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Simon Miles. "The War Scare That Wasn't: Able Archer 83 and the Myths of the Second Cold War."

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Secretary of State John Foster Dulles probably did not refuse to shake the hand of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev probably never banged his shoe on the table at the United Nations. Many of the most famous anecdotes about the Cold War are not accurate. In some cases, the real truth is most useful for pedants at dinner parties. But in others, popular mistakes about the Cold War constitute serious misunderstandings about not only historical turning points but also what such events tell us about how to think about politics more generally.

The new article by Simon Miles about the NATO Able Archer exercise in 1983 is not just a major contribution because it further corrects the record of another Cold War 'myth.' It is also a serious accomplishment because he goes into great detail on the origin of the myth, its significance, and its persistence. Readers will not only come away with a better understanding of the event itself, but also the use and misuse of sources. As Miles correctly notes, because nuclear crises (or faux crises) are so rare, we should do our best to accurately understand what happened, and this article should be required reading for political scientists who are interested in the latest historiography. Miles does not explicitly ask whether Able Archer is a 'good' or 'bad' case for testing the nuclear taboo and strategic stability, although his new book provides more details on this question. Ultimately, however, "The War Scare That Wasn't" is a powerful case study of nuclear history at its best.¹

The War Scare That Wasn't

The first two pages of the article include an enormous thirty-three line footnote listing the scholarship that has concluded that NATO's Able Archer 83 exercise led the Soviet leadership to consider a preemptive attack to counter a western first strike.² Miles is not the first scholar to question those conclusions. As he recognizes, Mark Kramer, Gordon Barrass,

¹ Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

² See, for example, Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 124; Stephen J. Cimbala, "Revisiting the Nuclear 'War Scare' of 1983: Lessons Retro- and Prospectively," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27:2 (2014): 234–53; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 227–228; David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 94–100; Nate Jones, ed., *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

Raymond Garthoff, Beatrice Heuser, and Vojtech Mastny have all used archives and interviews to claim the Soviets never believed a NATO attack was imminent or considered moving first.³

Miles's contribution, however, is special for two reasons. First, he draws upon new archives to provide fascinating new details on Project RYaN, a Warsaw Pact initiative to determine whether a U.S.-led nuclear attack was imminent. The Soviet defector Oleg Gordievsky, who first openly claimed that Able Archer represented a 'near-miss,' pointed to RYaN as the reason for the alleged Soviet reaction. Miles uses previously unused documents that are held in archives throughout the Warsaw Pact, including the German Democratic Republic, Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia, to demonstrate clearly that RYaN was simply not trusted or treated seriously in 1983: "During the Able Archer 83 exercise, RYaN was a research and development project rather than a serious source of insight into NATO's thinking – far from a sufficient basis on which to contemplate a preemptive strike" (103-104).

The Power of Myth

Yet this article is also fascinating because of its description of how the popular myth began, why it has proven so popular, and the impact of the misunderstanding on the course of the Cold War. Miles blames Gordievsky for first making inaccurate statements about Able Archer, but he also carefully assesses the curious role of declassified U.S. intelligence documents in perpetuating and affirming Gordievsky's views.

In January 1989, the outgoing director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Leonard Perroots, fired a "parting shot before retirement" (96) in which he claimed that war was only narrowly averted in 1983. In February 1990, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) completed a report that argued "there was in fact a genuine belief among key members of the Soviet leadership that the United States had embarked on a program of achieving decisive military superiority that might prompt a sudden nuclear missile attack on the USSR" but cautioned that, specifically during Able Archer, "the depth of that concern is difficult to gauge (96-97)." The PFIAB, like Gordievsky, pointed to RYaN as a reason for the heightened dangers at the time.

When the PFIAB report was declassified in 2015, the document, as well as other declassified intelligence assessments, led to the conclusion that Gordievsky was right and Able Archer was a 'near miss.'⁴ That turn of events is a disconcerting and cautionary tale. I sometimes recommend that my students use documents from the American archives to better understand the politics of other countries – especially when they do not speak other languages. Yet, as Miles shows clearly, that approach assumes serious risks. Even high-level assessments like PFIAB assessments do not necessarily have the right

³ Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 297–312; Mark Kramer, "Die Nicht-Krise um 'Able Archer 1983': Fürchtete die sowjetische Führung tatsächlich einen atomaren Großangriff im Herbst 1983?," in Oliver Bange and Bernd Lemke, eds., *Wege zur Wiedervereinigung: Die beiden deutschen Staaten in ihren Bündnissen 1970 bis 1990* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), 129–149; Gordon Barrass, "Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?," *Survival* 58:6 (2016), 7–30; Raymond L. Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965–91," in Paul Maddrell, ed., *The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries since 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 28–67; Beatrice Heuser, "The Soviet Response to the Euromissiles Crisis," in Leopoldo Nuti, ed., *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975–1985* (London: Routledge, 2009), 137–149; Beatrice Heuser, "Military Exercises and the Dangers of Misunderstandings: The East-West Crisis of the Early 1980s," in Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias, eds., *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2018), 113–137; and Vojtech Mastny, "How Able Was 'Able Archer'? Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11:1 (2009), 108–123.

⁴ Jones, *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*; Nate Jones and J. Peter Scoblic, "The Week the World Almost Ended," *Slate*, April 13, 2017, <http://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/06/able-archer-almost-started-a-nuclear-war-with-russia-in-1983.html>.

answers. The use and misuse of American archives without access to foreign archives deserves closer methodological attention.

Able Archer and Strategic Stability

Miles describes in great detail the tensions between Moscow and Washington in 1983, a situation that also helps explain the origin of the myth, while also demonstrating that Able Archer was not actually a ‘crisis.’ But what exactly does that mean exactly for how we think about strategic stability?

Page | 3

A facile reaction to Miles’s argument would be that the non-case of Able Archer supports the political science theory that nuclear weapons use is unlikely because leaders commonly understand that no one wants nuclear war even during periods of strained relations.⁵ Yet that assumption would require a clear answer to at least two questions. First, just how much ‘kindling’ was present such that a different crisis might have led to a more dangerous outcome at the time? And second, how powerful of a ‘match’ really was Able Archer?

With regards to the first question, Miles writes “Throughout this tense period, policymakers expressed concern that the superpower confrontation was spiraling out of control” (90). Soviet leader Iurii Andropov “worried that Western leaders might entertain the idea of a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union (90).” At the same time, he believed the U.S. leaders were “striving for military superiority in order to check us and then declare checkmate against us without starting a war” (91). In 1983, Soviet leader Iurii Andropov warned W. Averell Harriman that “war may not perhaps not occur through evil, but could happen through miscalculation” (91).

In his book, however, Miles presents a slightly different picture of the ‘kindling.’ Providing a new historical interpretation, Miles argues that the signs of the end of the Cold War were already present in the first half of the 1980s. He points to evidence that both U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Andropov wanted to achieve a qualitative improvement to the relationship and the ‘behind the scenes’ dialogue that helped the superpowers keep in touch, arguing that “Crisis never gave way to conflagration in large part because behind the scenes, in both the Kremlin and the White House, policy makers engaged their Cold War Rivals.”⁶

As for the second question, Miles’s explanation of why Able Archer was a near miss also raises questions about whether it was a good test of strategic stability. He points out that “Able Archer 83 was nothing new: similar exercises occurred on an annual basis” (108), and uses his impressive collection of Warsaw Pact documents to show that “The specifics of Able Archer 83 did not come as a surprise to Warsaw Pact observers, who took a keen interest in this comparatively open demonstration of NATO capabilities and knew that their own exercises similarly attracted the attention of the West” (109).

In the article, Miles does spend one paragraph on the infamous September 1983 incident when a Soviet Oko satellite indicated an American ICBM attack and the watch officer, Stanislav Petrov, concluded it was a false alarm. Although the details remain controversial, the evidence suggests that the Soviets might have been reticent to believe their early warning systems because of their political conclusion that a nuclear attack was unlikely (113-114). If that narrative is correct, then the Petrov incident is arguably more revealing of crisis stability than Able Archer.

Misunderstanding Nuclear Crises

⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, vol. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

⁶ Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the Cold War*, 58–59.

In “The War Scare that Wasn’t,” Miles focuses on how the ‘near miss’ narrative entered the public imagination. As discussed above, that raises interesting questions about the pathologies that inherent to the social production of knowledge about history. Yet his book addresses another crucial side to the story of ‘nuclear misunderstanding’ and Able Archer.

In *Engaging the Evil Empire*, Miles writes “As sources from the Warsaw Pact show, it is entirely possible that some in the West came to believe that Able Archer 83 almost led to a nuclear war, that there is ample documentation from Western sources to support this conclusion, and that they were entirely wrong.”⁷ In other words, while the Gordievsky claims and later declassifications led to a popular misunderstanding about Able Archer years later, at least some people in the U.S. government also concluded they had survived a near miss *at the time*.

As Miles describes in the book, that belief had profound implications for Cold War history. Reagan’s diaries reveal that the president’s belief in a 1983 Soviet war scare in part led him to pursue a more stable relationship with Moscow.⁸ 1983, then, represents another interesting moment in ‘nuclear misunderstanding.’ President Richard Nixon falsely believed nuclear threats ended the Korean War, and Khrushchev falsely believed that nuclear threats resolved the Suez Crisis. Miles’s research further demonstrates yet again that the actual nature of crises is often beside the point for their long-term impact on leadership views.

Miles’s article does not dwell on the possibility that Able Archer’s greatest historical importance lies here. Counter-intuitively, then, although Miles spends less time on Able Archer in his book than in his article, both should be read for a full picture of the importance of 1983 in nuclear history. Together, they are major contributions to Cold War history, the literature on nuclear weapons, and the uses and misuses of history.

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⁷ Miles, 82.

⁸ Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Reagan Diaries*, vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 289–290.