

ABLE ARCHER 83

By Ben F. Fischer

The Soviets were familiar with the annual NATO command post exercise codenamed ABLE ARCHER 83 from previous years, but the 1983 version included two important changes:

- In the original scenario (which was later modified), the 1983 exercise was to involve high-level officials, including the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in major roles, with cameo appearances by the President and the Vice President. Such high-level participation would have meant greater publicity and visibility than was the case during past runnings of this exercise.

ABLE ARCHER 83 included a practice drill that took NATO forces through a full-scale simulated release of nuclear weapons.

According to high-level Soviet KGB defector Oleg Gordievsky, on the night of November 8 or 9-he was not sure which-the KGB Center sent a flash cable to West European residencies advising them, incorrectly, that US forces in Europe had gone on alert and that troops at some bases were being mobilized. The cable speculated that the (nonexistent) alert might have been ordered in response to the then-recent bomb attack on the US Marine barracks in Lebanon, or was related to impending US Army maneuvers, or was the beginning of a countdown to a surprise nuclear attack. Recipients were asked to confirm the US alert and evaluate these hypotheses.

Gordievsky described the reaction in stark terms:

In the tense atmosphere generated by the crises and rhetoric of the past few months, the KGB concluded that American forces had been placed on alert--and might even have begun the countdown to war [...]. The world did not quite reach the edge of the nuclear abyss [...], but during ABLE ARCHER 83 it had, without realizing it, come frighteningly close--certainly closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The ABLE ARCHER story has been told and retold by journalists with inside contacts in the White House and Whitehall. Three themes run through the various versions: The US and USSR came close to war as a result of Soviet overreaction; only Gordievsky's timely warning to the West kept things from getting out of

hand; and Gordievsky's information was an epiphany for President Reagan, convincing him that the Kremlin indeed was fearful of a US surprise nuclear attack:

Within a few weeks after [...] ABLE ARCHER 83, the London CIA station reported, presumably on the basis of information obtained by the British from Gordievsky, that the Soviets had been alarmed about the real possibility that the United States was preparing a nuclear attack against them. [National Security Adviser Robert] McFarlane, who received the reports at the White House, initially discounted them as Soviet scare tactics rather than evidence of real concern about American intentions, and told Reagan of his view in presenting them to the President. But a more extensive survey of Soviet attitudes sent to the White House early in 1984 by CIA director William Casey, based in part on reports from the double agent Gordievsky, had a more sobering effect. Reagan seemed uncharacteristically grave after reading the report and asked McFarlane, "Do you suppose they really believe that? [...] I don't see how they could believe that--but it's something to think about." [...] In a meeting the same day, Reagan spoke about the biblical prophecy of Armageddon, a final world-ending battle between good and evil, a topic that fascinated the President. McFarlane thought it was not accidental that Armageddon was on Reagan's mind.

Is Gordievsky's stark description credible? According to US foreign affairs correspondent Don Oberdorfer, the "volume and urgency" of Warsaw Pact communications increased during the exercise. In addition, US sources reported that Soviet fighter aircraft with nuclear weapons at bases in East Germany and Poland were placed on alert. But a US expert who queried a number of senior Soviet political and military officials, Raymond Garthoff, reports that none had heard of ABLE ARCHER, and all denied that it had come to the attention of the Politburo or even the upper levels of the Defense Ministry. Moreover, the knowledgeable Soviet ambassador to Washington Anatoly F. Dobrynin, who argues that the top leadership took the war threat seriously, makes no mention of ABLE ARCHER.

ABLE ARCHER 83, it seems, made more of an impression in the White House than in the Kremlin. In any event, it was not comparable to the Cuban crisis, when the superpowers were on a collision course, US nuclear forces were on full alert, and the USSR had deployed nuclear weapons in Cuba.

[Excerpt from Ben B. Fischer, [*A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare*](#) (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1997), pp. 24-26.]