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# Confusing Intelligence Given Carter

The fear that nags critics of SALT II is that the United States won't be able to tell whether the Soviet Union is cheating on the strategic arms limitation agreement.

This is a legitimate concern. The Soviets have a track record of "interpreting" treaty provisions in their favor.

But what is not generally known is that the most serious problem of interpretation may rest with our own intelligence organizations. Although our ability to gather information about the Russians is excellent, there is serious disagreement in our intelligence community over how the information should be interpreted.

The result is that two or more conclusions—each based on a logically reasonable interpretation of the same basic facts—have been presented to the president as guidance in setting national policy. "I don't know how the president can make his decisions from all the different conclusions we give him," one intelligence source told our associate Dale Van Atta.

The simple, appalling truth is that, though the Soviet government is in its 62nd year of existence, our intelligence experts still can't agree on what kind of beast the Russian communist bear is. They are like the legendary blind men trying to describe the elephant from different vantage points, and it is left for the president to decide which description is most reliable.

The basic disagreement is over the Soviets' long-range strategic goals. Are they, in the late Nikita Khrushchev's phrase, out to "bury" us and take over the world? Are they defensive paranoids, fearful of being overwhelmed by U.S. military and industrial strength? Or are they just practical politicians seeking to exploit any temporary advantage on the international scene in hopes of achieving stability through equality with the United States?

The diversity of opinion is spelled out in a document, "Understanding Soviet Strategic Policy," written by Central Intelligence Agency analyst Fritz Ermath, who is now with the National Security Council. Although the paper was prepared in December 1975, it is still stamped "Top Secret Umbra" because it is regarded as valid today.

"The subject of Soviet strategic policy and objectives is very elusive," Ermath began. "Pertinent evidence is voluminous; but it almost never speaks for itself. Interpretation of the evidence always involves our preconceptions about the Soviet Union as a nation, international politics, the meaning of military power, and the condition of our own country."

Ermath then spells out the "three distinguishable perspectives current in the intelligence community" concerning the Soviets:

- The first group contends that the men in the Kremlin "seek clear superiority over the U.S. with confidence and determination and may see some serious prospect of achieving it in the next decade."
- The second group believes "that the Soviets entertain no realistic hope of acquiring clear strategic superiority over the U.S. and even see the chance for advantage as dubious," according to Ermath. "Their [the Russians'] main aim is quite simply to prevent the great technical and industrial might of the U.S. from placing them once again in an inferior position. Their arms and arms control policies are chosen to this end."
- The third group sees the Soviets' objective this way—"to choose policies that best hedge against uncertainty; they frame their policies to offer some chance of attaining a decisive preponderance over the U.S., a greater chance of something less dramatic but still advantageous and a virtual guarantee of establishing and retaining at least overall equality."

Footnote: For what cold comfort it offers, intelligence sources feel the Kremlin leaders are as confused about the United States as we are about them. The information they collect— from U.S. newspapers, congressional hearings, politicians' statements, Pentagon announcements, their own covert activities— probably gives them no better grasp of U.S. strategic goals than the average American newspaper reader has.