

not recall the specifics of a single meeting with the defendant, Adm. John Poindexter, with whom he'd met one-on-one every day for nearly a year. He had virtually no recollection of signing the momentous presidential finding that could have led to his impeachment in the Iran-Contra scandal.

Looking back now, it is sadly apparent that this was not simply a legal tactic but a physical manifestation of the Alzheimer's disease that had already begun to eat away his mind. When attorneys presented him with transcripts of his speeches and press statements, Reagan beheld them with the delight of first discovery. But in the middle of this arduous and, as he admitted, confusing day and a half of back-and-forth with lawyers, in an instant of unexpected and shocking clarity, Reagan offered an unsolicited reminder to these young attorneys of just what he'd been up against as president: "We only had to heed the words of Lenin, which was what was guiding them, when Lenin said that the Soviet Union would take Eastern Europe, it would organize the hordes of Asia and then it would move on Latin America. And, once having taken that, it wouldn't have to take the last bastion of capitalism, the United States. The United States would fall into their outstretched hand like overripe fruit. Well, history reveals that the Soviet Union followed that policy." It was a stirring moment in an otherwise sad and dreary courtroom exercise, when the ex-president let loose with his eloquent little peroration and showed a flash of the ol' Gipper. He could still remember his best lines. And deliver them too.

Never mind that Lenin didn't ever say or write this. Reagan likely got the quote from *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, circa 1958, which had cribbed it from the fanciful US Senate testimony of a youngish Russian exile by the name of Nicholas Goncharoff, who was just three years old when Lenin died. The fake Lenin quote in the original Goncharoff-Bircher

rendering did not in fact mention Latin America, but Reagan was never shy about ad-libbing an update here, an improvement there. His point was, when he walked into the Oval Office, the Soviet Union, "the evil empire" bent on world domination, was out to enslave the citizens of the United States. And the Soviets had fellow travelers lurking right here on our own continent: the Cuban strongman Fidel Castro and a growing contingent of Marxist revolutionaries who were working hard to make Communist satellites of El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua. There was a Bolshevik in every *baño*.

When Team Reagan started down the road to military buildup, its ideological and quasi-intellectual backup came from the post-World War II phenomenon of the permanent national security hawk nest, the out-of-power roost for ex-military, ex-intelligence, ex-Capitol Hill, defense industry, academic, and self-proclaimed experts on threats to the United States and how (inevitably) those threats were being ignored by the naïve government apparatchiks these restless hawks were eager to replace. The Think Tanks and Very Important Committees of the permanent national security peanut gallery are now so mature and entrenched that almost no one thinks they're creepy anymore, and national security liberals have simply decided it's best to add their own voices to them rather than criticize them. But like we lefties learned in trying (and failing) to add a liberal network to the all-right-wing, decades-old medium of political talk radio, the permanent defense gadfly world can't really grow a liberal wing. It's an inherently hawkish enterprise. Where's the inherent urgency in arguing that the threats aren't as bad as the hype, that military power is being overused, that the defense budget could safely and wisely be scaled back, that maybe this

next war doesn't need us? The only audience for defense wonkery is defense enthusiasts, and they're not paying the price of admission to hear that defense is overrated.

Even before President Carter was losing the nation's attention with his talk of "a nation that is at peace tonight everywhere in the world," the oh-no-you-don't defense-igentsia's alternate position was being proclaimed by a cabal of academics, military officials, and businessmen (a director of the defense contractor Boeing, for instance), who liked to meet for lunch over the starched white tablecloths of Washington's exclusive Metropolitan Club; they called themselves the Committee on the Present Danger. Among the committee members were the rabid anti-communists Paul "Missile Gap" Nitze, who was well known for his frightening and incorrect assertions in the 1950s that the Soviets had achieved superiority in offensive nuclear missiles; Gen. Daniel O. Graham, Reagan's go-to guy on Panama and godfather of the Star Wars defense shield; James R. Schlesinger, who was at that moment eloquently and vociferously sick and tired of the nation's neurotic hand-wringing; and historian Richard Pipes, who liked to bash his lefty academic colleagues while using his Harvard faculty credentials as proof of his own intellectual bona fides. The *mélange* of suit-and-tie warriors fancied themselves latter-day Paul Reveres, and in the spring of 1976, in the cosseted world of the Metropolitan Club, they began scripting the dire warning that the Russians were coming, the Russians were coming—that the Soviet Union had *surpassed* the West in both nuclear and conventional force capabilities. The Russians were building their strategic (aka offensive) capabilities, they said, toward not just starting and not just fighting, but starting and fighting and *winning* a nuclear war. And there was nobody in the United States intelligence apparatus clever enough to understand it, not like the Present Danger luncheoners.

The Committee on the Present Danger might have finished its career as a forgotten lot of kooks if it weren't for Ronald Reagan. The first thing he did for them was to prove that you could get real political traction with their kind of scare tactics. "The evidence mounts that we are Number Two in a world where it's dangerous, if not fatal, to be second best," Reagan had said on the campaign trail, on his way to nearly upsetting sitting president Gerald Ford in the primaries. When Reagan began roughing up Ford in that election season, Ford's new CIA head decided he could provide the president some political cover from the tough-talking right by acquiescing to the Present Danger luncheoners' demand to participate in the government's official top secret estimate of Soviet military and political strength. "Let 'er fly!" Director George H. W. Bush wrote, inviting this group of "outside experts" (they would be called Team B) to look over the shoulder of his agency analysts and come up with a parallel assessment of the Soviet threat.

From the start, Team B was much more interested in the political and public relations benefits of participating in the National Intelligence Estimate than in the final product itself. When Team B looked at the intelligence data, it was sure to misread it, and not by a matter of slight degree. Team B wildly overhyped the flight range of the Soviets' Backfire bomber, rendering it a threat to America's East Coast when in fact it had a proven combat radius that left it about three thousand miles short. Their estimate of future production numbers of the bomber was off by more than 100 percent. They asserted, falsely, that the Soviets were working furiously on laser-beam weapons that were nearing deployment. Because the United States had developed acoustic devices for tracking nuclear subs, Team B assumed the Soviets had them too. When it was unable to find a whit of evidence that the Russians had developed these acoustic devices, Team B simply

invented for the Soviets “non-acoustic” devices. As Anne Hessing Cahn, a former Defense Department official who wrote a book about the Team B fiasco, noted: “They’re saying, ‘We can’t find any evidence that they’re doing it the way everyone thinks they’re doing it, so they must be doing it a different way. We don’t know what that different way is, but they must be doing it.’”

The obfuscations and make-believe continued for fifty-five breathless pages. The Team B report incorrectly asserted that Soviet military spending, especially on new nuclear weapons, was on a steady upward trajectory. Team B was so wrong about the Soviets, so invested in hyperinflating the Soviet threat, that they even claimed that the USSR was exempt from the basic guns-versus-butter tradeoff that everyone learns on day one of macroeconomics class. In Team B’s imaginings, the Soviets were so all-powerful that they didn’t have to trade off anything. “Soviet strategic forces have yet to reflect any constraining effect of civil economy competition, and are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future,” wrote Team B, conjuring a world in which the Soviets could build all the tanks and tractors they wanted, without limit. In this, Team B simply brushed aside the settled historical fact that the Politburo could hardly keep its own people fed. “The spectacle,” noted an official CIA analysis in 1964, “of the USSR, after boastful claims and plans a few years ago, coming to the West hat in hand to buy wheat and ask for long-term credits . . . These phenomena are not passing difficulties, nor are they merely consequences of misfortune. The source is deeper, and the problem will not soon go away.” In fact, at the time Team B imagined for the Soviets an impossible sustained upward arc, Soviet military expenditures were flat or even falling.

Team B further asserted, with no hard evidence, that the Soviet Union had “hardened” its command-and-control structure to permit the Communists to win a nuclear war against the

United States, and was training its citizenry in a civil defense system that would ensure the survival of a large enough cohort of its population to maintain a viable nation after that war. Team B was apparently unaware of the joke among Muscovites about Soviet civil defense:

“What do you do in the event of a nuclear attack?”

“Wrap yourself in a white sheet and crawl slowly to the cemetery.”

“Why slowly?”

“To avoid causing a panic.”

In Team B’s defense, not that many ordinary Russians made it to the Metropolitan Club for lunch in those days.

The umbrella assertion made by Team B—and the most inflammatory—was that the previous National Intelligence Estimates “substantially misperceived the motivations behind Soviet strategic programs, and thereby tended consistently to underestimate their intensity, scope, and implicit threat.” Soviet military leaders weren’t simply trying to defend their territory and their people; they were readying a First Strike option, and the US intelligence community had missed it. What led to this “grave and dangerous flaw” in threat assessment, according to Team B, was an overreliance on hard technical facts, and a lamentable tendency to downplay “the large body of soft data.” This “soft” data, the ideological leader of Team B, Richard Pipes, would later say, included “his deep knowledge of the Russian soul.”

Historian Pipes had not lived for any extended time in Eastern Europe since his family fled Poland at the beginning of World War II when he was still a teenager, and his area of expertise in Russian history stopped somewhere around 1923. America’s self-proclaimed Kremlinologist never claimed any real sources of information inside the Kremlin. But that didn’t mean he was shy about explaining “the grand strategy” of the Soviet leaders circa

1976; neither was he shy about parsing their psyches without a license. The Soviet Union, according to Pipes, was more than ever hell-bent on world domination. The old aristocracy sympathetic to the West had been killed off long ago; the people in charge were descended from a mindless and bitter peasantry, and they were wielding a lot more than pitchforks these days.

The Team B report may have been an exhilarating exercise for its members, allowing them the endorphin-producing experience of beating on the crania of the CIA's analysts, but the nation that Team B meant to wholly reorient to the . . . uh . . . "present danger" remained unaware of Team B's warnings. Their entire output was for the eyes of the president and his intelligence hands only. Pipes's efforts to get Team B's addendum to the NIE report declassified and into the widest possible circulation were rebuffed.

But that could be fixed: somebody from Team B started leaking its findings to the press, and then the Committee on the Present Danger published their own white-linen manifesto: "The principal threat to our nation, to world peace and to the cause of human freedom is the Soviet drive for dominance based upon an unparalleled military build-up."

They also published articles under unforgettable headlines such as "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight & Win a Nuclear War" by Richard Pipes, who now had the imprimatur of his recent participation in the National Intelligence Estimate, and who therefore had, as far as his readers believed, the inside dope. The Committee on the Present Danger had gotten their message out there: The Soviet Union was actively trying to off us. *Now*. While the naïve among us thought we were at peace!

Ronald Reagan was a big fan of the Present Danger crowd; they would later claim he was a member. And it is certainly true that

he hired on many Present Danger men to serve in his administration, and not as bureaucratic pikers but as national security adviser (Richard Allen), as director of Eastern European and Soviet Affairs (Richard Pipes), as chief negotiator on the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and later special adviser on arms control (Paul Nitze), and as director of Central Intelligence (William Casey). Casey, in particular, represented an incredible shift to the . . . well, incredible. Willard C. Matthias, one of the CIA's best-known and best-respected analysts going back to the 1950s, a man who tried to warn the Johnson administration in 1964 that a war in Vietnam was not winnable, summed it up like this: "With Casey's arrival at the CIA, the campaign to shift control of national estimates to the hard-line anti-Communist faction of the intelligence community was over. The rational approach, with its commitment to keeping Soviet behavior under continuing review, was replaced by one that simply identified the USSR as an implacable and changeless enemy determined to enslave the world. The only question was when and how the Soviets would attempt to do so. The issue was 'slavery' versus 'freedom.'"

Even before he was elected, Reagan had been making Casey's slavery-versus-freedom argument himself, and he really believed it. He could occasionally be shocked when presented with the logical operational extension of his hard-line rhetoric, as when his first secretary of state, Alexander Haig, suggested a US military attack on Cuba. "Give me the word," the nation's chief of diplomacy said to the new president in March 1981, "and I'll turn that island into a fucking parking lot." One of Reagan's most loyal and longtime aides, Mike Deaver, later said that Haig's pronouncement had "scared the shit out of me" and had also shaken the boss. Deaver asked Chief of Staff James Baker to make certain Haig was never again in a room alone with the president.

But Reagan did not soften his own tough talk. In a nationally televised interview in March of 1981, when *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite suggested that Reagan might be laying it on a little thick about the Soviet leaders being “liars and thieves,” the president stuck by his assessment, paraphrasing another hysterical Bircher trope: “We’re naïve if we don’t remember their ideology is without God, without our idea of morality in the religious sense—their statement about morality is that nothing is immoral if it furthers their cause, which means that they can resort to lying or stealing or cheating or even murder if it furthers their cause. . . . If we’re going to deal with them, then we have to keep that in mind.”

That same month, the Reagan administration went into production on a new publication called *Soviet Military Power*. The illustrated, ninety-nine-page booklet, released just as Reagan was asking for added funding for MX missiles and B-1 bombers, was no internal government-eyes-only threat assessment. This was straight-up politics, complete with dozens of specially commissioned artists’ renderings of the Soviet military’s 25,000-ton ballistic missile submarines, MiG-23 Flogger counter-air jet fighters and MIRVed intercontinental missiles, each of which looked like a cel from a deranged Team B–authored episode of *Jonny Quest*. On one page was the outline of the Soviets’ Nizhny Tagil Tank Plant ominously superimposed on a map of Washington, DC. The tank factory covered the Mall from the Capitol Building to the Lincoln Memorial. “There are 135 major military industrial plants now operating in the Soviet Union with over 40 million square meters in floor space, a 34 percent increase since 1970,” the booklet informed readers. High-tech Soviet shop classes, the booklet noted, were graduating thousands of welding engineers every year. And they had “perfected two

new methods for refining steel and other alloys—electroslag re-melting and plasma-arc melting.” Nine hundred thousand mad Soviet scientists were at work designing and testing new weapons systems, giving the Soviets, according to best guesstimates, a running head start on twenty-first-century weapons technology: “The Soviet high energy laser program is three-to-five times the U.S. level of effort . . . they have worked on the gas dynamic laser, the electric discharge laser and the chemical laser . . . in the latter half of [the 1980s] it is possible that the Soviets could demonstrate laser weapons in a wide variety of ground, ship and aerospace applications. . . . Research in behavioral modification, biological warfare and genetic engineering all have the potential to result in the development of new and extremely effective weapons.”

“Its purpose,” noted *Time* magazine of the *Soviet Military Power* booklet, “[is to] send a red alert to Americans and their allies that the U.S.S.R. is gaining a military edge over the West. Naturally, there was suspicion that the timing was designed to help the Pentagon justify the vast sums needed for the new strategic systems.” Reagan’s secretary of defense Caspar Weinberger denied this allegation. “There is a very real and growing threat,” he said when unveiling the booklet produced by the Pentagon’s public affairs team. “It is not scare talk or any kind of propaganda.”

Of course, it *was* scare talk and propaganda, but it was *quality* scare talk and propaganda. In 1981, and 1983, and every year thereafter, right around budget time, the Pentagon released its newest installment of *Soviet Military Power* to the public, and then Reagan sent his chairman of the Joint Chiefs up to Capitol Hill to make headlines. A typical pronouncement from 1983: “The Soviets have armed themselves to the teeth and they

continue to do so at a rate far in excess of any legitimate defense needs by any measure—theirs or ours. The plain fact of the matter is that, in the last ten years, Soviet military investment in hardware alone has exceeded ours by some 500 billion dollars.” And every year the Pentagon bite of the federal dollar got bigger and bigger. In Reagan’s eight years in office, military expenditure doubled from around \$150 billion to \$300 billion a year, until it represented nearly 30 percent of our overall annual budget and more than 6 percent of GDP. And all to chase the giant shadow projected on the wall by the *Fantasia* boys at the Committee on the Present Danger.

You didn’t have to be a defense contractor to cash in on this ’80s political phenomenon. Hollywood studios, those great coastal reflecting pools of received wisdom, had pretty much dispensed with introspective films like *Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* that picked at the old scabs of the Vietnam War. Now they were happy to produce box-office gold while feeding the Soviets-as-maniacs paranoia. In *Red Dawn*, schoolboys C. Thomas Howell, Patrick Swayze, and Charlie Sheen went guerrilla to fight a spectacularly armed force of Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguans who had invaded their peaceful Colorado town after (yes, Richard Pipes!) a Kremlin-ordered nuclear first strike destroyed most major American cities. The biggest moneymaking movie of 1986 was a Knights-of-the-Sky adventure pic that would have made Burgess Meredith and Hap Arnold blush: *Top Gun*. “Gentlemen,” says our flight instructor, “this school is about combat. There are no points for second place.” Young Tom Cruise was the lasciviously oiled, sun-burnished, leather-jacket-wearing, motorcycle-driving, soul-singing fighter pilot who overcomes self-doubt (a psychic leftover from his father’s service record in Vietnam) and the training-exercise death of his best buddy/navigator (“Talk to me, Goose”) to air-joust the Soviet MiG jets into

bloodless submission and win the girl. *Top Gun* sold nearly fifty million tickets in US theaters.

And who was pushing back at this hypermilitarism? Well, it didn’t much matter. When a million people gathered at a Central Park rally to protest nuclear arms proliferation—the biggest single demonstration in American history—Team Reagan initially wrote them off as well-intentioned but hopelessly naïve. But the administration soon moved on to suggesting the demonstrators were stooges in a Soviet plot. “In the organization of some of the big demonstrations, the one in New York and so forth,” Reagan asserted in a press conference a few months after the rally, “there is no question about foreign agents that were sent to instigate and help create and keep such a big movement going.” Reagan refused to elaborate on this theory “because I don’t discuss intelligence matters.” And it was true that the publications providing the most cogent and consistent counterweight to the new American militarization were generally the magazines whose ad revenue depended on discount-priced Oriental herbs, futons, prefab geodesic homes, all-cotton drawstring pants, send-a-crystal-to-a-friend, and the magic of Feldenkrais’s Awareness Through Movement seminars.

Not many mainstream American publications gave much play to the statement of Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev a month after Reagan’s first *Soviet Military Power* was issued: “It is dangerous madness to try to defeat each other in the arms race and to count on victory in nuclear war. I shall add that only he who has decided to commit suicide can start a nuclear war in the hope of emerging a victor from it. No matter what the attacker might possess, no matter what method of unleashing nuclear war he chooses, he will not attain his aims. Retributions will ensue ineluctably.” Nor that of Brezhnev’s deputy Konstantin Chernenko, who said nuclear war “must not be permitted. . . .

It is criminal to look upon nuclear war as a rational, almost legitimate continuation of policy." Nor that of Brezhnev's other deputy, Yuri Andropov, who said that "any attempt to resolve the historic conflict between these systems by means of military clash would be fatal for mankind."

But, hey, those guys were liars. The president said so. And in 1981 Reagan went on the record with a dark warning, saying, "Unlike us, the Soviet Union believes that a nuclear war is possible and they believe it is winnable."

America's actor president and his hard-right turn looked like madness to the Soviets. What Team B was making up about the Soviet mind-set actually seemed true about the American one. The Soviets saw the US defense budget go up by 10 percent a year; they saw us rolling out ever more lethal strategic weapons and investing in new military technology. They watched with growing alarm as Reagan convinced NATO to plant nuclear-armed missiles all over Western Europe. And they watched as Reagan convinced a skeptical but apparently spineless Congress to fund General Graham's defense system designed to knock down any missiles the Soviets fired, a system popularly known as Star Wars, as in the blockbuster film. Star Wars was as much a fantasy as Ewoks and lightsabers. Thirty years later we're still futzing with it and it doesn't really work, or even really make sense. But from the point of view of the Soviets, who had no way of knowing how close to science fiction Star Wars was, this signaled an alarming move by Reagan to free the United States from the fearsome but stabilizing deterrent of Mutually Assured Destruction. With Star Wars defenses in place, the Soviets feared, our nukes would hit Russia first, but then any retaliatory missiles from them would be shot out of the

sky before they even entered American airspace. It would take the safety off America's nuclear trigger.

The Soviets put their own intelligence services on high alert, watching for any and every sign of American military movement. And their ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, who spent much of his adult life in Washington, was gently passing the word to his bosses in the Kremlin that Reagan really did believe what he was saying. Dobrynin later wrote in his memoir that "considering the continuous political and military rivalry and tension between the two superpowers, and an adventurous president such as Reagan, there was no lack of concern in Moscow that American bellicosity and simple human miscalculation could combine with fatal results."

In 1983, when fear at the Kremlin was at an all-time high, the Reagan administration was more or less oblivious to it. "While we in American intelligence saw the tension," Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates (yes, *that* Robert Gates) wrote in his memoir, "we did not really grasp just how much the Soviet leadership felt increasingly threatened by the U.S. and by the course of events."

There was, remarkably, according to Dobrynin's later memoir, one article of faith inside the Kremlin that gave the Soviets some measure of solace: the American system of government. They understood that a president had a lot of hoops to jump through before he could take the United States to war. Dobrynin had been in Washington to watch the Congress erect the would-be barrier to presidential war making that was the War Powers Act. Reagan's Soviet counterparts—Brezhnev, Chernenko, Gorbachev—believed, as Dobrynin wrote, that the "political and social structure of the United States was the best guarantee against an unprovoked strike." Yuri Andropov, who was Soviet general secretary in 1983, that year of living most dangerously, was not so sanguine. "Reagan is unpredictable,"