

[REDACTED]
30 November 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT : Why Is the World So Dangerous?

1. The level of global violence has risen as sharply and as suddenly as a child's temperature. In just the last several months we have seen the shoot-down of KAL Flight 007, the assassination of Benigno Aquino, the murderous decapitation of South Korea's leadership in Rangoon, the terrorist bombings of US, French, and Israeli soldiers in Lebanon, the Libyan invasion of Chad, and the anti-Bishop coup in Grenada that ultimately triggered our own successful action on that island. What makes these acts of violence so especially disturbing is their common denominator: each has hurt the citizens, governments, or interests of the Free World.

2. Clearly, the world has become a much more dangerous place. We need to know why. Are these acts of violence somehow linked, or traceable to the same malevolent source? Or should we dismiss the present trend as a series of frightening, tragic, but unconnected events whose one-after-another timing is mere coincidence?

3. I believe the current outbreak of violence is more than coincidence. More precisely, I believe it signals the beginning of a new stage in the global struggle between the Free World and the Soviet Union. My contention rests on a perception that present US policies have fundamentally changed the course of history in a direction favorable to the interests and security of ourselves and our allies. What we are seeing now is a Soviet-led effort to fight back, in the same sense that the Mafia fights back when law enforcement agencies launch an effective crime-busting program. Let me concede right now that I cannot prove this -- if your definition of proof is restricted to intercepts, photographs, and purloined documents. Of course these things matter. They matter hugely. But to truly understand an alien phenomenon like the Soviet Union, one needs to go beyond a listing of facts; one needs also to make a leap of imagination:

4. If four years ago the Soviet leadership had asked my counterpart -- call him Vice Chairman of the Soviet National Intelligence Council -- for his evaluation of the global struggle, I believe my counterpart would have

Approved for Release
Date 27 JUN 1985

[REDACTED]

replied: "Comrades, I'm delighted to report that the correlation of forces is moving steadily in our direction." He would have cited the following trends to support his upbeat analysis:

- The US economy was faltering.
- US defense spending was too low to truly assure the nation's security.
- The Soviet Union had established a mechanism for the steady flow of wealth from West to East.
- The Soviet Union had established a companion mechanism to assure the steady flow of technology from West to East.
- The Soviet Union, through the effective use of surrogates such as Cuba and Vietnam, had developed a technique for spreading its influence throughout the Third World by targeting fragile countries, destabilizing them, and swiftly taking over.
- Through the massive deployment of SS-20s, the Soviets were changing the balance of power in Europe.
- In more and more countries, policymakers, elites, and the masses were coming to accept the Soviets' long-standing claim that time was on their side; that one needed only to align with Moscow to be on the winning team.

5. Were the Vice Chairman of the Soviet National Intelligence Council called in by the Kremlin's leaders, say in mid-1983, and asked for his evaluation, I believe he would have sung a very different song: "Comrades," he would have said, "something has gone wrong. The US is refusing to accept history!" Assuming our Vice Chairman were allowed to continue -- and this is a bloody big assumption -- he would have cited the following trends to support his downbeat analysis:

- The US economy is recovering, with the only argument focusing on the breadth and duration of the boom. (The vice chairman, who enjoyed the privilege of access to US business publications, could not understand their failure to discuss the awesome national-security implications of a 15-month, 64 percent rise in the Dow-Jones Industrial Average, combined with a lowering of the annual inflation rate to less the 4 percent.)
- US defense spending is up, with the debate in Congress and on the campaign hustings focusing only on the proper size of the increase. (The vice chairman had in his briefing book -- but chose not to read aloud -- a letter Dwight

Eisenhower wrote to General Lucius Clay in 1952: "One of the great and immediate uses of the military forces we are developing is to convey a feeling of confidence to exposed populations, a confidence which will make them sturdier, politically, in their opposition to Communist inroads."

- The flow of wealth from the West to the East is less than the Soviets had anticipated it would be by now. (The vice chairman took a deep breath and pointed out that Moscow's most audacious project, the Siberia to Western Europe pipeline, had been literally cut in half by US opposition; after all, the pipeline was originally to have comprised two strands, and lately no one either in Western Europe or the Soviet Union had even mentioned that second strand.)
- The flow of technology from West to East is less than the Soviets had anticipated it would be by now. In part, by reducing the flow of wealth the US also reduced the Soviet Union's ability to buy equipment and know-how. And the US-led crack-down on illegal technology transfers had put a crimp in that key effort. (The Vice Chairman thought sadly -- but did not take the liberty of complaining -- that the expulsions of roughly 100 KGB agents from Western countries, mostly on technology transfer-related charges, had wiped out the KGB's welcome home-party fund.)
- The Soviet mechanism for spreading power through the Third World, while still a considerable threat to Western security, has run into unexpected resistance. Soviet textbooks insist that anti-Soviet Third World insurgencies cannot develop. Yet in 1983 there are five of them -- in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Angola, Kampuchea and Afghanistan. Thus Moscow can no longer target a Third-World country and assume that no serious resistance will develop. Most worrisome of all is the shocking setback in Grenada. (The vice chairman bit his tongue to keep from pointing out that the Soviet Union believed deeply in the domino theory -- and that one of its own had just toppled over.)
- With deployment now certain of Pershing IIs and cruise missiles, NATO is about to change the balance of power in Europe back to its favor. (The vice chairman had read in Pravda that a P-II's flight time to Moscow was 12 minutes -- which, he thought to himself, is roughly how long it takes some of the Kremlin's leaders to get out of their chairs, let alone to their shelters.)
- And most dangerous of all, by describing the Soviet Union as "the focus of evil" U' President Reagan has singlehandedly deployed the one weapon for which the

Soviets lack even a rudimentary defense: the truth. (The vice chairman made a mental note to ask a friend at the USA and Canada Institute how it happened that the Republican Reagan had made good against the Soviets a threat made against the Republicans by the Democrat Adlai Stevenson in 1952: "If you don't stop telling lies about us, we'll start telling the truth about you.")

6. Whether or not such briefings actually took place, it's apparent that by mid-1983 Soviet leaders had sufficient evidence to conclude that US policy had fundamentally changed course, and was now moving in a direction highly unfavorable to Soviet national interests.

7. From Moscow's perspective, the immediate danger would be the taking hold of a perception among leaders and voters throughout the West, but particularly in the US, that this new course was not only right but also successful. Surely Western politicians -- especially those up for re-election -- would chortle: "You see, we were exactly right to stand up to the Russians. We are defending our own interests more effectively now, and it's working." The inevitable result of this approach would be precisely what Soviet leaders dreaded most: widespread public support for the new US course and, therefore, a continuation or even an acceleration of it.

8. If Moscow's chief objective were to knock the US off its course, Moscow's most likely strategy would be to discredit this course through the following tactics:

- Raise the level of violence, thus making the world a more dangerous place. (Keep in mind that US tolerance of violence has declined markedly during the last 10 years.)
- Attribute the increased violence and danger to the inevitable result of reckless US policies. (It could be safely assumed that members of the US media and other elites would swiftly pick up and amplify this theme.)
- Hope that voters will force a change of course, either by replacing the incumbent leaders or forcing them to adopt more "moderate" policies.

9. To implement this strategy, the Soviets would not need to commit each and every act of violence themselves. They would commit some, arrange for others to be committed by surrogates or allies, and generally create an atmosphere in which violence flourishes. This last element would be especially fruitful, for there are always those who stand ready to murder for one cause or another when the timing seems right.

10. Whether or not this Soviet strategy succeeds in the short term, I believe the current outbreak of violence is a harbinger of things to come. Let me begin with an assertion that seems startling, but that is accepted by

at least two dozen Soviet specialists and generally well informed individuals I know, whose political views and affiliations range across the spectrum: If the Soviet Union does not achieve its ambition to displace the US as the world's pre-eminent power within -- very roughly -- the next 20 years, the Soviet Union will never succeed. Among the analytic points supporting this assertion:

- The Soviet Union has failed utterly to become a country. After sixty-six years of communist rule, the Soviet Union remains a nineteenth-century-style empire, comprised of more than 100 nationality groups and dominated by the Russians. There is not one major nationality group that is content with the present, Russian-controlled arrangement; not one that does not yearn for its political and economic freedom. It's hard to imagine how the world's last empire can survive into the twenty-first century except under highly favorable conditions of economics and demographics -- conditions that do not, and will not, exist.
- The Soviet economy is heading toward calamity. With an average annual growth rate of less than 2 percent, and with defense spending going up at an average annual rate of 4 percent, something fairly drastic has got to give, and fairly soon. It's a matter of simple arithmetic. Moreover, sharply rising energy costs will make even current growth rates difficult to sustain. It is inevitable that if present economic trends continue, living standards will decline, perhaps to post-World War II levels. We have all been warned by the experts never to under-estimate the Russians' capacity for belt-tightening; I myself have published articles on this very subject. But there is a limit, and that limit is coming closer every year.
- The Soviet Union is a demographic nightmare. Today only about half the country's population can speak Russian; for an industrialized, technologically-advanced society, this is intolerable. Moreover, so low has been the Russian birthrate that in coming years the able-bodied working-age population of the Russian Republic -- which contains roughly two-thirds of the Soviet Union's total industrial production capacity -- will actually decline. This is not merely a drop in the growth rate; it is a drop in the total number of warm bodies showing up each morning, drunk or sober, for work. Moreover, high birthrates in the Moslem republics have begun to soak up vast amounts of investment for schools, hospitals, roads, and so forth. Thus, fewer and fewer Russians must work harder and harder to support more and more non-Russians. This sort of thing cannot go on indefinitely.

- The East European satellites are becoming more and more difficult to control. Already economic growth rates in the key satellites are marginal, non-existent, or negative. These rates will decline further as the Soviet Union moves to insulate itself from the rising costs of empire by squeezing its satellites harder, for example by raising the prices of its raw materials and paying its satellites less for the finished goods the Soviet Union then buys. Economic trouble leads inevitably to political unrest, so the question is not whether Moscow's difficulties will mount but rather how bad things will get. We are all familiar with the situation in Poland. But other satellites may be closer to their own political boiling points than we realize. Romania has just announced massive cutbacks in electric power, including the shutting down of all schools for the month of January along with pressures on consumers to stop using vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and refrigerators. And in East Germany -- widely regarded as among the most stable and secure satellites -- the Communist Party daily Neues Deutschland, in an astounding ideological departure, published in its October 22 edition two letters from clergymen who expressed their fears about new Soviet missiles. In all, it seems likely that the Soviets will need to use raw military power somewhere in Eastern Europe before too long; they may need to use such power in several satellites at once.

11. The Soviet leadership simply cannot make the changes necessary to either reverse these trends or cope with them. Kremlin leaders could boost their country's economic growth rate only by slashing the defense budget or by enacting massive economic reforms. Either remedy would threaten the Communist Party's grip on power, thus neither remedy has the slightest chance of being administered. The demographic nightmare is equally difficult to end. Moscow cannot transfer industrial-production capacity from the Russian to the non-Russian, and especially non-Slav, republics. Doing so would give these republics more power over Moscow than Moscow is willing to risk. And Moscow cannot import workers to Russian factories from Moslem republics because these workers (a) don't speak Russian, (b) don't want to come, and (c) would be bitterly resented by Russian workers, who would be required to share scarce housing and food with individuals they view as racially inferior.

12. Two Kremlin actions provide a good measure of Moscow's domestic impotence. To boost the birth rate among Russian women -- who average six abortions, according to recent, highly credible research -- the Soviet Union has decided to offer Glory of Motherhood awards to women who bear large families. And to reform the world's second largest economy, Kremlin leaders just last month ordered the execution, for corruption, of the poor devil who managed Gastronome No. 1, Moscow's gourmet delicatessen. These feeble and pathetic actions are not those of a dynamic or even a healthy leadership responding to national emergency. They bring to mind neither Roosevelt in 1933 nor Reagan in 1981, but rather Nicholas II in 1910.

13. In sum, time is not on the Soviet Union's side. This assertion is now widely accepted among Western observers, as I've noted. But its staggering implications have scarcely been absorbed. To do so we need to make yet another leap of imagination, this one to consider the phenomenon of thwarted ambition:

14. We have all known individuals who have come to recognize that time is no longer their ally: the 45-year-old corporation vice president who realizes that he may never make chairman; the 35-year old childless woman who lies awake at night, listening to the relentless ticking of her biological clock; the campaigning politician who has confidently brushed aside polls that show him trailing his opponent by 20 points, and who now realizes that with just two weeks left before election day, that lead may be too big to close. The perception that time is no longer on one's side may take weeks or even years to develop, and often it is obvious to others first. But by definition the perception comes suddenly.

15. There are, in fact, just two ways to cope with the perception that time has become an enemy. The first is to accept the unpleasant reality, and to resign one's self to reduced expectations: life as a mid-level corporate manager isn't so bad, there are advantages to not having children, it'll be nice to leave public life for a while. This is quite often an honorable and perfectly sensible approach.

16. The second response is to go for it. That is, to refuse to meekly accept one's likely fate, and instead to work or even fight for whatever it is one wants. This, too, is quite often an honorable and perfectly sensible approach. But it is a phenomenon of human nature that from the moment one concludes that time is an enemy and that the proper response is to go for it -- all is changed. Ideas and actions that were unthinkable the day before are now quite thinkable and even appealing. Why? Because the alternative is failure, and this is judged to be unacceptable. Ambitious, seemingly defeated mid-level business executives who have taken desperate and daring measures, populate our corporate boardrooms. They populate our prisons, too. The 35-year-old single woman who conceives a child before finding a husband has gone from a scandal to a national trend. And the history of desperate politicians in the final days of their campaigns is the stuff of Washington legends.

17. Now let us consider the implication of our assertion that if the Soviet Union doesn't take the West in the next 20 years or so, it never will: it means that if present trends continue, we're going to win the Cold War. That is, the US will continue to be the world's pre-eminent power and the Free World will both survive and flourish.

18. What matters here is not whether US observers believe this, but rather whether our perception is shared by Soviet officials. No doubt there are some in Moscow who view the future with confidence. And probably there are some who see trouble ahead, but who take an apres-moi-le-deluge attitude. But it seems to me inevitable that some Soviet officials --

possibly at the very top, more likely at the third or fourth level echelons -- now view their empire's future as bleak. And of those officials it seems equally inevitable that while some will opt to accept the inevitable, so to speak, others will be less fatalistic. Their argument would run like this: Ours is an unstable political system, held together solely by terror and military force. Peaceful political change is utterly alien to Russia. The alternative to moving forward is not standing still, but falling backward. Thus when we lose our forward momentum and begin to suffer reversals, our empire will crumble swiftly and violently. We who are the elite -- like every totalitarian elite that has come before -- will be swept away. And unlike the elite that we swept away in 1917 -- so many of whose members wound up driving taxis in Paris -- we will wind up swinging from lamp-posts in every city from Leningrad to Vladivostok.

19. They could decide to go for it: to launch one or a series of actions designed to change the correlation of forces before it is too late to do so. In this category I would include a grab for the Persian Gulf, and possibly even a conventional or nuclear bolt-from-the-blue first strike on Western Europe or perhaps on the US. I do not predict these actions. I merely predict -- and this is worrisome enough -- that to some Soviet officials such actions may no longer be too risky to contemplate.

20. It has long been fashionable to view the Cold War as a permanent feature of global politics, one that will endure through the next several generations at least. But it seems to me more likely that President Reagan was absolutely correct when he observed in his Notre Dame speech that the Soviet Union -- "one of history's saddest and most bizarre chapters" -- is entering its final pages. (We really should take up the President's suggestion to begin planning for a post-Soviet world; the Soviet Union and its people won't disappear from the planet, and we have not yet thought seriously about the sort of political and economic structure likely to emerge.) In short, the Free World has out-distanced the Soviet Union economically, crushed it ideologically, and held it off politically. The only serious arena of competition left is military. From now on the Cold War will become more and more of a bare-knuckles street fight.

20. We should be optimistic, for if present trends continue we will win. But we must also be on guard, for it is all too likely that incumbent or future Soviet leaders will not choose to await their fates quietly while their empire completes its shattering descent into history. The current outbreak of violence may thus be merely a prelude to the most dangerous years we have ever known.


Herbert E. Meyer


30 November 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : Herbert E. Meyer
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT : Why Is the World So Dangerous?


(30 Nov 83) 