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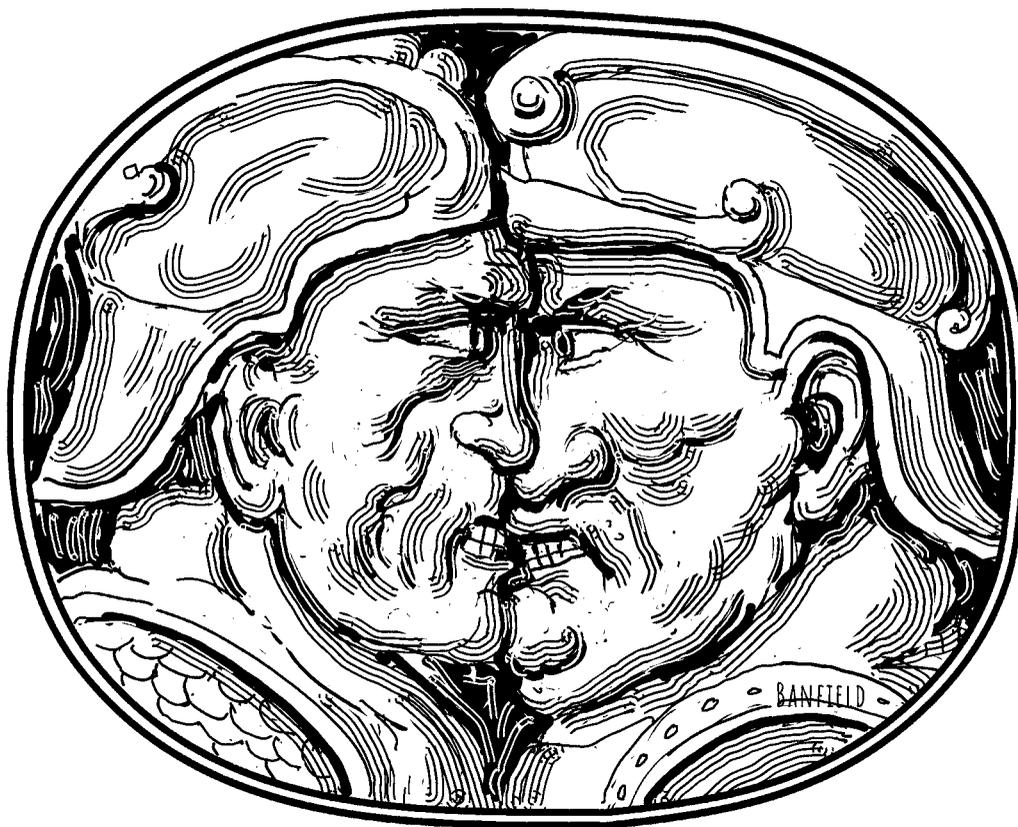
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Essay by Michael Anton

NUCLEAR AUTUMN

How the world almost ended in 1983.



THE CLOSEST THE WORLD EVER CAME to nuclear war was almost certainly the Cuban Missile Crisis. But the closest we've come since—until now—was fall 1983. October 1962 is well-documented and well-remembered. Not so the close calls of September-November '83. Familiarity with those events is useful for filling in the historical record and may also yield lessons for how to navigate the present crisis with Russia over Ukraine.

It's commonly thought that the Cold War was an era of remarkable bipartisan consensus in American foreign policy. This is not entirely wrong, especially when compared to other, far more divisive periods. Still, we tend to forget, or downplay, controversies such as "containment" versus "rollback," the cries of "who lost China," and the fallout from Vietnam.

The latter was the biggest fracture in the alleged Cold War consensus. The same Democratic Party that nominated Vietnam hawk Hubert Humphrey in 1968—granted, after an acrimonious primary season and a teargas-infused convention in Chicago—four years

later chose the stridently anti-war George McGovern...and proceeded to lose 49 states and millions of its hitherto most loyal voters, from anti-Communist liberals at the upper end of the socioeconomic ladder to hard-headed hardhats at the lower.

The Republicans, despite appearances, weren't much more united. The divide between the Goldwater insurgents and the Eastern establishment had almost shattered the party in 1964. Richard Nixon sorta-kindly reunified it in 1968, with big assists from the Chicago debacle, rolling race riots, anti-draft protests, and George Wallace's third-party run that split the formerly "solid South."

Which type of Republican was Nixon, anyway? Who was America getting in 1968? Was it the "Tricky Dick" of rough-and-tumble late '40s Southern California politics, the insurgent who defeated Helen "Pink Lady" Gahagan Douglas and sent Alger Hiss to jail, the ardent cold warrior who embarrassed Nikita Khrushchev in 1959's "Kitchen Debate"? Or was it the two-term vice president to self-described "liberal Republican" Dwight Eisenhower, the big-time corporate lawyer? Or the

big-time corporate lawyer whose last address before 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue was 810 Fifth Avenue?

It's safe to say that one thing most Republican voters thought they were getting in Nixon was a strident anti-Communist. Yet they were also getting a man who, in October 1967, published in the über-establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* "Asia After Viet Nam," which all but promised to pull America out of that war and telegraphed the old Redbaiter's willingness to break bread with the Red Chinese. And in right-hand man Henry Kissinger, voters were getting (though they didn't yet know it) a Harvard professor and three-time top aide to Ur-liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller.

In the Cold War's first half, no Republican tried outflanking the Democrats from the left on foreign policy. Nixon pulled it off against Humphrey over Vietnam. The question was: how far would he take it? The answer turned out to be: farther. Together, Nixon and Kissinger devised and implemented the strategy of "détente," which, though the rift took a while to show itself, divided the Republican Party almost as badly as the pre-war struggle



between Robert Taft “isolationists” and Arthur Vandenberg internationalists. With the victory of the latter, the matter seemed to rest, especially as internationalism came to be seen as a prerequisite for anti-Communism.

President Nixon’s anti-Communism turned out to be a lot more flexible than Congressman, Senator, or Vice President Nixon’s. Détente—roughly defined as a “relaxation of tensions” with the USSR—seemed to many inconsistent with the young Nixon’s hard line. Kissinger later complained that, by Nixon’s second term, the president was being denounced from within his own party as “soft on Communism,” a charge that had been “a staple of his own early campaign rhetoric” against opponents.

A 49-state reelection victory has a way of papering over a party’s internal divisions. Primary challenges against incumbents break them wide open again. Ronald Reagan’s 1976 run at Gerald Ford was motivated by many things, hostility to détente among them. In this, Reagan was far from alone. To his party’s conservative wing, which he led, détente was acquiescence. What was needed was a return to the more confrontational policies of the early Cold War.

Things came to a head at the ’76 Republican convention in Kansas City, where Reagan operatives inserted into the platform thinly veiled language attacking Kissinger and détente. Outraged, Kissinger threatened to resign if the Ford team didn’t at least try to kill that plank. An exasperated Ford aide, gearing up for a floor fight and knowing party activists’ deep suspicion of the secretary of state, retorted, “For chrissakes, Henry, if you’re going to quit, do it now! We need the votes.”

Reagan won the presidency four years later, of course, aided by a Carter Administration whose international bungling made détente seem, in retrospect, unsentimental and brilliant. But the newly-installed Reaganites viewed détente as a mistake yet to be corrected, from which Carterism was less a departure than a baleful continuation. That conviction informed the tough line that ran through Reagan’s first term, from the arms buildup and increased aid to anti-Soviet Afghan rebels to the “ash heap of history” and “evil empire” speeches, the Strategic Defense Initiative (or SDI, derisively called “Star Wars” by its enemies), and much else.

PsyOps

AMONG THE EARLIEST OF THE MUCH else were so-called “psychological operations” or “PsyOps.” These can take many forms, from false flag events like the

Reichstag fire or the January 6 pipe bomb, to demoralization propaganda such as Tokyo Rose and Lord Haw-Haw during World War II. In this case, the “ops”—begun in February 1981, mere days into Reagan’s presidency—included sneaking American submarines into Soviet waters where they would suddenly surface near a critical military installation, hang around long enough to be seen, and then submerge and bug out.

Somewhat more unnerving to the Kremlin was the practice of flying highly visible B-52s on what looked like bombing runs. As Undersecretary of State William Schneider explained, “A squadron would fly straight at Soviet airspace, and their radars would light up and units would go on alert. Then at the last minute the squadron would peel off and return home.” To those who wonder why there is a “nuclear triad”—land-based ICBMs, sea-launched SLBMs, and airplane-dropped gravity bombs—this is one reason: you can’t recall a missile, but you can recall a bomber.

To these, one may add “FleetEx ’83,” the largest American-led (Canada and Australia also participated) naval exercises in the North Pacific since World War II, in which three carrier battle groups repeatedly probed Soviet defenses, launching waves of aircraft to overfly Soviet bases. “It really got to them,” Schneider later recalled. “They didn’t know what it all meant.”

What the Soviets suspected scared the hell out of them. One response was Operation RYaN (sometimes rendered as VRYAN, a Russian acronym for nuclear attack), an intelligence gathering effort that chugged into high gear as it became apparent that deployment of Pershing II medium-range ballistic missiles in West Germany might go forward. These weapons had much shorter flight times to Russian targets than ICBMs siloed in North America. NATO viewed them as necessary counterweights to Soviet SS-20s, forward-deployed in Poland with similarly short flight times to European capitals. The Soviets viewed (or said they viewed) the Pershing IIs not as a logical response but as first-strike weapons that could decapitate Soviet command and control without risk of retaliation, and thus inherently destabilizing. Operation RYaN was meant (among other things) to keep a close watch on NATO’s supposedly itchy trigger finger and allow the Kremlin, should it so decide, to preempt an anticipated first strike with a first strike of its own.

A CIA historian revealed, in a subsequently declassified internal assessment, that a Czech intelligence officer reported that his

Soviet “counterparts were obsessed with the historical parallel between 1941 and 1983. He believed this feeling was almost visceral, not intellectual, and deeply affected Soviet thinking.” “1941” refers of course to Hitler’s surprise invasion of the USSR with a force of 3.8 million. As nuclear weapons expert Bruce Blair later put it, the superpower relationship

had deteriorated to the point where the Soviet Union as a system—not just the Kremlin, not just Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, not just the KGB, but as a system—was geared to expect an attack and to retaliate very quickly to it. It was on hair-trigger alert. It was very nervous and prone to mistakes and accidents.

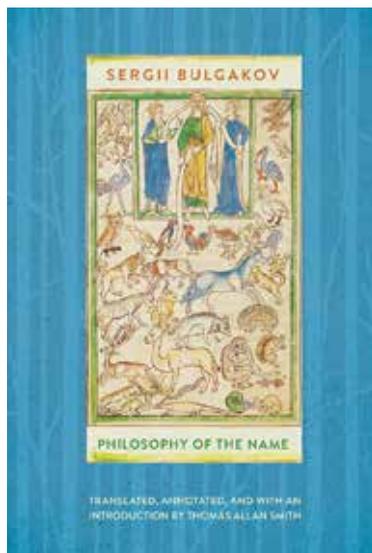
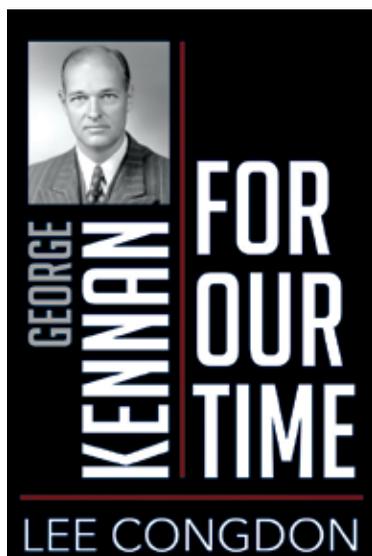
The stage was set for something momentous. And something momentous almost happened.

Shoot First

ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1983, WITH EAST-West tensions as high as they had been in more than 20 years, a South Korean civilian airliner, en route from Anchorage to Seoul, drifted into Soviet airspace after the crew inputted incorrect coordinates into their autopilot system. As bad luck would have it, a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance plane had, hours before, also been aloft in the area surveilling Soviet missile tests at the Kura Range on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Assuming that the big Korean airliner must be another American spy plane, the Soviet Air Defense Forces scrambled three Su-15s and one MiG-23. Visual contact was made, but in the darkness KAL 007’s identity was at first inconclusive. The Su-15 pilot who actually shot the airliner down later claimed he could tell the plane was a Boeing, but that it didn’t matter, since he had clear orders to fire, and it’s easy enough to convert a civilian plane to military use. The death toll was 246 passengers—including a United States congressman and 61 other Americans—plus 23 crew. There were no survivors.

The Soviets at first said nothing. It probably didn’t help that General Secretary Andropov, suffering kidney failure, was holed up in a Moscow hospital (from which he would never emerge; he died the following February). When they finally spoke out, their first explanation was that Soviet fighters had “intercepted” (military aviation-speak for “buzzed without attacking”) an unidentified, blacked-out plane, which had continued on its way, unmolested, they knew not where. The second, which lasted mere minutes, was

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that the airliner had been mistaken for an enemy military aircraft. Their final claim, to which the Soviets stuck for a decade, was that, yes, they knew it was a commercial airliner, but they also knew it had been engaged in spying.

Washington saw an opportunity and, as current parlance has it, pounced. Here was a great chance to (further) delegitimize the USSR. The president condemned Soviet “barbarism” and “inhuman brutality.” U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick shared with the Security Council hastily declassified audio and video showing that the Soviet air force had, indeed, shot down the 747. (It worked out better for her than the same maneuver, 19 years later, did for Colin Powell, whose “proof” of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction failed to pan out.) Secretary of State George Shultz threatened to cancel an upcoming meeting with Soviet foreign minister Andrey Gromyko—but didn’t, instead using the occasion to publicly excoriate Gromyko and his government.

The U.S. also imposed a range of sanctions, some of which violated international treaties. Reagan ordered the FAA to ban Aeroflot (Russia’s commercial airline) from the United States. For a brief period, even Soviet government planes on official business were denied access to New York and New Jersey airports. But under the U.N. Charter, a host country (in this case, us) is required to allow access to U.N. facilities to all member states—including those it may be angry at in a given moment, and even those with which it does not have diplomatic relations. The ban on government planes was quickly reversed, but the bar on commercial flights lasted almost three years.

The Reagan Administration’s P.R. counteroffensive was wildly successful. The Soviets paid a heavy price in legitimacy and prestige. No one believed their preposterous, contradictory non-explanations. The Pershing II deployment in West Germany, which was contingent on a Bundestag vote that Reagan and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl hadn’t been certain they would win, was approved the following November as public opinion shifted, at least temporarily, from nuclear pacifism to anti-Soviet alarmism.

The corollary, though, was that tensions which had already been high cranked into overdrive. Soviet paranoia, never exactly room temperature, intensified. Whatever might have been Soviet leaders’ private pangs of conscience about killing 269 innocents because of, at best, a mistake and, at worst, a reckless policy of shoot-first, ask-questions-later, the lesson they took from the incident’s aftermath

was that the West would use every opportunity as an excuse to harm their country.

What happened next seemed designed to ensure that a spark hit the kindling. But as Otto von Bismarck is alleged to have said, God looks after fools, drunks, and the United States of America.

Angel in the Whirlwind?

BARELY THREE WEEKS AFTER THE KAL 007 shootdown, during the late night of September 26-27, Stanislav Petrov, a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet Air Defense Forces, was on duty in the Serpukhov-15 satellite and radar monitoring site outside Moscow—more or less the Soviet equivalent of NORAD in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, from which the U.S. and Canadian militaries keep watch over North American airspace (and, once a year, track the progress of Santa’s sleigh). After midnight, Serpukhov-15 computers, interpreting data from “Oko” (Russian for “eye”), a network of satellites that detects missile launches and tracks their progress, showed a single ICBM inbound from the United States. Then two. Then three, four, and five.

Petrov, who had been trained in nuclear strategy and tactics, reasoned that any American first strike would consist not of five but of hundreds or even thousands of missiles. Rather than alert his superiors, as he was required to do, Petrov waited until the alleged missiles were close enough to be spotted by Soviet ground radar (at which point, incidentally, they would be minutes from their targets, one of which might have been Serpukhov-15). When the radar showed nothing, he concluded the missiles didn’t exist.

What caused the false alarms? Many hypotheses have been posited. My favorite? Flocks of Canadian geese. In all likelihood, however, the computers misinterpreted sunlight reflecting off very high-flying clouds.

What would have happened had Petrov, per his orders, alerted his superiors? According to Bruce Blair, “[t]he top leadership, given only a couple of minutes to decide, told that an attack had been launched, would make a decision to retaliate.” There’s no way to know for sure. But he didn’t, so they couldn’t.

After the incident, Soviet leaders never quite figured out what to do with Petrov. At first they praised him, then they reprimanded him, then they ignored him. When his actions were finally revealed to the world in 1998, he became an international hero. But not before losing his career and suffering a nervous breakdown. Still, he died in 2017 a much-honored man. He was even the subject

of a 2014 film entitled *The Man Who Saved the World*.

Able Archer

BUT BACK IN 1983, THE “SHATTERER OF worlds” wasn’t quite finished prodding us. Every fall since the late 1960s, NATO ran exercises to test readiness and “interoperability”—that is, the ability of militaries from more than a dozen different countries to work together seamlessly toward a common objective. In a war against the Red Army, the whole “area of operation” problem that had bedeviled the Allies in World War II—Americans here, Brits there, Canadians over there—could not be allowed to recur, or so it was thought. The elements of any potential operation needed to be as consistent and uniform as possible, from physical things like ammunition and fuel (British guns had to be able to shoot American bullets, just as American jeeps needed to run on British gas, and so on, across the alliance) all the way up to command, control, and communication. (This remains the strongest argument for keeping NATO together past its 1989 expiration date. Interoperability, built over decades, is not easily reestablished once lost; and, all present appearances notwithstanding, you never know when you might need it again.)

In 1983, there were 16 NATO member states, so this challenge was even more daunting than it had been for the Allies. Hence the annual exercise, which came to be known as “Able Archer,” grew in size and complexity from year to year.

That same year also saw many new, “non-routine” elements introduced. According to a National Security Archive report, based entirely on declassified U.S. government documents, these included:

a 170-flight, radio-silent air lift of 19,000 US soldiers to Europe, the shifting of commands from “Permanent War Headquarters to the Alternate War Headquarters” [i.e., moving key personnel away from their usual haunts in anticipation of retaliatory strikes], the practice of “new nuclear weapons release procedures,” including consultations with cells in Washington and London, and the “sensitive, political issue” of numerous “slips of the tongue” in which B-52 sorties were referred to as nuclear “strikes.”

The most consequential new element was the involvement of a wide range of civilians,

including—unprecedentedly—heads of government, among them Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, and Ronald Reagan. Able Archer 83 was thus no longer strictly a military exercise, but a political-military one. This gave it an extra element of realism that especially unnerved the Soviet brass. (National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, fearing Moscow’s interpretation of the president’s participation, nixed that at the last minute, but Western European leaders still took part.)

One of the things spies do is keep tabs on the comings and goings of various government officials in hostile countries. The idea is that, even when their conversations can’t be eavesdropped (and Soviet capabilities were always miles behind ours on this score), you can at least have a good idea of where those people physically are. Scattered at various golf courses or holed up in massage parlors? Or all schlepping from their far-flung offices toward the same defense ministry secure conference room? The latter is of course

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standard operating procedure for an exercise, but it’s also standard procedure for the real thing. How is even the most observant spy supposed to tell the difference? More to the point, how can the nervous recipients of his reports tell?

Sort of like that spy plane buzzing Kamchatka at the most inconvenient moment for the poor innocents aboard KAL 007, less than two weeks before Able Archer 83 began, American forces invaded Grenada, a small Caribbean island whose Communist government had just been overthrown by one more hardline, and in bed with Fidel Castro’s Cuba. The Reagan Administration gave no forewarning to Downing Street or anyone else in the British government, which turned out to be a problem, since Grenada’s sovereign was Queen Elizabeth II. A lot of encrypted communication zapped back and forth between Washington and London, the Brits expressing their displeasure and the Americans trying to smooth things over.

Soviet intelligence could see the messages flying but couldn’t decode them. The more paranoid among the Moscow high command, which was most of them, feared that all that chatter was planning for a first strike.

When Able Archer 83 officially kicked off on November 7, suspicion hardened into certainty. The last straw was visible evidence that NATO was moving through the so-called “alert phases,” from “defense readiness condition” (DEFCON) 5—everything is normal—to DEFCON 1: nuclear war. The Soviets could see, for instance, dummy (but not therefore harmless) warheads being loaded onto NATO bombers. It was just practice, of course, but the Soviets didn’t know that. They began to ready their forces. ICBMs are by their nature easy to put on alert and difficult for an adversary to know when they are, but planes are a different story. They have to be wheeled out, fueled, and loaded with ordinance. This is detectable—and it was detected on Soviet squadrons deployed as far forward as East Germany.

If there is an American Stanislav Petrov, it is Lieutenant General Leonard Perroots, then the U.S. Air Force’s top intelligence officer in Europe. Presented with details of Soviet preparations, Perroots showed the information to his boss, General Billy Minter, with the recommendation that NATO not respond in kind. Maybe the Russians don’t know it’s an exercise, he reasoned. If they see us doing nothing, maybe they’ll calm down. Minter took Perroots’s advice and ordered no counter-alert. Less than 48 hours later, the whole ordeal was over: the “last paroxysm of the Cold War,” as a 1990 report described it.

Only in 2015, when that report was declassified, did the public learn of Perroots’s pivotal role. He “acted correctly out of instinct, not informed guidance,” the report said, before concluding that Perroots’s decision was “fortuitous, if ill-informed.” May all such snap judgments have such a happy ending.

We know what happened next. Andropov died in February 1984 and was replaced by the equally suspicious and belligerent—but also equally old and infirm—Konstantin Chernenko, who then died a year later in March 1985, to be replaced by the much more amenable Mikhail Gorbachev, of whom Thatcher famously said “we can do business together.”

Meanwhile, “evil empire” 1983 gave way to “morning in America” 1984. Everyone chilled out. The Eastern Bloc boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics, but the games were a smashing success anyway, a global party the dour Commies missed out on because of their own peevishness. A year later, Ronnie met Gorby



in Geneva, both of them all smiles. Two years after that (the impasse of 1986's Reykjavik Summit notwithstanding), they agreed to pull every Pershing II and SS-20 out of Europe. And two years after *that*, the Cold War was over.

Getting Tough

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ALL THIS? The contemporaneous, near-worldwide response to Reagan's first-term belligerence was widespread alarmism that this senile cowboy was going to unleash Armageddon. The fifth-highest-grossing movie of 1983 was *War Games*, an anti-nuke yarn that compares superpower conflict to tic-tac-toe: inherently unwinnable and thus played only by fools. That same year, the German synthpop song "99 Luftballons," about an accidental nuclear war, topped the charts all over the Anglosphere, the untranslated version reaching number two in the U.S. (behind Van Halen's megahit "Jump").

On November 20—barely a week after Abel Archer ended—ABC aired *The Day After*, about a nuclear strike on (of all places) Kansas City. Half the country tuned in, making it the highest-rated TV movie ever and second-most-watched broadcast of any kind up to that time. Reagan himself later admitted that the film reinforced his own innate nuclear pacifism (about which more below) and led directly to the 1987 treaty that pulled those medium-range missiles out of Europe.

Reagan's first-term policies had a cadre of conservative defenders, but for a while, theirs seemed a lonely crusade. The president won reelection more on the strength of a rebounding economy than his confrontational approach to the Soviets. Once he did, many on the Right then attacked their champion for his (in their view) sudden and inexplicable about-face. Why is "Ronald Ray-gun" playing nice with these godless Communists?

When it all turned up aces more quickly than anyone anticipated, a new argument emerged: Reagan had planned it all along. Bad cop in the first term, good cop in the second. 4D chess! (to use an expression that would emerge decades later). Conservative conventional wisdom soon hardened around this interpretation, where it has remained ever since: Reagan's initial toughness was a necessary corrective to Carter's fecklessness and Nixon's détente, put the Soviets on their back foot, and forced them back to the table, resetting the stage for a Western victory. Nineteen eighty-three came to be seen as a kind of mirror-image of 1938, teaching the

same lesson: appeasement begets war, toughness brings peace—or better yet, victory.

There is no doubt something to this, but even on its own terms, this rendering skips over important elements. The first is that the stakes matter. And the stakes in the Cold War were the very highest: the survival of the free world and maybe even the existence of the whole world. By 1980, it was plausible to fear that freedom and even humanity were losing. It was therefore not unreasonable to believe that calculated risks were warranted.

But you never know where toughness might lead, what it might provoke. When the consequences of toughness could be total destruction, it is rational—moral, even—to be tough only when the stakes are equally enormous. Toughness not in the service of a core interest—or the core of all core interests—is not merely foolish but reckless.

One reason one never knows where toughness might lead is that you can never be sure you really understand your adversary—or that he understands you. In 1983, both sides misunderstood one another. The Americans assumed the Soviets knew that all those flybys, flyovers, fleet maneuvers, dummy warheads, and DEFCON escalations were just drills. The Soviets, for their part, knew no such thing. They really believed that it all might be prelude to a surprise first strike.

Later informed of Moscow's alarm, Reagan was offended. "I don't see how they could believe that," he said, quickly adding, "but it's something to think about." It was, eventually, thought about, in hindsight. That 1990 report on Perroots's restraint observed that "in the years leading up to Able Archer," national security officials "had received no guidance as to the possible significance of apparent changes in Soviet military and political thinking."

Reagan sincerely hoped that his Strategic Defense Initiative would make nuclear weapons obsolete. When he offered to share the technology with the Soviets, he meant it. They didn't believe him. They feared, rather, that the United States would use SDI as a shield behind which to launch a first strike (sort of like ancient Sparta citing the Athenian "long walls" as evidence of aggressive intentions). Reagan's refusal to drop the program, at Gorbachev's demand, is what scuttled the Reykjavik Summit.

Winston Churchill recounts that, in 1911, Germany's longtime ambassador to the Court of St. James recalled being "at Berlin in a throng of generals and princes" where "someone had said that the British Fleet would one day make a surprise and unprovoked attack on Germany." The ambassador replied that

"such a thing was absolutely impossible." But the German generals didn't think so, and their misimpression contributed to the escalations of July 1914 which produced the disaster of August 1914.

Change of Heart

IT'S EASY FOR CONSERVATIVES TO PRAISE Ronald Reagan for 1983: not only was the apocalypse avoided but the happiest of endings materialized a mere six years later. But disaster easily *could* have happened—how would Reagan be remembered then? And how sure can we be that his toughness and provocations—for let's not mince words about what some of those actions really were—actually improved the situation, or were required by the circumstances? This is not so much to second-guess the Reagan Administration. It's hard to know what to do in complex matters of war and peace, and the Western alliance definitely needed a boost in the early '80s. But it is to caution all those who would apply 1983's alleged lesson indiscriminately to any and every "crisis," real or imagined. Just because you won on 22 black once, when you really needed the money, doesn't mean you will next time, or should risk it when much less is at stake.

Another lesson of that autumn is the role of chance. What if someone other than Stanislav Petrov had been on duty in Serpukhov-15 the night of September 26-27? It's not hard to imagine a hardline Communist scourge of the capitalist-imperialists in the same chair; there were lots of them in the Soviet armed forces at that time. Or what if, instead of Leonard Perroots and Billy Minter at Ramstein Air Base in West Germany, we had been saddled instead with Generals Buck Turgidson and Jack D. Ripper? Perroots and Minter at least acted within their lawful authority; Petrov didn't. It took a special kind of man to defy a system whose ordinary operation was much harsher than ours at its worst (so far). Ronald Reagan answered to no one but the voters, the U.S. Constitution, and God. Still, under the common understanding of Cold War deterrence doctrine, most elites and citizens alike believed he was obligated to respond in kind to any Soviet attack. Yet there is reason to suspect he wouldn't have.

One of the first responsibilities of any Cold War president was to trudge down to the Situation Room in the West Wing basement to receive the briefing on the SIOP, or "Single Integrated Operational Plan," the Pentagon's ingeniously bland term for the American military's nuclear targeting guidance. Reagan put off receiving the briefing for more than two



years, driving his senior defense officials crazy. Weinberger finally insisted and the president relented—a week after viewing *The Day After* (a tape of which he received in advance of the broadcast).

Reagan was so horrified by that briefing that he began to speculate aloud in front of cabinet secretaries and aides that the West's goal should be the elimination of nuclear weapons and even hinted that, in the event of nuclear conflict, he might not order a retaliation because, at that point, what would be the point? According to her biographer Charles Moore, Margaret Thatcher felt it necessary to remind Reagan never to say such things in public, noble as the sentiments might be, lest they embolden the Soviets to test Western resolve. Deterrence doesn't work if the other side doesn't think you'll follow through.

It is thus at least possible that Reagan, contra the 4D chess explanation, somewhere in the middle of his presidency had a change of heart and decided on a new approach. He likely knew he wasn't going to get anywhere with Andropov or Chernenko, and so waited them out. At any rate, the Ronald Reagan who strode down the steps, open hand extended, to greet Gorbachev in Geneva presented an entirely different affect than the Reagan of the evil empire speech.

It would be ironic indeed if today's leftists-in-good-standing—heirs to the hippies, peaceniks, nuclear-freezers, anti-anti-Communists, fellow travelers, and outright Reds who so bedeviled Reagan and his team—were to blunder (or maneuver) us into a nuclear confrontation that the alleged superhawks of 1983 managed to avoid. For we seem to be, in the fall of 2022, replaying many of the events of four decades earlier, but with much higher—and simultaneously lower—stakes.

The Present Crisis

THE WAYS IN WHICH THE STAKES ARE lower are obvious. There is no Cold War—or shouldn't be, however much Western Russophobes would like one. Russia today, whatever you think of it, is not Communist, is not dominating half of Europe, has no prospect of doing so, and is not exporting revolution around the world. Russians may see themselves as locked in mortal ideological combat with the West, but then we've given them ample reason to think so, haven't we?

Here we bump up against two sinister propaganda tropes effectively deployed by our ruling class. The first, which I have termed the "celebration parallax," holds that the same

fact pattern is either true and glorious or false and scurrilous depending on who states it. Hence when some Biden apparatchik, or the president himself, denounces Russia as authoritarian, pledges to weaken the country, and even calls for regime change in Moscow, well, that's fine, because the good guys are saying it. Anyone who quotes those same words to point out how they might be ill-received in the Kremlin is immediately denounced as a Putin apologist.

The related (but distinct) "law of salutary impossibility" says "that's not happening and it's good that it is"—i.e., we're not pursuing a policy to bleed Russia dry and collapse its economy, and isn't it great that we are because those bastards deserve it. If *you* say the Bidenistas are doing it, you're lying to defend "Putler." But when *they* say they're doing it, they're boasting.

It's all very confusing, I admit, which is part of the reason why it works. Average Joes, even well-educated ones, are struck dumb by the illogic, dishonesty, and bad faith. They don't know what to say. And so, all too often, they say nothing, leaving the field to the lefties.

The way in which the stakes are higher should be equally obvious. Unlike 1983, 2022 is defined by a hot war, in which Russia is a belligerent. This time the Kremlin isn't watch-

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Paul Ryan and Angela Rachidi, eds.

November 17, 2022
Publisher: American Enterprise Institute

America is facing enormous political and economic challenges. How can we rise to meet these challenges and continue to prosper and thrive? *American Renewal* has the answer.

Edited by former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Angela Rachidi, this new volume offers a sweeping set of policy proposals from America's top conservative policy experts to revitalize our social contract and prepare our country for the challenges ahead.



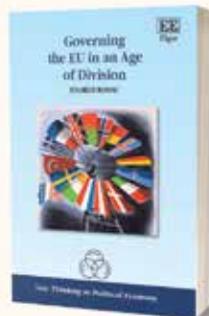
Governing the EU in an Age of Division

Dalibor Rohac

November 1, 2022
Publisher: Edward Elgar
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Few international organizations embody the idea of historical progress as strongly as the European Union while struggling with such diverse priorities.

In *Governing the EU in an Age of Division*, Dalibor Rohac explores the roots of the European Union's ambitions and shows how disagreement, pluralism, and conflict must be adequately managed and channeled toward socially productive uses, such as fueling institutional learning. This timely book offers an expert's view of a better future for the EU and its governance.

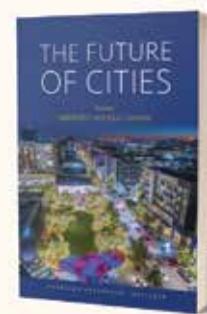


The Future of Cities

Joel Kotkin and Ryan Streater, eds.

Winter 2022
Publisher: American Enterprise Institute

The Future of Cities addresses the issues inflicting cities around the world and offers tangible solutions to restore urban excellence. Exploring everything from the burgeoning immigrant suburbs in California's Inland Empire to the rise of China's bifurcated cities, this volume draws on the expertise of a range of scholars and practitioners to identify the salient issues driving urban policy and the nature of global geography. "The citizen," observed Frank Lloyd Wright, "is really the city. The city is going wherever he goes."



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ing a bunch of troop movements wondering whether they're an exercise or the prelude to war. They *know* we're arming Ukraine, providing targeting information that's killing Russian generals, and using our power over the global financial system to try to strangle their economy—a far cry from merely banning Aeroflot for a few years. Moscow held back in 1983 in part because, at the decisive moment, we held back. That's not what we're doing now. I don't know who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines. I do know that neither we nor any of our allies did anything nearly that provocative in 1983.

The worst element of the present crisis, at least from our side, isn't the virulent Russophobia emitting from the same people who scoffed at standing up to the Kremlin when it was controlled by zealots hell-bent on worldwide Communist revolution—by conquest if necessary. It's not even the newfound war fever of former pacifists who once denounced military preparedness as reckless provocation. It's the casual insouciance with which elites now speak of *nuclear exchanges* as an acceptable price to pay for stopping Russia and, really, not all that bad. Exhibit A is Anne Applebaum's recent *Atlantic* column entitled "Fear of Nuclear War Has Warped the West's Ukraine Strategy." The West is not doing enough to escalate the conflict, she argues, because "[w]e feel relieved, somehow, that people will die because they have frozen in unheated apartments or drowned in an artificial flood, and not from nuclear fallout." And, hey, what's the difference?

Seriously, the survival of the free world wasn't grave enough to risk nuclear confrontation, but who controls the Donbass is? When MSNBC and CNN talking heads start making Curtis LeMay sound circumspect, the world has turned upside down.

Some especially ardent neoliberals insist that the risks are necessary to defend the "rules-based liberal international order." Reserving the larger debate for another occasion, let's for now merely consider what threat Russia actually poses to that order. There was a time when Russia wanted to be in it; the West said no. Then Russia asked to be left alone. The West encircled it, or made it feel encircled, which in present circumstances amounts to the same thing. Now Russia is being pushed not so much to destroy that order, which in any case it lacks the power to do, as to work with others to build a parallel one. I am not the first to observe that it would be ironic if, in its overzealous defense of the "liberal international order," the West ended up driving together its adversaries, and even one erstwhile proto-ally (India), to create the first viable alternative to that order since 1945.

At any rate, it is surely disconcerting to hear the same people who denounce Russia as poor, backward, besotted, demographically crippled, undeveloped, a "gas station with nukes," as at the same time a grave threat to the cool-country club. Are the cool countries and their order really that weak? If so, don't they face more pressing threats than Russia?

Can We Survive?

IN THE COLD WAR, IT COULD BE TAKEN for granted that, if not everyone who emphasized the horror and unwinnability of nuclear war was anti-anti-Communist, at least all the anti-anti-Communists did. But so did about half, or close, of the committed cold warriors, among whom there were two camps. One said: it's just another bomb. More powerful, to be sure, but otherwise little different. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were back up and running within a year. What's the difference between that and Dresden or Tokyo? The other responded: Dresden and Tokyo were indeed horrific, but this thing is

The survival of the free world wasn't grave enough to risk nuclear confrontation, but who controls the Donbass is?

qualitatively worse. Hiroshima and Nagasaki may have been operating *as cities* a year later, but tens of thousands of "survivors" hardly warranted the term and many died agonizing deaths. We did what we had to do in 1945 to end the war and avoid a bloody invasion of Japan, but thanks to tests (and catastrophic testing "accidents" such as 1954's Castle Bravo), we now know a lot more about what nukes can do and it's not pretty.

A faction of the first camp began to worry that the second was indulging in defeatist talk that undermined American resolve to see the struggle through. Thus began the serious study of nuclear weapons' effects, both out of a genuine scientific curiosity to find the truth (to the extent that the truth could be found without actually fighting a nuclear war) and to bolster support for the notion that nuclear war would not be, literally, the end of the world.

The great genius of this effort was Herman Kahn—one inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*—who has been described as "combining elements of a high-

speed computer, an eager-to-please four-year-old, a borscht-belt comic," and "second-strike Santa Claus." Kahn (who, as fate would have it, died in 1983) was a nuclear physicist who felt he wasn't smart enough to play in the same league as Edward Teller, Hans Bethe, or Stanisław Ulam and so quit physics to devote himself to strategy. His magnum opus was *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), whose laconic, almost scholastic title double-dog-dares you to peruse its 600 pages of ruminations on this very darkest of topics.

Among the many questions that book raises and tries to answer is: "will the survivors envy the dead?" (the title of Chapter 2, in fact). Kahn had a refreshing, if unsettling, way of cutting to the chase. He goes into clinical detail on (among other topics) radioactivity's contribution to genetic birth defects, strontium-90's effects on human bones, and the material differences between the deaths of a quarter versus half the country's population—all with the bemused detachment of Euclid demonstrating a geometric proof. QED.

For my part, I will say that Kahn convinced me that the nuclear pacifists' worst fear—that the world would literally end—is not true. Nor is it true, Kahn insists (and I'm persuaded he's right), that civilization would end. But Kahn also admits that humanity

may never recuperate from a thermonuclear war. The world may be permanently (i.e., for perhaps 10,000 years) more hostile to human life as a result of such a war. Therefore, if the question, "Can we restore the prewar conditions of life?" is asked, the answer must be "No!"

Nonetheless, Kahn goes on to assert that nuclear war "would not preclude normal and happy lives for the majority of survivors and their descendants." This is, I suppose, a subjective judgment. I have little doubt that life would go on, that most survivors would make the best of a bad situation, and that all the human virtues would show themselves, perhaps more impressively than they do in a decaying materialist society. But it is one thing to risk such a calamity in order to avoid a—hypothetically at least—worse subjugation, and/or an entirely non-hypothetical loss of dignity and honor. It is quite another to risk it over...the Donbass? For the "liberal international order"? To stick it to Putin?

Kahn was a brilliant and serious man, whom I don't doubt sincerely meant all his arguments, calculations, charts, and tables. But I also believe he felt it necessary to push back on nuclear apocalypticism, and that this may



have colored his judgments. In that same edgy boomer-doomer 1983, superstar astronomer Carl “billions and billions” Sagan, who had little or no background in nuclear physics (or geology or climatology), lent his name to the “nuclear winter” hypothesis—the idea that a nuclear war would throw enough particulate dust into the upper atmosphere to block the sun’s rays and cool the earth’s surface for decades or longer, causing crops to wither, emaciated animals to wander like the dinosaurs in that scene in *Fantasia* (except through frozen tundra rather than parched desert), and people to just give up.

It’s not an insane hypothesis. Something like it, in fact, is many enviro-activists’ preferred solution to “climate change,” née “global warming”: stretch a hose up into the stratosphere and spray reflective mist. (I am not making that up.) But in the context of 1983, backed by Sagan’s PBS celebrity, “dust in the wind” went from Kansas pop ballad to harbinger of The End. Nuclear winter was a warhead targeted precisely at Herman Kahn’s frontal lobe. Its message was: can’t win, don’t try. Even if the initial blow was survivable, as Kahn assured us, the aftermath wouldn’t be—and not because of radiation; Sagan et al. didn’t even try to take down Kahn on that score. Who cares about radiation? We’re all going to starve, and freeze while we do.

Nuclear winter remains, to say the least, a disputed hypothesis. Between July 16, 1945, the date of first-ever nuclear explosion, and July 17, 1962, when the last above-ground nuclear test was conducted before the Limited Test Ban Treaty entered into force, about 500 megatons in nuclear explosive power were detonated on the earth’s surface or in the atmosphere, 320 of those in last two years alone. All that may (or may not) approximate the total destructive power unleashed in a nuclear war, but, according to the hypothesis, should

have had *some* effect on the climate. As far as anyone can tell, it hasn’t. Neither did, as Sagan confidently predicted at the time, the Kuwaiti oil well fires that Saddam Hussein’s retreating troops set in 1991. If anything, as we constantly hear, global temperatures have risen, not declined, in the nuclear age.

This is not to say that nuclear winter is a myth. How could I know? The 1987 mimeograph tract *Nuclear War Survival Skills*—foreword by Edward Teller—says it’s bunk, but... how do *they* know? How could anyone?

Torturing Nature

FRANCIS BACON, A PLAUSIBLE CONTENDER for the title “founder of modern science,” wrote that for nature to give up her deepest secrets she must be placed “under constraint and vexed; that is to say, when by art in the hand of man she is forced out of her natural state, and squeezed and molded.” It is hard to think of a better description of the processes that create a nuclear explosion. One (at most two) inapt and irrelevant exceptions aside, these things simply do not happen in “nature free and at large (when she is left to her own course and does her work her own way).”

There is an unbroken line from Bacon’s observation to the bomb, as if to vindicate the classics’ warning that “man’s inventions might become his masters and his destroyers.” And here, I believe, is a source of unresolved remorse and angst that drives much leftist guilt. The bomb—and not just the scientific discoveries that led to it, but the device itself—is a bastard child of the university, leftism’s physical and spiritual temple. The bomb was built under university supervision, with faculty in charge and grad students doing the grunt work. Responsibility is widespread, but here is the efficient cause. Here is ground zero. Academics would rather talk about their holy

trinity—slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust—because deep down they believe they are not responsible for any of those whereas they know in their strontium-90-laced bones that they, or their caste, acting in accordance with their most deeply cherished aspirations, birthed this monstrosity. Worse, they justified mustering learning to the cause of mass death because the targets were going to be Nazis, but then—against their every expectation and wish—their creation ending up killing “BIPOCs” instead. They’ve never forgiven themselves for that, and can’t, not with the stultifying racialization of all questions of morality and justice they’ve foisted on the world and in which they sincerely believe. These gnawing laments shake them to their core in ways they’ve not even begun to confront and overcome, and we all pay for their disquiet.

Are we about to pay much more? Is all the lefty war fever and the preposterous arguments, after 77 years of nuclear doomerism, that the bomb ain’t that bad an attempt to rehabilitate their golem to assuage their conscience? Is *that* why the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved the minute hand of its famous “Doomsday Clock” further toward midnight three times during the more-than-mostly-peaceful Trump Administration but hasn’t adjusted it once in the run-up to what even Joe Biden calls a potential Armageddon?

Herman Kahn was the first to admit that all his researches and ruminations amounted in the end to speculation, to thought experiments. Even computer simulations won’t cut it. The only way to know if he was right is to run the experiment for real.

Let’s just not.

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