fact that it has been on the defensive

since its emergence as a world power has more to do with the fact of its relative weakness compared to the U.S. rather than the particular needs of its sector of world capital.

Immediately following World War II, whole sections of the globe formerly dominated by the West fell to the Soviet bloc including Eastern Europe and the prize of the Pacific war, China, making a clash of empires seem almost inevitable at the time. However, once a relative stabilization of spheres of domination had been established and mutually recognized, it seemed that the potential for direct military competition for territory and markets no longer existed between the two super-powers, leaving the further confrontations to be fought out by each other's vassals.

Today, the Soviet Union is a contradiction—it has been recently described by Princeton Prof. Stephen F. Cohen as “one of the most conservative political systems in the world today.” And in fact it is easy to view the Kremlin as having its goals limited to the development of its economy, the retention of its ability to exploit those nations within its bloc, and the maintenance of its military security. While this is probably an accurate portrayal in the short run, it fails to recognize that the Soviet Union faces the same world economic crisis as does the West. The factors of a stagnating economy at home, the partial penetration by Western capital of its satellite nations, and growing political conflict throughout its bloc are the conditions which have historically given rise to inter-imperialist war. It is these conditions which thrusts the Soviet Union into the game of nuclear escalation and imperialist politics in no different a manner than the U.S. Plays Into the Hands of the Soviet Military.

On the other hand, Soviet paranoia over Western intentions is not of the delusional variety. Russia has been the subject of continuing and relentless attack by the Western powers since the inception of the Soviet state 63 years ago, and the Kremlin leaders have always demonstrated a siege mentality. The near destruction of the U.S.S.R. during World War II at the hands of a nation espousing the same anti-communist rhetoric one currently hears from every U.S. politician does nothing to reassure Moscow, and the fact that the U.S. maintains hundreds of thousands of troops and first strike missiles ringing its borders does nothing to alleviate Russian fears.

This pressure does two very concrete things: 1) It has already made the Russian war economy a permanent and central feature of the Soviet economy, just as it is in this country. Their state variant of capital has never allowed for the great production of consumer commodities and instead relies on the massive purchase of armament hardware by the military sector of the economy from the steel and heavy industry sector. This is not a choice, but an economic necessity, just as within U.S. capitalism. 2) As the war moves escalate, the hand of the military and the hard-line elements within the Kremlin bureaucracy is strengthened to the detriment of the reformers and technocrats who seek détente and accommodation with the U.S.

The Kremlin hard-liners argue that is not a question of whether or not the U.S. will launch a nuclear strike against the U.S.S.R., but when. The willingness of the U.S. to unleash nuclear holocaust on civilian populations as demonstrated by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is not lost on the Russians. Also, adding fuel to their fears are the recent revelations from President Truman's diary that he had considered threatening both China and the U.S.S.R. with a unilateral atomic attack during the stalemated Korean War and the fact that the U.S. has never repudiated the first use of nuclear weapons.

All of this gives rise to Paul Warnke's warning: In a crisis, the Soviets will not wait to be nuked first. Each escalation in technology brings with it a quantum leap towards the point in a political showdown where the decision will be made to press the buttons.

U.S. Nuclear Deterrent “Overwhelming”

What propels the lunacy even more swiftly is the political terrain of the U.S. where no politician dare not give obeisance to the official view of the Soviets as our mortal enemy and at election time each falls over the other trying to best him in advocating the strongest “defense” policy. Liberal critics have charged that Carter's Directive 59 was a political attempt to head off a similar Republican platform plank, thus allowing the President to appear “tough” on foreign policy. They note that several times in the past Carter has denied the two nations could fight a limited war, yet now he advocates the ability to wage a prolonged nuclear conflict. Similarly, as short a time ago as his 1979 State of the Union message, Carter declared that the U.S. nuclear deterrent was “overwhelming.” He cited as evidence

that even if the Soviets could somehow manage to neutralize the entire U.S. land-based missile system, this would still leave a fleet of SAC bombers and the nuclear warhead bearing Poseidon submarine flotilla, one component vessel of which has the capacity to destroy every large and medium-sized city in the Soviet Union. Similarly, there is every reason to believe that the Russians would also retain a similar ability—even after being hit by a first strike—to reduce this country to rubble. Even with the prospect of mutual ruination assured, the two nations continue to advance their war preparations, locked into the trajectory by the demands of imperialist competition and their own economies. In this country, Directive 59 will necessitate, according to defense officials, the deployment of the \$34 billion mobile intercontinental MX missile system and the development of sophisticated laser and charged particle beam systems in outer space. The government has even trotted out a 1950's re-run telling the citizenry it might be time to start considering fallout shelters again as well as other "civil defense" schemes.

The picture is grimmer now than it ever has been and the Soviet fears of when, not if, hold true for both nations. Without a popular opposition ("Did they really all die without a peep of protest?") to the war schemes of both sides, maybe bomb shelters wouldn't be a bad idea after all.

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"Meanwhile, in Arkansas," FE #303, October 20, 1980.

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