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SUBJECT Major General George Keegan

LARRY KING: We are going to devote the early portion of the program tonight to a discussion of the flight of the almost macabre-named 007, the Korean Air Line flight from New York to Seoul with a stopover for refueling in Anchorage.

Our guest, first, will be Major General George Keegan, United States Air Force (Retired). Major Keegan is the former head of Air Force Intelligence.

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KING: I thank you, Major General Keegan, for, on rather short notice, coming over.

MAJOR GENERAL GEORGE KEEGAN: I'm delighted to be here, Larry.

KING: I think the easiest thing from the top is, what the hell happened?

GENERAL KEEGAN: Well, what happened is very much characteristic of what goes on in and over the Soviet Union. Obviously, it is a tragic, unconscionable incident. I think others will occur in the future because the courses of action open to a President who is sort of a captive of the forces and the pressures that he is captive of makes it very difficult for this President, or any President, to take forceful, vigorous, direct, consistent action that would be held to over a long period of time. So, therefore, I think we're going to roll with the punches, as we have in most previous cases.

What happened, however, shall have to wait some further clarification. I'm very familiar with the Koreans, the Korean Air Force, [unintelligible] the Korean Air Lines. And over the years, those of us who have been very familiar and individually involved with their operations have noticed that, like a lot of the Third World airlines that have moved into high technology, there's a long tendency to have been careless. And I was aware for many years that Korean pilots were taking these new modern jets, were falling asleep at the wheel, putting the aircraft on automatic pilot, were not being very consistent and thorough about their navigation.

As far as I'm concerned, I think it inexcusable on the part of the South Korean crew of that aircraft that they should not have discovered their error much earlier. And in view of their known past propensity for carelessness -- maybe this was not the case here at all -- you'd have thought that the Koreans would have long since learned and skirted and given wide, wide berth to the peripheral borders of the Soviet Union. Those flights in those international waters should not come that close to Soviet territory because of the traditional Soviet sensitivity. They should have flown directly from Anchorage to Tokyo, which many American flights do, and from there be vectored by radar safely on to Seoul, Korea.

KING: That, of course, does not excuse what the Russians did to them.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Absolutely not. The act was a barbaric one.

But on the other hand, if you take the long perspective of characteristic Soviet paranoia -- and granted that they are a great imperial power, they're very tough, and they're mean as hell about what they do. And what is it that they're sensitive about in this area of the world?

KING: Yeah, what?

GENERAL KEEGAN: Two things. For a great period of time, since the early 1950s, the Soviets have been militarizing the Far East. I presume, originally, in order to beef up their offensive capabilities against China. I was very -- I was the CINCPAC J-2 during that time period, so I was aware of what was going on. What the Soviets have built in that part of the world that makes them very sensitive is probably the greatest naval cantonment in the world, a string of naval bases, ports, handling facilities, fishing warehouses, large cranes, the ability to handle enormously expanded naval traffic of all kinds all the way from Vladivostok on up through Margadan, all the way through the Sea of Okhotsk. And the Western World has been quite ignorant of this, including most of the Japanese leadership.

The last study that I did about the area showed that in a 15-year period the total port handling capacity built by the Soviets from Vladivostok northward to Kamchatka and Petropavlovsk more than doubled all the port capacity on the West Coast of the United States from Alaska down to the southernmost exposure to the Pacific Ocean in Mexico, a shocking, staggering fact, considering that the Soviet Far Eastern hinterland involves a population of three or four million people, at the outside.

So that's one reason for the sensitivity.

The other is a political territorial one. The Soviets have been very sensitive about the Sea of Okhotsk because it was an area of peripheral reconnaissance by the United States for many years. Reason: Before the entry of satellite reconnaissance means and their availability to us, that was a very closed area of the world. And those of us who were in the strategic air arm of the United States Armed Forces had great difficulty doing our defensive war planning and route planning for the penetration of our bombers. We were looking for safe routes. We didn't know where the Soviet radars were. So it was very important, for tactical, strategic reasons, to get all of the latest radar data on Soviet defenses. And it meant flying in the Sea of Okhotsk. And the Soviets were particularly sensitive.

Secondly, they had a large missile test range terminating in Kamchatka, where access to the area would allow us to determine how accurate some of the Soviet intercontinental missiles were.

KING: Given all that, though, a 747...

GENERAL KEEGAN: Inexcusable.

KING: ...is a passenger plane.

GENERAL KEEGAN: But I'm explaining the background...

KING: Their sensitivity.

GENERAL KEEGAN: ...over many, many years.

Finally was the political question of the international waters, of which the Sea of Okhotsk was involved in. And the dispute between the Free World, the United States, and the Soviets simply involved the age-old classical struggle for maintaining free international use of important waterways, of which the Sea of Okhotsk is one.

So, from the very outset, the Soviets were more than sensitive about access to the Sea of Okhotsk and did everything in the world to pressure us, to intimidate us, to fire upon our

aircraft, to induce some of our -- to lure some of our aircraft into traps that were deliberately laid by radio means for them.

KING: They've done this before.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Oh, yes. Many times.

KING: But they never shot down one of ours, though, have they?

GENERAL KEEGAN: Well, let me put it this way. I'm aware of more than 65 shooting incidents since 1948, when my first involvement began, up through 1977 and beyond, when I left government.

KING: Them shooting at us.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Them shooting at us. Some of these were incidents involving ships. Others were shooting against commercial aircraft. The bulk of them were against military reconnaissance flights flying over international waters beyond the legal limits of the Soviet peripheral territorial claims.

KING: In other words, this could have been an American passenger plane.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Oh, yes. Most assuredly.

KING: And it might have been 15 years ago when they missed.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Correct.

KING: Our guest, Major General George Keegan.

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KING: Okay. They're very uptight about the area, with some understanding. Indeed, possible paranoia about the area. And a Korean jetliner broke through that thing some years ago, didn't it once, again through navigational intelligence, but still broke the corridor?

GENERAL KEEGAN: Another part of the world.

KING: But they knew they were shooting down a passenger plane, didn't they?

GENERAL KEEGAN: No question about it at all.

KING: And they're, therefore, killing a lot of innocent people who were not spies.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Yes. And they had to be fully aware of it.

KING: Why would the Soviet Union -- forget the United States -- with its desire to appeal to Western European thinking, a desire that's been very successful in some circles, like in Germany, why would they do this dumb thing? Forget the horror of it, the dumbness of it.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Well, these considerations don't always obtain, as they relate to dumbness of some of these actions.

KING: In other words, we're dealing with our logic.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Yes. The Soviets have the largest air defense system in the world. Their air defense structure is larger than the entire United States Air Force. They have a long tradition of extreme sensitivity and aggressiveness. And I am personally familiar with a number of cases going back as far as 30 years in which high-ranking Soviet commanders were shot as the consequence of their failure to successfully intercept whatever was bothering them. And as that tradition has come down into modern times, they have modernized, automated their air defense system, employed the latest automated American technology.

The chain of command, at the same time that it was decentralizing control, was also, through improved communications, able to exercise greater discipline in Moscow. And the discipline in all those years remained unchanged, as did the rules.

Now, not many people are familiar with the Soviet law and Soviet regulations that go back to 1944. These rules essentially are, both in Soviet law and by international agreement, that interlopers, penetrators, be they commercial or military, entering Soviet airspace will be responded to in a very strict fashion.

First, interceptors will be launched. Identification friend or foe will be made. And after such identification, by an agreed system of international air signals, if radio communications cannot be established, the intercepting fighter is to go in front of the interloping aircraft, intruding aircraft, waggle his wings and signal the intruder to lower his gear and land by following the fighter. And failing that, of course, the instructions are clear in the Soviet regulations: destroy the intruder.

And the Soviets behave very characteristically, and were doing so today, I don't have any question.

KING: According, though, to Secretary of State Shultz

-- and you agreed with me. You'd never seen the Secretary of State be as frank in a statement in your memory -- they did that, and the Korean jetliner responded to that and was ready to follow instructions. Is that correct? In other words, that jetliner, while he had made a mistake, was then willing to do anything he could to rectify it.

GENERAL KEEGAN: No, I don't think that's the case. I think this is the case of the Koreans in the cockpit realizing the magnitude of their error. They had just previously reported that they were at a position which in fact they were hundreds of miles away from. So there was a very significant navigation error. Due to equipment? It's hard to say, with the high technology inertial nav equipment aboard those...

KING: It would have to be preprogrammed wrong, wouldn't it? Almost?

GENERAL KEEGAN: I just don't know. There are so many things that could have entered that, including some very James Bondish calculations about options that might have gone [unintelligible].

But in any case, the Korean pilots, suddenly becoming aware that they were really in trouble and that they were really under active interception by active Soviet fighters, obviously did what they have done in other cases previously. They clammed up, they avoided radio communications, they did everything in their power to cover up the mistake, and turned to get the hell out of there as fast as they could. And I think that was the case today. They were evading, approaching the Sea of Japan, over international waters.

And here is where the deliberate savagery and barbaric behavior of the Soviets comes into play.

KING: They knew that plane was trying to leave.

GENERAL KEEGAN: After all of this time, and observing and tracking for 2 1/2 hours, making visual identification, absolutely no possibility of mistaking this for a reconnaissance aircraft, none -- it had to be a commercial jetliner -- the Soviets proceed, deliberately, on instructions and orders from higher up, to shoot down and destroy that aircraft.

KING: Did Moscow -- do you have any doubt as to whether Moscow ordered this?

GENERAL KEEGAN: None whatever.

KING: None at all.

GENERAL KEEGAN: I have none in my mind whatever.

KING: Could it have been a berserko captain of the base in the straits who said to the plane, "Shoot 'em down," acting against Moscow's orders? I mean we're human. Could a human have made that error, tragic error.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Probably in the Free World. But in the Soviet case, with discipline being as brutal as it is, discipline that they inflict upon their own people, I think it hardly likely that some guy might have gone trigger-happy or slightly berserk and acted on his own.

KING: The thought that there's a militant element in the Politburo and a non-militant element, and in this particular instance the militant element took sway, a right and a left there.

GENERAL KEEGAN: In my judgment, that is blatant nonsense. It is a product of some of the most wishful, erroneous judgment-making that a certain number of people in this country indulge themselves in traditionally and regularly, and have over a great number of years. There are no hawks and there are no doves in the Soviet Union. That myth just simply should have been dispelled years ago. No one gets to the position of the Politburo or the Central Committee of the State Defense Committee unless they're tough, hard-bitten Communist ideologues who have lived in the filth and have climbed to their high position by other than climbing over the skeletons of their buddies and their colleagues.

KING: But there could be disagreement, could there not?

GENERAL KEEGAN: No. Perennially, there are differences in judgment, as there are in any great government, including our own. And I think these judgments are reflected by those who understand and watch these things. But these cannot in any way, in my opinion, be represented as part of the hawk-dove establishment. This just is pure, unadulterated nonsense. Differences of opinion, yes. But the differences are over tactics, not over ideology, not over objectives, not over long-range purposes. And the differences over tactics would be, "Well, should we shoot now, or should we bear in mind that we have an international conference coming up?"

The Soviet tendency, in the main, in these situations is to behave in a rigid, categorical sort of way, do it by the book. If the book and the rules call for shoot-down, we've got a violator, let's get him if we can.

KING: General, this may be hard to ask, but I guess everybody thinks it, and maybe a few ask it. Did those people know they were going down? Did they -- were they dead in the air, or did they experience that 22 minutes or so?

GENERAL KEEGAN: I don't have any doubt that the bulk of them knew what was happening. I would guess that the majority of them knew that they had been successfully fired on by a missile. Probably, because of the size, the enormous size of this aircraft and the structural integrity so characteristic of these wide-bodied jets, I think a small air defense rocket might have done some serious damage, killed maybe a dozen people, crippled maybe another dozen or so. But I would guess that for 10 or 20 minutes, a lot of people knew they were about to die. And intellectually, at least, there was pandemonium that reigned in the minds of most of the passengers who survived that rocket.

KING: No loss of air pressure to have knocked them out?

GENERAL KEEGAN: If the hull was penetrated, which is likely, unless the rockets were heat-seeking and attracted to the engines, I think a breach of the hull was probably likely. And I would say that there was a massive decompression, but that this wouldn't kill people instantly. It would cripple them, it would pin them down in their seats.

I've been in a number of high-altitude decompressions, and you always have a minute or two or three, or sometimes longer.

KING: Will we ever have -- will anyone ever have the black box that all planes have that keep the tape of the last 30 minutes?

GENERAL KEEGAN: I think it's likely. And you may be certain that any allied ship that ventures into those waters searching for such parts is going to be given an extremely unfriendly reception by the Soviets.

KING: So we're never going to hear that.

GENERAL KEEGAN: I would guess we would probably not.

KING: Why is the Soviet Union acting as they are now? Why aren't they saying, "We apologize for this grave error. They had invaded our airspace. The pilot failed to respond. We deeply regret the death of those people aboard. We our protecting our space. We hope it never happens"? Why aren't they going some conciliatory route?

GENERAL KEEGAN: They don't play that way. They're an authoritarian, dictatorial regime, and they behave by the rules of dictatorships. And since time immemorial, I don't think [unintelligible] like yourself can name me a single dictatorship that has behaved differently.

KING: They don't apologize, dictators.

GENERAL KEEGAN: They don't apologize for what they're doing. They justify what they're doing. And in their mind and in their way of looking at things, yes, they have justification for what they did, barbaric and uncivilized as it was.

KING: Now, that was still illegal -- forget the moral. That was still illegal to shoot that plane down, even with laws concerning airspace.

GENERAL KEEGAN: No, it was not.

KING: It was not illegal?

GENERAL KEEGAN: No, sir.

KING: They have a legal right to shoot that down?

GENERAL KEEGAN: In Soviet law they did.

KING: I'm talking about international law.

GENERAL KEEGAN: No. In international law, that behavior was totally unwarranted and unjustified. I think that case could be made before the World Court. It would be argued very vigorously by the Soviets. But within the framework of their own legal system, there is no question but what they did was entirely legal, from their perspective.

KING: After the news headlines I'll ask Major Keegan that which plagues all democracies: What does a democracy do to retaliate? We've already heard of -- and I'm sure there'll be others -- of the tragic threat on a Russian passenger plane tonight forced to land in Montreal under threat. And I'm sure there'll be others of this, which makes no sense just to kill other innocent people. But what do we do?

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KING: Before I take the first call, though, what does a democracy do, beyond declaring war? What does it do?

GENERAL KEEGAN: Well, the one thing that a democracy must strive to do is to take actions that have the support of the populace at large, or certainly the legally appointed representative bodies such -- in this country is the Congress of the United States.

KING: Punitive action, then.

GENERAL KEEGAN: That's always difficult to do. And one has to be careful about the nature and the character of the punitive action, lest it occasion more more harm against the

innocent, innocent civilians, whomever and wherever they may be.

And therefore, I think, in this century of more lethal weapons and very dangerous encounters, I think the United States increasingly, and the democracies increasingly, have to look to actions that are acceptable, that are of controlled punition, that do not harm physically the lives of innocent people, and that are designed specifically to let the Soviets be aware that they're being judged and censured by the free people in such a manner that doesn't invite further aggression and further difficulty of this kind.

How do you do this?

KING: Yeah, how do you? Give me a sample.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Well, in my case, of course, I would probably go further than quite a number of people. I look at Soviet behavior as a continuum over 64 years in which their behavior has been consistent, their violation of treaties has been consistent, their delusion of the Free World, through the use of diplomacy as a weapon, has been consistent, in which they have cheated on all their treaties.

So, given that constant, which a lot of people in this country don't accept, I think the only way the United States can respond meaningfully is to be consistent over a long period of patient time, with a clearly delineated and defined policy in which we act softly and speak softly, but take increasingly stringent actions of pressure.

What might some examples be? Well, number one, since 1934, when the protocols of recognition were signed -- I regret to say this, but it's well documented -- it is the United States, principally, which has financed the Soviet Union's industrial, military growth. It is the United States, principally, that has extended the high technology necessary for the Soviets to become a modern industrial state. It is the United States, through its provision of generous credits, sometimes grants, loans of its technical people, its engineering people, its faculties from great universities, and its agricultural produce, often at bargain-basement prices, that have permitted the Soviets to solve their domestic problems by receiving foreign aid from such as the United States in a way that permits them to continue their disparate investments, their over-defense, their over-investment in military capability and technology. And I find that, very simply, means that it is the United States that has been the principal financial, industrial backer of the Soviet war-making potential, which has increased exponentially every year of the past 30 years. And I think that has to stop. Yet I think the likelihood of that stopping in the evolving political climate of the United States is zero.

KING: Even with a tragedy like this.

GENERAL KEEGAN: Oh, yes. Even with a tragedy like this.

KING: Let's take some calls....