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DEBATE OVER U.S. STRATEGY A MIXED RECORD

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IN BRIEF

The charge has resounded in recent times that the United States intelligence community has chronically and woefully underestimated both the pace and magnitude of the Soviet strategic build-up. Yet, an analysis of the available record of forecasts with respect to eight major Soviet weapons developments—extending from the first Soviet A-bomb explosion in 1949 to the improvements in Soviet ICBM accuracy and yields in the 1970s—shows that the performance has been mixed, consisting of overestimates as well as underestimates, and in at least two instances of predictions that were on or close to the target. Few of the mistakes that have been committed in forecasting can be attributed to errors in intelligence gathering; most of them have been the function of more-or-less inevitable human foibles. With the demise of SALT, estimates of future Soviet strategic programs are apt to be wider off the mark than they would have been under a SALT II Treaty, because the reference points provided by the Treaty for U.S. intelligence have been removed, and precisely because the human element in intelligence evaluation and forecasting is thus again maximized.

"It is . . . a matter of record that the growth of the Soviet ICBM force was underestimated for a decade after the 'missile gap' by the entire intelligence community—including Pentagon 'hawks.'"

Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, USA (Ret.)

"But the history of the past twenty years shows quite the reverse. Few indeed are the instances when the Soviet military threat later turned out to be greater than the estimated 'worst case.' Usually, the government's experts overestimated the danger."

George B. Kistiakowsky

The death of SALT II turns the focus of U.S. strategic intelligence away from "verification" and back to the old business of "forecasting." SALT provided for some degrees of restraint and certainty: We knew how far the Soviets were allowed to go, and the task was to verify their compliance with these restrictions. Without SALT, there are no limits or guidelines. The United States must rely purely on its skills in strategic forecasting—in projecting the future, including future Soviet strategic intentions and capabilities.