1983: Reagan, Andropov, and a World on the Brink

Taylor Downing (Da Capo Press, 2018), 391 pp., photographs, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Douglas F. Garthoff

Varying levels of tension between the USSR and the United States existed throughout the Cold War as strongly held beliefs and interests drove a global political competition and thousands of nuclear weapons cast an ever-present shadow of potential destruction. Periods of eased tension came and went, but so too did moments of crisis when the risk of war came to the fore.

This book, written by a British television producer advertised on the dust cover as a writer of "vivid and fast-paced" history books, says it aims "to create a new and accessible narrative" of a period of heightened US-Soviet tension in 1983. And that is precisely what it does. Much of it re-tells known events: President Reagan's evil empire rhetoric, his advocacy of a strategic defense initiative (SDI), US military probing along Soviet borders, the Soviet shootdown of a South Korean airliner, Soviet concerns about new US missiles in Europe, and a NATO military exercise called Able Archer. The book draws on relevant sources, including interviews generated for a 2007 British *Flashback* television series produced by the author as well as memoirs, scholarly analyses, and declassified documents. Unfortunately, apparently for Downing, creation a compelling "story of the time when fingers really did hover over the nuclear button" (16) took precedence over analysis.

The book goes beyond history for dramatic effect in painting a scene for which no sources are cited. Soviet leader Yury Andropov, Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov, and General Staff chief Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov are depicted as sitting out the night of November 9 as Able Archer comes to a head, "trembling" over the possibility of reluctantly having "to push the nuclear button." (255) It also goes beyond available mixed evidence to declare that "the entire Soviet nuclear arsenal" (242) was placed on maximum combat alert.

Apparently encouraging the author in this direction are reminiscences and studies reflecting US intelligence about a range of Soviet intelligence and military activities observed during 1983. The climactic chapter closes with a quotation from a 2007 *Flashback* television interview by former DCI Robert Gates: "We may have been at the brink of nuclear war and not even known it." (256) Also quoted is a 1990 study by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), declassified in 2015 and characterized in the book's acknowledgments as "the jewel in the crown of recently revealed evidence on the November war scare," (349) which claims that Able Archer "may have inadvertently placed our relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger." (224)

Disregarding the careful use of "may" in these speculations makes for a clearer story but does not serve accuracy. The current public record on Able Archer leaves unanswered the question of what related actions, if any, were taken by Soviet leaders. It is tantalizing to wonder what Politburo member Grigory Romanov had in mind when he charged in a speech two days before Able Archer began that "the international situation is at present white hot, thoroughly white hot." (238) But at this time we simply do not know, and other statements by Soviet leaders strongly expressing concern about tensions during the early 1980s also remain subject to interpretation as to the degree of danger they may reflect. Former ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and former KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov have said that Andropov stood out among Soviet leaders as the most fearful of a US nuclear attack, but even if accepted as fact that does not translate to a finger closer to a button more than, say, occasions when missile warning systems went awry (one of which, recounted in the book, occurred shortly after the 1983 Korean airliner incident).

The book's treatment of intelligence is uneven. It notes accurately that anger expressed by US leaders over the airliner incident disregarded cautions raised by US intelligence about the knowledge of Soviet air defense commanders, and also that President Reagan was told about Soviet fearfulness and took it to heart. It highlights the importance of human agents on both sides (e.g., Oleg Gordievsky, Rainer Rupp) and accords attention to the

extraordinary Soviet intelligence program begun in 1981 that monitored closely any indicators of a sudden US nuclear strike, although attributing Andropov's rise to the top to his recommending it is another imagined fact. The book's more general comments about US intelligence are shallow. It wrongly implies that inadequate intelligence led to White House surprise at Moscow's unhappiness over SDI, and blaming US intelligence for not predicting the end of the USSR repeats a perennial complaint better addressed elsewhere.

Scholars will find nothing new in this book to advance analysis of issues such as whether the tensions of 1983 rival those of 1962 as the most dangerous moment of the Cold War, or whether US intelligence assessments of the time interpreted available data to best advantage (the target of the PFIAB study).[a] One could argue, however, that a story about an important Cold War moment that melds research and imagination to portray the continuing weight of nuclear age fears on leaders and citizens alike performs a valuable service, particularly for the growing number of readers who have no memory or knowledge of the Cold War.[b]

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a. A 1997 Center for the Study of Intelligence monograph, Benjamin B. Fischer's *A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare*, also examines the question of how well US intelligence understood Soviet expressions of concern about the possibility of war in 1983, concluding that analysts who interpreted stated Soviet concerns as reflecting genuine fears probably were closer to the truth than those who viewed them as disinformation or scare tactics.

b. Another recent treatment of the period, similar in style and approach to Downing's, is that of another journalist and film producer, Marc Ambinder: *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983* (Simon & Schuster, 2018).

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