The 1980’s “War Scare:” Misperceptions, Mistaken Beliefs, and Missed Signals in US-Soviet Relations

Never, perhaps, in the post-war decades was the situation in the world as explosive and hence, more difficult and unfavorable, as in the first half of the 1980’s.

- Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, 1986
**Introduction**

Tensions grew between the United States and the Soviet Union during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, as détente gave way to renewed hostility. During this period, Soviet leaders became increasingly concerned about the growing gap in military capabilities between the USSR and the US and about the intentions of the Reagan administration, which took office in 1981. This anxiety culminated in the so-called “war scare” of 1983, in which Moscow apparently believed that NATO might use that year’s iteration of the annual “Able Archer” military exercise to carry out a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. Whether Soviet leaders truly believed that there was a danger of an attack by NATO during Able Archer remains an open and contentious question, but the historical record does clearly show serious concern in Moscow regarding American intentions during the early 1980’s. The record also shows a comprehensive dismissal of these concerns as propaganda by Washington. Overall, Soviet and American leaders shared a remarkably poor understanding of the other side’s intentions and beliefs.

During this period, the predispositions, beliefs, and bureaucratic incentives of key actors in the political, intelligence, and military leaderships of the USSR and the US led each side to consistently misinterpret seemingly clear signals and indices. On both sides, mistaken perceptions became entrenched due to a host of psychological and bureaucratic factors, including: efforts to shape analyses in keeping with bureaucratic incentives; cognitive reliance on preexisting beliefs and conclusions; and the human reluctance to reexamine beliefs in light of new facts. Consequently, these perceptions were largely impervious to contradictory evidence, not least because the perceptions themselves informed and defined intelligence gathering and analytical efforts, leading to self-perpetuating cycles on both sides. In short, the dangerous misapprehensions of US and Soviet leaders during the “war scare” period are best understood with reference to bureaucratic dynamics and political psychology, including the question of how beliefs are shaped and, in turn, shape assessments.

The historical evidence summarized below offers three conclusions: the Soviet leadership genuinely perceived a heightened threat of an attack by the United States; they sought to communicate their alarm to the United States through a variety of signals, which the United States consistently
dismissed; and Soviet behavior included several indicators of this alarm (potential indices) which the United States observed and likewise dismissed. The Soviet assessment of American intentions was shaped by several factors, including internal political maneuvering, heightened intra-governmental resource competition, and the intellectual predispositions of Soviet leaders. These perceptions were, consequently, unaffected by the absence of confirmatory evidence.

Similarly, the United States persisted in viewing Soviet rhetoric and outward indicators of alarm as propaganda, designed to legitimate the regime in the eyes of Soviet citizens and to influence European observers. The fact that the USSR’s public “propaganda” was accompanied by consistent signaling of alarm through multiple channels and by numerous apparent indices of Soviet fears did not affect the American assessment. Accordingly, the “war scare” episode indicates that it is impossible to analyze the function of signals and indices in international communication without understanding the recipients’ predispositions and political incentives, which can render seemingly clear signals meaningless and lead to conclusions beyond the logical scope of the available information.

Union of United Soviet Socialist Republics – Initial Fears of an American Attack

In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, several factors combined to produce a profound sense of insecurity among Soviet leaders, including changes in the balance of military capabilities and potentially threatening moves (both doctrinal and operational) by the American military. Soviet leaders feared that the shift in the balance of military capabilities in favor of the United States might make Washington more inclined to resort to force. However, the Soviet perception of American intentions also shifted in this period, a change that may have been attributable to bureaucratic and psychological factors, rather than to any meaningful change in American signaling or the international context.

The international environment and American actions did offer reasons for the Soviet leadership to be concerned. While the two sides had maintained essentially stable deterrence and cordial relations through the 1970’s, the collapse of détente following the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and (faulty) American perceptions of a growing strategic imbalance led to a series of moves viewed as discrete and defensive by Washington but as a calculated set of aggressive actions by Moscow. Following the
Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate range missiles in 1979, the United States responded with the “dual-track” policy, simultaneously pursuing arms control negotiations while preparing to deploy Pershing-II intermediate-range missiles in Europe by 1983. Washington viewed the planned Pershing-II deployment as a logical and defensive response to the Soviet positioning of SS-20’s. According to Len Scott, “NATO had felt confident that while the Pershing-II provided incentives for the Soviets to negotiate, it would not be destabilizing because it did not have the range to strike Moscow or key command and control centers west of the Soviet capital.” Moscow, however, viewed the Pershing-II deployment as a serious threat that would result in significantly reduced warning time in the event of a nuclear strike, and was also concerned by the remarkable political cohesion displayed by NATO around the contentious issue of nuclear-armed missile deployment.

Additionally, the United States made potentially threatening changes in American nuclear doctrine during this period. Fear of a so-called “window of vulnerability” (a strategic contingency wherein the United States might not be able to respond to a Soviet first strike due to the vulnerability of American land-based missiles) dominated American strategic discourse in the late 1970’s. American military planners consequently sought to induce greater caution in the Soviet leadership and heighten deterrence by shifting targeting priorities in the United States’ strategic nuclear doctrine. Correctly deducing from a massive campaign of bunker construction that the Soviet leadership feared above all for its own survival in a nuclear exchange, Defense Department planners suggested that Soviet leaders be explicitly targeted in American nuclear contingency planning. President Carter approved this shift in targeting priorities in Presidential Decision Directive-59 of 1980.

The Reagan administration also sought to achieve greater deterrence and communicate heightened resolve through a series of “psychological operations,” including the well-known tactic wherein “sizeable numbers of military aircraft were flying straight at the Soviet frontiers, only turning away at the last minute.” These missions intensified through the early 1980’s, based on the American perception that they (in the words of Secretary of the Navy John Lehman) constituted “the greatest deterrence we can have.” Finally, Soviet officials had somewhat discounted belligerent rhetoric
delivered on the campaign trail, but were unpleasantly surprised when such rhetoric continued following Reagan’s inauguration (the Strategic Defense Initiative, which the Soviets viewed with great alarm, was announced in 1983 and is consequently beyond the scope of an inquiry into changing Soviet perceptions of American intentions prior to the “scare” in 1983).

However, there is nothing in the extensive body of now-public records from the period to suggest that the Reagan administration’s views on the feasibility of a first strike on the Soviet Union had changed. The American leadership sought to signal greater resolve to Moscow and to redress perceived strategic imbalances (i.e. in intermediate-range missiles) but would have been shocked to learn that Soviet leaders viewed these steps as a prelude to or enabling a surprise attack (as indeed Reagan, Robert Gates, and other senior officials were upon learning of the extent of Soviet fears several years later). The steps taken by the United States government were no doubt alarming to Moscow, but were not indicative of any change in American adherence to the doctrine of mutual assured destruction.

By 1981, however, the Politburo and the Soviet military had become increasingly anxious that the United States might seek an opportunity to carry out a nuclear first strike, a fear that intensified in subsequent years. Soviet leaders publicly voiced these anxieties on numerous occasions, and now-public documentation of internal deliberations show that fears of an attack dominated the consciousness of the Politburo during the early 1980’s. Similarly, Soviet intelligence-gathering priorities shifted dramatically in response to this perceived threat. These internal deliberations and operational shifts demonstrate clearly that Moscow was not merely concerned with an evolving balance of power or with aggressive American military moves. Rather, the Soviet leadership had somehow become convinced that American intentions had changed and that Washington, in a dramatic shift from decades of mutual nuclear deterrence, was planning or at least considering a first strike upon the Soviet Union.

In an influential piece published in 2013, Dmitry Adamsky argued that the Soviets were not “paranoid” because their fears were “not groundless but derived from genuine strategic inferiority vis-à-vis the United States.” According to Adamsky, Moscow’s fears were the logical product of an increasingly unfavorable security environment. However, this thesis ignores the shifting Soviet
perception of American intentions. It would be unremarkable if the unfavorable changes in the international environment detailed above had led to heightened insecurity within the Soviet leadership, as Adamsky suggests. However, it is less clear how Moscow could have concluded that the United States had suddenly abandoned the logic of nuclear deterrence, a conclusion that American signaling was not intended to produce (not least because it was untrue). As Keith Payne has demonstrated, American actions were predicated on an understanding that the logic of mutual assured deterrence still held, and were undertaken to convince Moscow that the Soviet Union could not win or survive a nuclear exchange (as noted above, Payne’s assertions are borne out by the contemporaneous and retrospective writings of key actors in the American government). A change in targeting priority for the event of nuclear war is not indicative of an intention to wage such a war. Given the realities of nuclear conflict and the shared understanding that a nuclear exchange would imperil life on earth, the Soviet belief in a shift of American intentions and abandonment of “MAD” logic represented a remarkably extreme conclusion, one that seems unsupported by the available signals and indices. The actions of the Soviet political leadership and intelligence apparatus during this period, however, demonstrate that Moscow did indeed arrive at this extreme (and, pace Adamsky, “groundless”) conclusion and “somehow believed that there was an impending Western nuclear attack that they had to preempt.”

In May 1981, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov announced a massive intelligence-gathering operation known as Operation RYAN, derived from the Russian acronym for “nuclear missile attack” (raketnoe-yadernoe napadenie). In his speech announcing the operation at a KGB conference, Andropov bluntly informed his listeners that the Reagan administration was preparing for nuclear war, and that the Soviet Union needed to prepare for a first strike. Andropov’s alarmist rhetoric, which offered a categorical view of American intentions (as opposed to capabilities), matched the increasingly pessimistic tone of remarks that had been delivered over the preceding months by senior Soviet leaders, including General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, and Politburo member (and Brezhnev protégé) Konstantin Chernenko.
While the steady increase in Soviet alarm is clear in the record of these public remarks, the provenance of these fears is less obvious. All of them, however, and especially those delivered by Andropov and Ogarkov, reflect concerns regarding US intentions, as opposed to capabilities. In this regard, they also mirror much of the internal discourse of the Soviet government. Much scholarship to date has sought to understand this radical conclusion through an examination of American signaling and actions at the time.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Newly available documentation and recent scholarship, however, indicates that the Soviet conviction that the United States might seek to carry out a nuclear first strike is best understood with reference to bureaucratic and psychological factors, including the preexisting beliefs, predispositions, and political incentives of the Soviet leadership.

\textit{Bureaucratic Incentive Structures – KGB and Intelligence Agencies}

Bureaucratic politics and incentive structures may have played a key role in driving the Soviet threat assessment between 1979 and 1984. According to Janice Stein, “Organizational and bureaucratic politics can produce pathologies where leaders structure problems in ways that increase their importance and push hard for solutions that advance their institutional interests. These institutional interests can generate and benefit from either a heightened or reduced level of threat assessment.”\textsuperscript{xxvii} Stein’s insight sheds light on the shifting threat perception of the Soviet leadership in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.

Andropov, the Chairman of the KGB and an aspirant to the position of General Secretary, benefited politically from a shared sense of heightened threat within the Soviet leadership.\textsuperscript{xxviii} Internal jockeying over political succession intensified in the early 1980’s as Brezhnev’s health deteriorated,\textsuperscript{xxix} leading Andropov to seek the backing of the military leadership and Politburo hardliners.\textsuperscript{xxx} Andropov, already suffering from health problems of his own, was not the first choice of Brezhnev, who preferred his long-time protégé Chernenko for the position. Accordingly, Andropov’s succession to the top job, which surprised many Western observers in 1982,\textsuperscript{xxxi} was hardly a foregone conclusion in 1980 and 1981. A CIA analysis of potential successors written six months before Brezhnev’s death in 1982 focused primarily on the relative chances of Chernenko and Politburo member Andrey Kirilenko, and was dismissive of Andropov’s chances.\textsuperscript{xxxii} The need to overcome Chernenko’s political advantages
may have figured into Andropov’s promotion of the American “threat” and the key role of his agency, the KGB, in guarding against this danger.

Unsurprisingly, Andropov was the first member of the senior Soviet leadership to publicly suggest an imminent threat from the United States. Andropov also called for a massive intelligence-gathering operation as a necessary response to this ostensibly growing threat, thereby positioning himself and his agency as a bulwark against the supposed menace (in Stein’s words, a “solution” that advanced the KGB’s institutional interests). Some accounts have suggested that Andropov was initially skeptical of the need for an operation like RYAN, but ordered the operation in an effort to protect his own political flank: “Initially Andropov (as KGB head) had delayed the plan in 1981, dismissing these fears [of an American attack] as groundless. However, Andropov wanted to succeed Brezhnev and therefore had to listen to the dominant hardliners in the Politburo, including Defense Minister Ustinov. Andropov had to play to his power base of military and ideological conservatives… RYAN offered a perfect opportunity to do this.”xxxiii This assertion matches numerous other anecdotes in which Andropov offered alarmist public assessments of developments he privately judged inconsequential. For example, he dismissed the significance of the Pershing-II deployment in a conversation with Erich Honecker, despite publicly decrying the move as “destabilizing” and “reckless.”xxxiv

The British historian Christopher Andrew, who collaborated with the KGB spy and subsequent defector Oleg Gordievsky on several books, has asserted that Andropov relied heavily on the political support of Ustinov, a noted pessimist regarding American intentions. This assessment of Ustinov’s close relationship with Andropov is echoed in contemporaneous US government appraisals. xxxvi According to Vladislav Zubok, Andropov’s success in ensuring the support of Ustinov and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko was the determinative factor in allowing him to outmaneuver Chernenko in the months leading up the Brezhnev’s death. xxxvii Ustinov’s own hawkish predilections (detailed below) and the crucial support he offered Andropov meant that the latter’s alarmist view of the United States was a major factor in his rise to the top.
Beyond Andropov’s personal ambitions, the KGB itself had clear institutional reasons to play up the threat of an attack, particularly at a time of diminishing government resources. According to Arnav Machanda, “Like any bureaucracy, intelligence agencies had to justify their own existence and gain funding and operational resources from the Soviet system. They appealed to upper-level decision-makers in the Kremlin by fanning the threat of nuclear war.” Andropov’s dire assessment of American intentions was, unsurprisingly, shared throughout the organization. In a secret speech delivered in 1980 (well in advance of Andropov’s speech announcing Operation RYAN), the KGB’s head of foreign intelligence, Vladimir Kryuchkov (who would later serve as Chairman of the KGB), warned that the Soviet intelligence apparatus must not “overlook the possibility of a US missile attack on our country,” a theme that Kryuchkov echoed repeatedly in meetings with other Warsaw Pact intelligence officials (much to their surprise and alarm). The personal and bureaucratic incentives of Andropov and the KGB offer insight into the radical conclusion, seemingly unsupported by the available evidence, that the United States was preparing for a nuclear first strike upon the Soviet Union.

Additionally, the KGB’s alarmist threat assessments during this period conform to Ceren Yarhi-Milo’s “selective attention” thesis, which argues that intelligence analysts and political leaders view potential threats differently due to differing incentive structures and predispositions. According to Yarhi-Milo, “Organizational affiliations and roles matter: intelligence organizations predictably rely on different indicators than civilian decisionmakers do to determine an adversary’s intentions. In intelligence organizations, the collection and analysis of data on the adversary’s military inventory typically receive priority.” Due to this focus, the Soviet intelligence apparatus may have been inclined to believe that the growing gap in military capabilities was proof of hostile American intent.

The “selective attention” thesis consequently suggests that the ascension of Andropov from an intelligence position to the top political leadership position elevated a heightened and possibly irrational threat perception from the intelligence community to the top of the Soviet leadership, which may help to explain the growing disconnect between Soviet and American perceptions of Washington’s signaling. Vojtech Mastny characterizes Andropov, who had spent years steeped in the paranoia of the KGB, as the
Andropov’s assumption of the top position entrenched at the highest level a worldview that had been shaped by the KGB’s bureaucratic incentives and predispositions, and consequently was markedly different from that of Brezhnev, a believer in détente who had sought to shrink the Soviet defense establishment.

Bureaucratic Incentive Structures – Soviet Military

Likewise, the Soviet military had clear bureaucratic incentives to highlight the perceived threat from the United States, particularly due to an intensifying political battle over diminishing resources. In keeping with Stein’s theory of bureaucratic interests informing beliefs, military leaders had also begun to warn of an increasing military threat well before the political leadership. Nikolai Ogarkov, the chief of the Soviet General Staff, began to use increasingly dire rhetoric to characterize the international situation and American intentions early in 1981. In 1982, Ogarkov informed a meeting of Warsaw Pact generals that the United States had “in effect already declared war on us,” and compared the international situation to the eve of World War II (a potent reference for Soviet military leaders). Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov had sought to highlight Washington’s allegedly malign intent even earlier. In 1979, Ustinov warned a gathering of Soviet generals that NATO would be able to count on Chinese support in a conflict with the Warsaw Pact and was consequently likely to behave more belligerently. In a speech delivered in February 1980, he suggested that his fears had been fulfilled, condemning what he viewed as an increasingly “aggressive US policy.” Ustinov’s dire rhetoric culminated in a remarkable editorial published in Pravda in 1983, in which he warned, “Certain hotheads [zabiyayki] by their insane actions have brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.”

Notably, the alarmist trend in the rhetoric of Ogarkov, Ustinov, and other Soviet military leaders coincided with what the CIA characterized as a “virtual freeze on the growth of Soviet military procurement since the mid-1970’s.” According to a 1987 study prepared by the RAND Corporation for the US Air Force, Brezhnev sought throughout the late 1970’s and early 1980’s to shift Soviet government spending away from the military, in order to improve consumer welfare: “Starting in the mid-1970’s… Brezhnev and his colleagues in the civilian leadership began to encroach on a wide range
of military interests.”

Looking ahead to the planned publication of a new Five-Year Plan (which would set government spending levels) in 1981, the military leadership grew increasingly alarmed over Brezhnev’s attitude toward military spending. Ogarkov published two articles in 1979 in which he criticized the Soviet political leadership’s attitude toward military affairs in strong terms. As Brezhnev continued his efforts to reorient Soviet spending away from the military, however, Ogarkov upped the ante and began to warn publicly about the growing danger of war with the United States. According to the RAND report, “The Soviet High Command was unable to persuade its civilian superiors to accelerate the rate of growth in military spending. Instead of backing off in the face of such resistance, Ogarkov became an increasingly hard-charging lobbyist…. He continued to campaign in public speeches and articles.”

Ustinov also continued his efforts to promote the notion of an imminent threat from the United States. Here again, the succession struggle may have played a role: the dovish Chernenko was widely viewed as sympathetic to Brezhnev’s efforts to devote more government resources to the improvement of consumer welfare. Ustinov was consequently willing to ally with Andropov as a herald of the nuclear threat, in order to block Chernenko’s ascension.

The incentives of the Soviet security bureaucracy and key leaders during a period of increased resource competition clearly pointed toward alarmist assessments of American intentions as a means of institutional and personal advancement. The primary drivers of this radical and largely unprecedented assessment of American intentions were Andropov, Ustinov, and Ogarkov, all of whom stood to benefit from the adoption of this conclusion as official policy. Once they began to articulate this grim outlook, other Soviet leaders (including Brezhnev) were quick to fall in line. Writing in 1983, Lawrence Caldwell and Robert Levgold concluded, “No one in Moscow gets ahead these days by looking for reasons to give the Reagan administration the benefit of the doubt.” Confronted with a threatening international environment, Soviet leaders adopted an alarmist view of American intentions that was not supported by the available evidence but conformed to their bureaucratic and personal incentives. This view was further entrenched once the Soviet leadership undertook actions, like Operation RYAN, that were predicated on it. As Mastny puts it, “Invoking threats has a way of fostering belief in them.”
While the belief that a first strike was possible may have been partially borne of bureaucratic maneuvering, it took on a life of its own as policies based on this belief served to further entrench it. Paradoxically, Operation RYAN, which was launched based on the belief that the United States was planning a surprise attack on the Soviet Union, quickly became the primary driver of this conviction.

The seriousness with which the Soviet leadership viewed the possibility of an attack is clear from the great importance attached to RYAN. According to a 1990 report by the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board assessing US intelligence efforts during the “war scare,” Foreign Minister Gromyko sent a cable to all Soviet missions warning all ambassadors not to interfere with KGB and GRU personnel engaged in Operation RYAN work, an unusual step indicating personal involvement by top political leaders. Additionally, the operation received top billing in the official reports on KGB activities in 1981 and 1982, “Report of the Work of the KGB in 1981” and “Report of the Work of the KGB in 1982”. These documents, which were obtained from Soviet archives by the historian Dmitri Volkogonov and published in 2013 by the National Security Archive, do not mention RYAN by name, but both indicate that the operation was the primary focus of the KGB’s foreign activities. The 1981 report, from Andropov to Brezhnev, clearly refers to RYAN at the beginning of the section on foreign intelligence activities: “Measures [were] implemented to strengthen intelligence work in order to prevent a possible sudden outbreak of war by the adversary [protivnikom].” Similarly, the 1982 report (from new KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov to Andropov) detailed intelligence activities “related to the danger of the enemy’s nuclear attack.” Finally, the Soviet leadership went to great lengths to secure the cooperation of Warsaw Pact intelligence services in the operation. According to Benjamin Fischer, “The Soviets drew all the Warsaw Pact intelligence services into RYAN,” with an especially heavy burden on the East German Stasi. The Czechoslovak and Bulgarian intelligence services were also involved, a significant commitment of Warsaw Pact intelligence resources.

Given the belief of Soviet leaders that RYAN was crucial to safeguarding the country, it is unsurprising that information obtained through the operation only served to harden the fear of an
imminent threat. According to Andrew and Gordievsky, “RYAN created a vicious circle of intelligence collections and assessment. Residencies were, in effect, required to report alarming information even if they themselves were skeptical of it. The Centre was duly alarmed by what they reported and demanded more.”

There is considerable documentary evidence that the intelligence agencies involved in RYAN, knowing that the Soviet leadership believed the operation to be of preeminent importance, shaped their reporting to fit the preexisting beliefs of their political superiors. In addition to the highly unbalanced reporting methods of KGB rezidentura’s, wherein supporting evidence was passed to Moscow devoid of any context, the East German Stasi provided confirmatory reporting to Moscow despite their own assessment that the threat of a first strike did not exist. The Stasi, which had thoroughly penetrated NATO through the West German military and Foreign Ministry, uncovered no evidence of change in NATO’s strategic approach and concluded that an attack was implausible. In a study of East German involvement in RYAN, Mastny writes, “NATO’s defensive doctrine and strategy was [sic] an open book for them [the Stasi] but for evidence of an imminent enemy attack they would look in vain.” However, this assessment never made it to Moscow.  

Similarly, Gordievsky later wrote that the KGB officers involved in RYAN-related collection efforts at the London rezidentura were privately dismissive of the threat but dutifully passed along the indicators that KGB Center requested.

The paper trail provided by the defector Gordievsky shows clearly that Moscow directed the RYAN reporting, rather than allowing the nature of the intelligence findings to determine the operation’s direction. KGB Center repeatedly sent exhortations for more information and lengthened the list of indicators that rezidentura’s should be monitoring (including blood donations and the movements of prominent bankers, who, according to the Marxist-Leninist worldview, would surely have advance warning of a nuclear strike). Regardless of the reasons for which Andropov may have initiated RYAN, there is considerable documentary evidence that he eventually came to believe the reporting generated by his own program.

Overall, RYAN appeared to constitute a clear case of actions driving beliefs, as opposed to the reverse. According to Robert Jervis, most analysis of international politics rests on the assumption that
the beliefs of actors drive their actions, but the reverse is often true: “… actions not only produce beliefs, but once formed, these new beliefs influence later actions.” Jervis goes on to suggest that individuals often seek explanations for their own behavior and develop beliefs as part of this effort.\textsuperscript{lxv} A focus on the “function of beliefs” and their use as “rationalizations for policies as well as rationales for them,”\textsuperscript{lxvi} to use Jervis’ terminology, sheds considerable light on the Soviet leadership’s “belief” in an imminent threat of war from the United States. Andropov’s perception of US malign intent may have been genuine, but it appears that Operation RYAN itself served to solidify and clarify this perception. The fact that Ogarkov, Andropov, and other Soviet leaders may have had instrumental reasons for “believing” in the American threat does not mean that this “belief” was insincere or that it did not become more entrenched once confirmatory intelligence began to trickle in.

In short, Soviet actions further solidified a belief that had always had only the most tenuous connection to the actual American signaling and indices on display. The phenomenon of “actions driving beliefs” explains how a belief initially driven by bureaucratic incentives could have become “sincere,” as actions undertaken in the service of the ostensible belief (in this case, that the United States might launch a surprise attack on the Soviet Union) confirmed it. Accordingly, it is not contradictory to assert that the Soviet threat perception was genuine, yet appears to have been driven by bureaucratic incentives, rational consistency, and other distorting factors that are endemic in the generation of beliefs and threat assessments. The American disinclination to view this growing Soviet alarm as genuine was similarly driven by bureaucratic incentive structures and human psychological fallibility.

\textit{United States – Dismissal of Soviet Fears}

Washington was, of course, aware of the Soviet leadership’s professed fear of the ostensibly growing military threat from the United States. However, the intelligence community was remarkably adamant that these publicly expressed fears were nothing more than propaganda designed to serve two specific purposes: to mobilize and distract a Soviet population under increasing economic pressure and to rally pacifist sentiment in Washington’s western European allies, particularly West Germany.\textsuperscript{lxvii} This essential perception persisted throughout the early 1980’s, through a series of Soviet signals and
apparent indices of Soviet thinking (in other words, information that Moscow intended to remain secret). The intelligence analysts who arrived at this consensus vigorously defended it in successive estimates that specifically considered and discounted information supporting the conclusion that Moscow did indeed fear an American attack. This conclusion was enormously consequential, as it provided the Reagan administration with no reason to moderate its approach or halt the initiatives that Moscow viewed as threatening. By persisting in its efforts to demonstrate resolve, given the belief that Soviet leaders were not truly alarmed, the Reagan administration unwittingly contributed to the “war scare.”

As detailed above, the Reagan administration did seek to improve deterrence through a series of aggressive military actions, including psychological operations and the deployment of Pershing-II missiles in Europe. However, they clearly did not intend that the Soviet leadership would believe that a nuclear first strike was imminent. Paradoxically, therefore, the key question regarding the actions of the American government during this period is why Washington refused to believe that Moscow believed the signals that Washington was sending. Due to a predetermined belief that both sides understood that the logic of mutually assured destruction still held, Washington could not see how its actions might be perceived as outside the basic logical framework of deterrence. According to Jervis, “Actors do not pay careful attention to the images they have of other states – or the images they project [emphasis added] – in periods when they believe everyone has the same goals and view of the world and so will behave similarly.” The basic presumption that both sides recognized that nuclear conflict was “unwinnable” informed and distorted all of Washington’s efforts to understand Soviet beliefs during this period. However, the American inability to grant credence to public expressions of Soviet fears appears to have been based on several other psychological and bureaucratic factors.

*Intelligence Assessments of Soviet Fears*

Throughout this period, the American government (including the CIA and senior officials in the White House and State Department) believed that public indications of Soviet alarm were propaganda designed to mobilize domestic audiences and split NATO. This assessment held until late 1983, when the first realizations that Soviet fears might be genuine, based primarily on the information provided by
Gordievsky, began to emerge, according to contemporaneous documents and the retrospective writings of key figures (including Gates, William Casey, and George Shultz). Reagan himself came to accept Soviet fears as genuine in late 1983 and consequently shifted his public rhetoric dramatically in 1984. The CIA, however, persisted in dismissing Soviet fears through 1987, and was rebuked by the PFIAB in 1990 for “categoric conclusions” that were unsupported by the available evidence.

Within the American intelligence community, the conclusion that Soviet fears were nothing more than propaganda was both unequivocal and robust. In 1983, a memorandum prepared by the CIA’s Office of Soviet Analysis and titled “Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Conflict with the United States” concluded, “Contrary to the impression created by Soviet propaganda, Moscow does not appear to anticipate a near-term military confrontation with the United States.” In a pair of National Intelligence Estimates produced in May and August of 1984, analysts reached the same conclusion but in even stronger terms: “We believe strongly 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.” These NIE’s asserted that any rhetoric to the contrary was nothing more than “propaganda.”

Finally, in a 1987 National Intelligence Estimate titled “Soviet Force and Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through the Late 1990’s,” the Office of Soviet Analysis defended its prior conclusions with minimal concessions, asserting, “We judge that some leaders may have become more concerned in the early 1980’s that the United States had lowered the threshold somewhat for nuclear escalation, but that the top leaders on the whole did not believe a surprise nuclear attack by the West in peacetime had become a serious prospect.” Remarkably, the 1987 NIE reproduces several phrases from the 1984 documents verbatim, despite the emergence of contradictory indicators in the intervening period and the changing impressions of American political leaders, including Reagan himself. As the quote above demonstrates, the 1987 assessment did allow for the possibility of concern within the Soviet leadership but defended the overall conclusion that Moscow did not view a surprise attack as a genuine possibility.

In fairness, the notion of that Soviet fears might be propaganda designed to mobilize European opinion against the United States was eminently plausible at the time. Splitting Washington from
western European allies was a key goal of Soviet foreign policy throughout the Cold War. Caldwell and Levgold characterized it as a “dream that died hard. Every flare-up within the alliance… rekindled it.”\textsuperscript{lxvii} In the period leading up to the “war scare,” massive public protests in West Germany over the proposed deployment of Pershing-II missiles had “rekindled” the Soviet dream, and Moscow had infiltrated a number of pacifist groups in West Germany and around Europe.\textsuperscript{lxvii} Accordingly, the notion of war scare rhetoric as a public framing device designed to turn European opinion against the United States plausibly fit the international context. Similarly, the declining quality of life in the Soviet Union resulting from economic stagnation did incentivize Soviet leaders to focus the population’s attention on external threats. However, this explanation did not account for repeated efforts by Moscow to privately convey the same fears that were articulated in public. These efforts at back-channel signaling were wholly consistent with the Soviet leadership’s public rhetoric but did not materially affect American perceptions. Declassified American documents from the early 1980’s show the Soviet leadership repeatedly sought to convey their concerns through backchannels or non-official means.

Moscow’s public rhetoric reached a fever pitch in 1982, when Brezhnev (speaking one month before his death) publicly warned that Washington was seeking to “push the world into the flames of nuclear war.”\textsuperscript{lxviii} After Brezhnev’s death, Andropov continued with this alarmist public message but also sought to convey Soviet fears privately. In June 1983, former Ambassador Averell Harriman visited Moscow and met with Andropov, who delivered the message that he had been publicly articulating: Washington was behaving recklessly and the Soviet leadership feared imminent military conflict. While accompanied by the requisite diplomatic niceties, Andropov’s message is noticeably similar to his 1981 speech to the KGB, and refers directly to “the threat of a war incomparable with the horrors we went through previously.”\textsuperscript{lxix} According to Harriman’s memo, Andropov warned that the United States was approaching the “red line” of nuclear war.

Harriman’s memo seems to have made no impression on Reagan’s advisors and on the CIA, but the visit was sufficiently high-profile that American observers may not have considered it to be a private backchannel and viewed Andropov’s admonitions as a repeat of his public message. An identical
message delivered to six visiting Democratic Senators in August 1983 may have been discounted for similar reasons.\textsuperscript{xxx} In October, however, \textit{Pravda} columnist Sergey Vishnensky echoed Andropov’s message to Harriman during an informal meeting with National Security Council staffer (and future ambassador to the USSR) Jack Matlock. In a memo to National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane dated October 11, 1983, Matlock asserted that Vishnensky, with his “sound Party and… KGB credentials,” was “conveying a series of messages that someone in the regime wants us to hear.”\textsuperscript{\textit{\textit{lxxxi}}} The message was unambiguous: Soviet leaders feared that the Reagan administration was preparing for war.

While there may have been eminently logical reasons to doubt these overtures, their consistency with the Soviet leadership’s public messages is noteworthy. Additionally, the rationale offered by US analysts to explain Soviet rhetoric during the period is nonsensical when applied to discreet, backchannel communication efforts. Sending Vishnensky to echo Andropov’s public remarks in an “off the record” meeting with Matlock cannot plausibly be viewed as part of a campaign to influence public opinion in Leningrad or Frankfurt. Additionally, while Vishnensky was clearly acting on orders from the Soviet government, the tenor of the conversation suggests that he could have plausibly have been viewed as an “honest broker.” Vishnensky criticized the Soviet leadership several times during the exchange, and agreed wholeheartedly with Matlock’s contention that Moscow had handled the international furor stemming from the Soviet shoot-down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 very poorly. He also suggested on a personal note that he was uncomfortable with growing paranoia within the Soviet leadership, which he blamed for increasingly restrictive censorship of his work.\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxii}}

While these back channel signals were judged to be less than compelling, Washington also disregarded a number of seemingly clear indices of Moscow’s fears. In a memo to McFarlane dated December 13, 1983, Matlock passed along a cable from the US Embassy in Moscow detailing the impressions of an American academic “with excellent entrée to the Soviet political elite.” According to Matlock’s summary, the unnamed academic noted that “fear of war seemed to affect the elite as well as the man on the street,” and that “a degree of paranoia seemed rampant among high officials.”\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxiii}} This cable came only two months after the Vishnensky conversation and noticeably echoed the themes
articulated by the *Pravda* columnist, but Matlock does not seem to have connected the two. The cable itself actually paints a starker image than Matlock’s accompanying cover memo. According to the cable (which was signed by Ambassador Arthur Hartman, per State Department protocol, but was prepared by an unnamed diplomat in the Embassy’s political section), “Emotionalism and even irrationality are now entering into play. The academic perceives a growing paranoia among Soviet officials and sees them [as] *literally obsessed by fear of war* [emphasis added].”

In addition to these perceptions of individuals living and working within the Soviet Union, the US intelligence community had the opportunity to view several other apparent indices of Soviet thinking, none of which appeared to impact the standing assessment of the Politburo’s beliefs. For example, according to the 1990 report of the PFIAB, an unnamed Western visitor to Moscow obtained a letter that Andropov had secretly sent to all Party organizations, warning that the USSR was in imminent danger and that there was no prospect of repairing relations with the United States. The letter was secretly read at Party meetings, a development of which the CIA was fully aware, according to the PFIAB report. Given the secrecy surrounding this missive, one might reasonably conclude that it did not serve either purpose suggested by US analysts as reasons for Soviet “war scare” propaganda (spreading pacifist sentiment among America’s Western allies and mobilizing the Soviet populace). Here again, an intelligence revelation that appears to offer a genuine index of Soviet thinking did not factor into US intelligence assessments; no mention of the letter appears in the 1984 SNIE or, indeed, in any other available documentation until the PFIAB report of 1990.

The apparent failure to account for the clear index of Moscow’s thinking provided by the Soviet defector Gordievsky, however, is most noteworthy. Gordievsky, a KGB colonel who had spied for the British intelligence service MI6 since 1974, was assigned to London as the *rezident* and consequently was able to offer considerable insight into RYAN to his British handlers and to the CIA. By turning over RYAN-related tasking from the KGB Center in Moscow, Gordievsky provided clear and unambiguous indicators of the Soviet alarm driving Operation RYAN. Upon viewing the documents provided by Gordievsky, British Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe concluded, “The Soviets really did believe their
own propaganda.” The documents that Gordievsky passed along contained numerous references to heightened fears of an American nuclear attack. They also showed that the USSR had undertaken the most massive and costly intelligence operation in the nation’s history in order to discover evidence of such a strike, an apparent index of Soviet thinking (in that it reflects a willingness to assume certain costs and was intended to remain secret). While US intelligence analysts did not have access at the time to some of the other confirmatory material in the PFIAB report, like the Gromyko cable warning Soviet diplomats not to obstruct the KGB’s RYAN-related work, they were aware, through the Gordievsky materials, of the extraordinary reporting requirements imposed on rezidentura’s around the world. Additionally, they were aware that the FBI’s Counterintelligence Division had reported an extraordinary focus by the KGB on American military plans beginning in 1982. This revelation, just like the Gordievsky disclosures, appears to represent an index of Soviet thinking. Finally, a CIA study carried out by Fischer in 1996 indicates that the agency developed a source in the Czechoslovak intelligence service who worked closely with the KGB on RYAN and corroborated Gordievsky’s reports. The source suggested that the Soviet leadership was “obsessed with the historical parallel between 1941 and 1983,” a feeling he described as “almost visceral, not intellectual.” According to Fischer, this source was deemed insufficiently reliable to include in assessments of Soviet thinking, despite the correlation between his reports and Gordievsky’s.

Notwithstanding the dissemination of the Gordievsky materials and the other indices and confirmatory indicators discussed above, US intelligence analysts remained unwilling to concede that the fears of Soviet leaders had perhaps been more genuine than early intelligence analyses had indicated. In the assessment issued in 1987 (after Gordievsky’s exploits were publicly revealed), analysts doubled down on the previous assertion that “top leaders on the whole did not believe a surprise nuclear attack by the West in peacetime had become a serious prospect…” Moreover, the paper trail dealing with the Gordievsky disclosures strongly suggests that US intelligence analysts sought to fit the new information to those preexisting conclusions. In the 1985 NIE, the CIA authors appear to concede that Soviet political leaders may indeed have feared an attack, explaining the Gordievsky revelations as follows:
“The intelligence directives [passed along by Gordievsky] probably represent efforts by the Soviet intelligence services to respond to concerns of Soviet leaders that since at least 1980 worsening relations with the United States increased the danger of war.” This is, of course, exactly what the Soviet intelligence services were doing, but the analysts who produced the NIE dismissed the relevance of this, in keeping with the theory that the KGB was “running the show.”

Western intelligence agencies routinely ignored Gordievsky’s reporting on paranoia within the Politburo because of their longstanding conviction that the KGB controlled the Politburo and that the beliefs of members of the Politburo were consequently irrelevant. This conviction apparently rendered the CIA unable to process the clear insight into Soviet thinking provided by Gordievsky’s disclosures.

Accordingly, American analysts did not engage with the possibility that the Gordievsky papers represented a challenge to their conclusions. The preexisting belief in the KGB’s political primacy constrained the ability of American analysts to interpret the clear index embodied in Soviet intelligence cables. Additionally, the fact that intelligence priorities, which were supposed to be secret, matched Soviet public rhetoric apparently did nothing to diminish the certainty of American analysts that this rhetoric was nothing more than propaganda. Finally, the revelation that Soviet political leaders did, in fact, fear an elevated risk of attack (contrary to the CIA’s beliefs, as articulated in the 1983 estimate) did not affect the conclusion. The 1985 NIE therefore represents a remarkable feat of logic, in which the CIA somehow managed to concede that the 1983 and 1984 estimates were incorrect (by referring to the “concerns of Soviet leaders”) without altering their conclusions; the discrepancy is explained away with reference to the “actual” distribution of political power in the Soviet government.

The point of this catalogue of signals and potential indices is not to suggest that any one of them (or even several together) were sufficiently compelling to alter the strategic assessment of the US government in general and the CIA in particular. It is, rather, noteworthy that the clear pattern provided by Soviet signaling, coupled with these indices, did not even factor into the assessment. The fact that these indicators were either explained away or only considered retrospectively (by the PFIAB) despite
being on display at the time suggests that exogenous factors, including human nature and bureaucratic and political pressures, played an outsize role in shaping the CIA’s assessments of Soviet fears.

**Cognitive Consistency**

According to Stein, the unwillingness to update beliefs based on new, contradictory information is a core feature of human nature and political psychology. Stein writes, “Cognitive psychologists have produced robust evidence that people strongly prefer consistency, that they are made uncomfortable by dissonant information, and that they consequently deny or discount inconsistent information to preserve their beliefs.” The human disinclination to accommodate contradictory evidence clarifies the intelligence community’s reluctance to update its assessment of Soviet fears. The PFIAB’s 1990 report asserts that throughout the early 1980’s, “A strongly stated interpretation was defended by explaining away facts inconsistent with it.” The manner in which the CIA’s analysts sought to explain away or fit new information (including the Gordievsky revelations) into their preexisting assessment, particular in the 1985 NIE, supports this conclusion.

Fritz Ermath’s 2003 piece on the “war scare,” published by the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact, offers particularly useful insight into the role of psychological factors. Ermath, who had spent many years working at the CIA and National Security Council, rejoined the CIA in 1984, at the request of Gates, as the National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union. In this position, Ermath oversaw the drafting of the 1984 estimates that concluded definitively that Soviet leaders did not perceive a “genuine danger.” In 2003, Ermath returned to the “war scare” question, in response to the intensifying debate occasioned by the PFIAB’s scathing report, the declassification of many key documents, and the growing body of scholarship on the “war scare” period. In the piece, titled “Observations on the ‘War Scare’ from an Intelligence Perch,” Ermath suggested that nothing had emerged to make him rethink those assessments.

To the contrary, Ermath asserts, “In later years, I got personal confirmation that our conclusions were on the mark.” He goes on to (accurately) cite several indicators, including the revelation that Soviet Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev had never heard of the Able Archer exercise and the public
assertions of Gordievsky (with whom Ermath met following his defection) that Soviet and Warsaw Pact intelligence professionals were privately dismissive of the “ballyhooed” RYAN operation. Ermath had clearly followed developments related to the “war scare” period, but apparently with an eye toward validating his own performance. While this is perfectly understandable as a feature of human nature, it does shed light on the persistence of the CIA’s refusal to view the alarm expressed by Soviet leaders as genuine. For example, Ermath’s citation of the private doubts of KGB and Stasi professionals regarding the usefulness of RYAN is wholly correct (as Gordievsky’s memoirs show) but of questionable relevance. The fact that the program continued despite the skepticism of intelligence professionals (a skepticism they never conveyed to their superiors) is, if anything, indicative of the importance that the Soviet political leadership attached to RYAN and their fear of an attack.

Additionally, Ermath’s engagement with evidence that emerged after the fact is highly selective. For example, he triumphantly cites Akhromeyev’s public contention that he had never heard of Able Archer (which does not exactly prove that the Soviet leadership did not generally fear an American first strike during the early 1980’s), but makes no mention of memoirs by Dobrynin and former East German foreign intelligence chief Markus Wolf, both of which clearly assert that Andropov and the Soviet leadership genuinely feared a nuclear strike. Writing in 1995, Dobrynin asserted that his conversations in Moscow confirmed Gordievsky’s account (which had received significant public attention following his defection in 1985), and that Andropov in particular believed that the threat of war was greater than at any time since 1945. In his 1997 memoir, Wolf (a legendary spy who was rumored to be the inspiration for John le Carré’s “Karla” character) paints a disturbing picture of Andropov’s fear of war, a fear that subsequently infected the Politburo and the Soviet intelligence apparatus. In the German-language edition of his memoir (which differs from the English-language version), Wolf writes that Andropov suggested that US statements indicated a belief that a first strike against the Soviet Union could be justified. Similarly, Ermath selectively engages with the Gordievsky revelations: he trumpets Gordievsky’s description of the private doubts of Warsaw Pact intelligence professionals but makes no mention of Gordievsky’s description of the fears of Soviet leaders. In his own memoir,
Gordievsky recounts Ermarth’s confident assertion at their meeting that RYAN was “no more than a
deception exercise.” Explaining the “true” nature of an operation to an intelligence operative who had
carried it out is indicative of either supreme intellectual confidence or a somewhat less than open mind.

Beyond these memoirs, the body of scholarship that emerged in the 1990’s with the
declassification (or theft) of many Soviet documents clearly indicates a legitimate fear of war within the
USSR’s leadership. Andrei Kokoshin, for example, drew on conversations with Soviet officials and a
massive trove of internal documentation to conclude that the threat of an American attack was the
“number one problem” discussed by the leadership in the early 1980’s. Again, none of these
revelations or contributions represent proof positive that the CIA’s conclusions were wrong, but the
unwillingness of Ermath, writing with the benefit of significant new insights into Soviet thinking, to
reassess the SNIE’s conclusion in any way appears to demonstrate a disinclination to consider
contradictory evidence. It is implausible that someone who had so closely followed subsequent
developments that confirmed his point of view was simply unaware of those that did not. Most
remarkably, Ermath does not engage with the fact that the CIA itself conceded a heightened level of
“concern” among Soviet leaders during the “war scare” period in the 1987 assessment. By returning to
the subject years later, Ermath has assisted efforts to understand the CIA’s assessment of Soviet
thinking: if he is considered a representative indicator of the psychological and cognitive patterns of the
analysts involved, the rigidity of CIA assessments in the face of contradictory information is clarified.

Again, while analysts may have had unimpeachably sound reasons to reject or discount any or all
of the signals and indices detailed above, the fact that these indicators do not feature at all in internal
discussions and analyses and do not appear to have been considered as potentially challenging the
“propaganda” theory is indicative of a tendency to discount contradictory information. The Gordievsky
reporting features prominently in the 1990 “post-mortem” carried out by the PFIAB. The PFIAB report
also points to several apparent indices of Soviet thinking that were clearly on display in 1983, 1984, and
1987. Intelligence analysts were willing, at the time, to discount information that was subsequently
believed to be of great consequence (by fellow intelligence analysts); this is suggestive of the power of
entrenched thinking. Having developed a thesis regarding the nature of Soviet fears, analysts stuck to it stubbornly. But how did it develop in the first place?

**Bureaucratic and Political Factors**

The CIA’s thesis that Soviet fears were nothing more than manipulative propaganda is perhaps best understood with reference to Stein’s “organizational and bureaucratic politics,” which may have influenced the agency’s assessments (just as internal Politburo maneuvering may have led Andropov to discover his “belief” in the threat of a nuclear attack by the United States). During the period leading up to the assessments discussed above, the CIA had been under sustained political and bureaucratic pressure. Lawrence Freedman has detailed the weakened bureaucratic position and influence of the CIA with regard to Soviet issues in the late 1970’s, a shift he attributes to the agency’s failures in Vietnam and Cuba and “dovish” approach to the Soviet Union. Not only had the agency’s reputation suffered from well-publicized failure, the CIA was under constant political attack in the late 1970’s, especially during the “Team B” exercise. Following the completion of the CIA’s 1976 National Intelligence Estimate on Soviet strategic nuclear forces, the Ford administration commissioned a second estimate by outside experts and hawkish agitators. The “Team B” report, which was much more alarmist than the CIA’s NIE, was clearly preferred by senior administration officials, a development that was naturally dispiriting to the CIA. As Freedman notes, “The Director of Central Intelligence barely defended his own analysts.” By 1980, the CIA’s National Intelligence Estimates, which had once played a vital role in defining American policy toward the Soviet Union, had been reduced to negligible importance.

The officials who populated the upper echelons of Reagan’s NSC, State Department, and Defense Department were, by and large, the same people who had been loudly excoriating the CIA’s allegedly insufficient appreciation of the Soviet threat throughout the 1970’s. For example, the appointment of Richard Pipes, the chairman of “Team B,” to the National Security Council, signaled the incoming administration’s attitude toward both the Soviet Union and the CIA. In all, 33 senior members of the Reagan administration (including CIA director Casey) had previously been members of the Committee on the Present Danger, a lobbying group formed to push the American government to adopt
a more confrontational approach toward the Soviet Union. Consequently, the political pressure on the CIA to adopt a more hawkish perspective intensified after Reagan’s inauguration. According to John Diamond, “Pressure from the right [i.e. from a hawkish perspective] was a constant for the agency, particularly once the key players brought together by the Committee on the Present Danger and Team B came into senior positions in the Reagan administration. With few exceptions, among them Secretary of State Shultz’s clashes with Casey and Gates, there was little pressure on the CIA from the left [i.e. from a more dovish perspective]… until the end of the Cold War.”

In light of these political pressures, it seems likely that CIA analysts may have been wary of allowing themselves to be “out-hawked” again and were consequently subject to the influence of the views of senior administration officials. These views were not secret, having been publicly aired during the 1970’s by organs like the CPD. The Reagan administration’s internal deliberations regarding the Soviet Union between 1981 and 1983, recently released in the Foreign Relations of the United States series published by the State Department, reflect an attitude toward the Soviet Union that may explain the CIA’s inability to properly assess signals and indices of Moscow’s thinking during this period.

The Reagan administration took office with a definitive perspective on the Soviet Union. Remarkably, only one document in the FRUS series within the first nine months of the administration refers to the possibility of improving relations with the USSR: a memo from Carnes Lord to Allen, passed along with a qualifying note by Pipes (who seemed to disagree with most of Lord’s conclusions). All other documentation from this period refers to efforts to demonstrate authority and resolve (including an odd fixation on the ostensibly different levels of access accorded to American diplomats in Moscow and their Soviet counterparts in Washington, leading to a number of State Department memos advising Haig to receive Ambassador Dobrynin only through the Department’s C Street entrance, not his personal elevator). In short, the lens through which American analysts and officials viewed Soviet signals was clearly established from the outset of the administration.

The documents contained in the FRUS volume clearly show the American conviction that Moscow’s expressed fears were nothing more than propaganda designed to complicate relations between
the United States and its European allies. American policymakers were notably preoccupied with so-called “Soviet wedge-driving techniques,” a fixation that may have altered perceptions of Soviet signaling throughout the early 1980’s. For example, a memo from Secretary of State Alexander Haig to President Reagan discussing Brezhnev’s introductory letter to Reagan refers repeatedly to the likelihood (unsubstantiated at the time the memo was written) that NATO allies had received copies and dismisses the letter as “time-honored wedge driving tactics.”\textsuperscript{cxiii} Notably, Haig was analyzing the first official communication between Brezhnev and the new administration, suggesting that this perception of “time-honored” tactics may have been based more on preexisting beliefs than on the administration’s actual experience with the Soviet Union (although many senior officials had served in the Ford administration). The predisposition to view Soviet initiatives in this light is reflected in the assessment of Soviet “war scare” rhetoric, believed to be an effort to peel off European allies from the Atlantic alliance.

In light of the political and bureaucratic pressures on the CIA at the time, it is perhaps unsurprising that CIA analysis of Soviet fears faithfully reflected the skeptical attitude of senior Reagan political appointees. The sentiments expressed by these figures in the FRUS documents (including the preoccupation with “wedge-driving”) are echoed in the estimates produced in 1983, 1984 and 1985, and in retrospective commentary provided by the CIA in 1987. For example, the CIA’s 1983 assessment on “Soviet Thinking” asserts, “By playing up the ‘war danger,’ Moscow hopes to encourage resistance to INF deployment in Western Europe [and] deepen cleavages within the Atlantic alliance.”\textsuperscript{cxiv} This clearly echoes the thinking of Reagan’s senior advisors, whose memo traffic and meeting minutes from 1981, 1982 and 1983 reflect a preoccupation with Soviet efforts to divide the Western alliance, particularly in relation to the Pershing-II deployment.\textsuperscript{cxv}

Given the remarkable volume of apparently contradictory signals and indices on clear display, this overlap between the preexisting views of Reagan’s political appointees and the analysis of the CIA seems less than coincidental. The CIA’s categorical conclusion in the 1984 NIE’s and refusal to substantively revisit these conclusions in 1985 and 1987 reflect an even more definitive viewpoint than that of senior Reagan administration officials. For example, the CIA’s refusal to reassess the 1984
The conclusion in the 1987 document is particularly notable given that CIA director Casey, a political appointee who had been a member of the CPD, sent a memo to Reagan one month after the 1984 NIE warning of a “dimension of genuineness to the Soviet expressions of concern.” The CIA’s rigid posture could have reflected a desire not to be outflanked by hawks in the administration. Given this political context, it is unclear what signals or indices, if any, might have “convinced” American analysts that the Soviet leadership was genuinely fearful. Freedman’s analysis of the political pressures under which the CIA was operating, coupled with the Reagan administration’s clearly defined and preexisting beliefs regarding the USSR, offer perhaps the most compelling explanation for the CIA’s failure to properly interpret Soviet signals and indices during the “war scare” period.

**Conclusion**

In short, Moscow was convinced of the United States’ malign intent and Washington was likewise convinced that Moscow did not perceive any such intent for reasons that were both unrelated to the signals and indices transmitted by each side and impervious to contradictory evidence. An analysis that seeks to understand the beliefs of leaders in Washington and Moscow during this dangerous period exclusively with reference to the signals and indices provided by the other side is, therefore, insufficient. An examination of bureaucratic and political incentive structures on both sides, however, offers insight into the formation of these beliefs. The remarkable endurance of these views is, in turn, best understood with reference to political psychology, including the phenomenon of actions driving beliefs and the human inclination toward cognitive consistency. All in all, a consideration of psychological and bureaucratic factors offers the most useful insight into the “war scare” of the early 1980’s.

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3 Cimbala, 4

4 Cimbala, 4

Arnav Machanda, “When Truth is Stranger than Fiction: the Able Archer Incident.” Cold War History 9.1 (2009): 113

Cimbala, 4

Podvig, 120


Adamsky, 12


Adamsky, 13

Adamsky, 7


Adamsky, 12

The “nuclear winter” theory was in public circulation, having been articulated in several influential studies throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s (e.g. “The Effects of Nuclear War on the Weather and Climate,” E.S. Batten – RAND Corporation)

Machanda, 112

There are several alternative transliterations; many accounts and contemporaneous documents add the word “surprise” (vnezapnoe), making the acronym “VYRAN”

Cimbala, 2

President’s Foreign Intelligence Board, “The Soviet War Scare” (February 1990): 52


President’s Foreign Intelligence Board, “The Soviet War Scare” (February 1990): 52

See, for example: Machanda; Cimbala; Adamsky; Hoffman; Barrass; and, to an extent, Fischer, A Cold War Conundrum


Machanda, 117


Brook-Shepherd, 268


Machanda, 117

Scott, 762
Ixx Reagan, 588; Gates, 270; PFIAB, 16
Ixxiii PFIAB, vii
Ixxiv “Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Conflict with the United States”
President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, vii (this NIE is not declassified, but sections of it are reproduced in the PFIAB report)
Ixxv President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 25
Cimbala, 4
Ixxvi Caldwell and Levgold, 12-13
Ixxvii Averell Harriman, “Memorandum of Conversation between General Secretary Andropov and Averell Harriman,” June 2, 1983 (Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress)
Ixxviii President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 61
Ixxxii President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 68
Ixxxiv Andrew and Gordievsky, 67
Ixxxv President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 36
Ixxvii ibid, 25
Ixxviii ibid, 23
Ixxx Machanda, 124
Ixxxv Stein, 372
Ixxxvi PFIAB, viii
xc Benjamin Fischer, 187
xcv Fritz Ermath, 4
xcvii Fischer,
xcvii Freedman, 122
xcviii ibid
cvii Freedman, 134-6


cxi e.g. Wilson, *Foreign Relations of the United States*: Document 2 – “Action Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Europe (Vest) to Secretary of State Haig (January 22, 1981)”

cxii e.g. Wilson, *Foreign Relations of the United States*: Document 24 - “Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Allen) to President Reagan (March 2, 1981)”

cxiii Wilson, *Foreign Relations of the United States*: Document 22 - “Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan (March 7, 1981)”

cxiv “Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Conflict with the United States”

cxv Wilson, *Foreign Relations of the United States*: e.g. Documents 76, 104, 176

cxvi PFIAB, 16
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