



# The MIT Press Journals

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/journals>

---

This article is provided courtesy of The MIT Press.

To join an e-mail alert list and receive the latest news on our publications, please visit:

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-mail>

# The Madman Nuclear Alert

Scott D. Sagan and  
Jeremi Suri

Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in  
October 1969

On the evening of October 10, 1969, Gen. Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), sent a top secret message to major U.S. military commanders around the world informing them that the JCS had been directed “by higher authority” to increase U.S. military readiness “to respond to possible confrontation by the Soviet Union.” The Strategic Air Command (SAC) was ordered to stand down all aircraft combat training missions and to increase the number of nuclear-armed B-52 bombers on ground alert. These readiness measures were implemented on October 13. Even more dramatic, on October 27 SAC launched a series of B-52 bombers, armed with thermonuclear weapons, on a “show of force” airborne alert, code-named Giant Lance. During this alert operation, eighteen B-52s took off from bases in California and Washington State. The bombers crossed Alaska, were refueled in midair by KC-135 tanker aircraft, and then flew in oval patterns toward the Soviet Union and back, on eighteen-hour “vigils” over the northern polar ice cap.<sup>1</sup>

Why did the U.S. military go on a nuclear alert in October 1969? The alert was a loud but secret military signal ordered by President Richard Nixon. Nixon sought to convince Soviet and North Vietnamese leaders that he might do anything to end the war in Vietnam, in accordance with his “madman theory” of coercive diplomacy. The nuclear alert measures were therefore specifically chosen to be loud enough to be picked up quickly by the Soviet Union’s intelligence agencies. The military operation was also, however, deliberately designed to remain secret from the American public and U.S. allies. In-

---

*Scott D. Sagan is Professor of Political Science and Co-director of the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Jeremi Suri is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

---

Drafts of this article were presented at seminars hosted by Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation, International Security Studies at Yale University, and the 2002 annual meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. The authors thank the following individuals for their helpful comments: Alison Alter, Bruce Blair, William Burr, Lynn Eden, M. Taylor Fravel, John Lewis Gaddis, Jeffrey Kimball, Stanley Kutler, John Wilson Lewis, Xue Litai, Vojtech Mastny, Todd Sechser, and Kathryn Weathersby.

---

1. Lynn Peake, “Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969,” SAC History Study 136, January 1970, Headquarters of U.S. Strategic Command, Freedom of Information Act Release (henceforth FOIA), p. 1; and History of the Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, Headquarters of U.S. Strategic Command, FOIA, p. 155.

---

*International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 150–183  
© 2003 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

deed, the nuclear alert operation was so secretive that even the senior U.S. military officers implementing the orders—including the SAC commander himself—were not informed of its purpose.

#### NUCLEAR SIGNALS IN THEORY AND HISTORY

Cloaks of secrecy still shroud this mysterious event, but a sufficient number of government documents have now been declassified to permit a serious examination of the October 1969 nuclear alert. This article both explains why President Nixon ordered this secret nuclear operation and uses the history of the event to help illuminate the dynamics of nuclear weapons decisionmaking and diplomacy. The emerging information provides new insights both about the nuclear history of the Cold War and about broader political science theories concerning the role of nuclear weapons in international politics.

Four common assumptions exist in the historical and political science literature about nuclear weapons diplomacy. First, scholars generally agree that rough Soviet-U.S. strategic parity in the 1960s, and a shared sense of nuclear danger after the Cuban missile crisis, led to a high degree of restraint in the use of nuclear threats. Under conditions of mutually assured destruction, leaders in Moscow and Washington avoided explicit threats, exerted tight central control over their nuclear forces, and used direct communications to defuse tensions that could escalate into a military confrontation neither side desired. McGeorge Bundy, for example, argued that after 1962 there was “great caution on the part of all states possessing nuclear weapons, caution not only with respect to their use, but also with respect to any step that might lead to a conflict in which someone else might be tempted to use them.”<sup>2</sup> This conventional wisdom is challenged by evidence that, well into the period of strategic parity, U.S. leaders continued to make nuclear threats more often and for less purely “defensive” motives (i.e., to deter enemy attacks) than previously acknowledged. The well-known history of the U.S. nuclear alert during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, for example, should now be seen as consistent with a

---

2. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 542. See also Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1978), pp. 47–49; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 398; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 36; and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 231.

pattern, rather than an aberration, in the diplomacy of Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger.<sup>3</sup>

The second common assumption is that the United States behaves as a unitary actor in the arena of nuclear weapons signaling. Many scholars have explained what presidents already know: A chief executive's freedom to act is seriously constrained by bureaucratic politics and competing domestic actors, even on foreign policy issues.<sup>4</sup> Nuclear weapons operations, however, have often been treated as an exception. "Bureaucratic politics flourished," Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond argue, "largely when the president and aides paid little attention to an issue or lacked clear policy preferences about it."<sup>5</sup> Given a president's strong preferences and attention to nuclear weapons, if there is one area where the U.S. commander in chief really should command, nuclear alert operations would be it.

The history of the 1969 alert supports this assumption in one important way. Nixon ordered an increase in the alert level of U.S. strategic forces—to support his madman theory—and he was able to get his basic order implemented, despite the ambiguity of purpose to many within the bureaucracy and the unacceptability of the purpose for others in the know. The historical record also demonstrates, however, that domestic politics and bureaucratic constraints significantly influenced both Nixon's decision and the outcome of his orders. Indeed, they helped to cause the nuclear alert. Domestic and bureaucratic opposition to further escalation of the Vietnam War led Nixon to conclude that he could not implement his first strategic preference, which was to launch a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. He therefore resorted to a secret nuclear signal in an attempt to convince the Soviets that he would do what he had, in fact, decided not to do—launch a major bombing attack, perhaps even a nuclear attack, against North Vietnam—in the fall of 1969.

---

3. On the October 1973 U.S. nuclear alert, see Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 575–599; Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 297; Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 215–224; and Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 226–288.

4. Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1999); Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1974); and Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1990).

5. Jonathan Bendor and Thomas H. Hammond, "Rethinking Allison's Models," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (June 1992), p. 316. See also Stephen D. Krasner, "Are Bureaucracies Important? (or Allison Wonderland)," *Foreign Policy*, No. 7 (Summer 1972), pp. 168–179.

Nixon hoped that his nuclear bluff would compensate for his domestic and bureaucratic constraints, convincing Moscow to put pressure on the Hanoi government to sue for peace on terms acceptable to the United States.

In addition, the history of the October 1969 alert demonstrates that even in this high-politics arena of nuclear diplomacy, presidential orders were actively fought against, sometimes manipulated or ignored, and often honored only in part. Other orders were interpreted and implemented in a more vigorous manner that best suited the organizational interests of the military commanders doing the interpretation. The result was that many important details of the military activities undertaken in October 1969 reflected the operational interests of the military commanders and the goals of lower-level bureaucratic actors as much as the strategic objectives of the president. In this important sense, the nuclear alert was “loosely coupled” to the president’s orders.<sup>6</sup>

A third common assumption—about how statesmen manipulate nuclear risk—is also challenged by the secret history of October 1969. Scholars have long argued that nuclear crises should be treated as competitions in risk taking in which leaders deliberately accept some danger that military mobilization could get out of control and lead to accidents or inadvertent escalation.<sup>7</sup> Because policymakers cannot credibly threaten to take actions that would be suicidal, they must resort to making what Thomas Schelling called “the threat that leaves something to chance.”<sup>8</sup> The risk that military preparations could create an accident or escalate out of control is one of the factors that makes military mobilization a potentially effective way of signaling resolve.

The history of the 1969 alert complicates this view in three ways. First, as we show, Nixon and Kissinger did not treat this nuclear alert as a competition in risk taking. Instead they attempted to make this an immaculate, risk-free alert operation, ordering the U.S. military not to take any provocative actions or threatening moves against the Soviets and ruling out some specific operations, such as increases in peripheral reconnaissance, which they feared might lead to an incident or an accident. Second, despite these efforts, a number of dangerous military activities occurred, completely off the radar screens of U.S. politi-

---

6. On tight and loose coupling, see Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 93–96.

7. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 92–125; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, pp. 82–95; and Robert Powell, *Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Search for Credibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

8. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 187–203.

cal authorities. Compromises in peacetime nuclear weapons safety regulations were instituted as part of the alert, and there was a near-accident with a nuclear-armed B-52 bomber on airborne alert. Third, Nixon and Kissinger ordered the increase in readiness of U.S. nuclear forces with minimal attention to the evidence that the Soviet Union and China were still in the midst of a serious crisis over their border dispute and that, indeed, in October 1969 Chinese political leaders were evacuated from Beijing and their small nuclear arsenal was placed on alert. There were, in fact, multiple crises occurring at the same time in October 1969, and key political actors in Washington were not sufficiently attentive to what was happening in adversaries' capitals. The U.S. nuclear alert thus took place in the middle of a set of loosely coupled crises, a global environment that increased the risks of misperception and inadvertent escalation. In short, Nixon made a nuclear threat that left something to chance; but that was not his intent, nor did he even appear to have been aware that this had occurred.

A fourth common assumption challenged by the secret history of October 1969 concerns crisis signaling. The political science literature on this topic differentiates "costly signals" (i.e., signals that provide strong indices of resolve) from "cheap signals" (i.e., signals that can be mere rhetoric).<sup>9</sup> Scholars and defense analysts, however, too often simply assume that increases in military readiness are public events and therefore create "audience costs" that can enhance the credibility of the threat to use force. Bruce Blair, for example, displays this common assumption when he writes: "By alerting its military establishment, each side conveys concern and determination to the adversary, thus supporting verbal diplomacy. A method of indirect or tacit communication, alerting emits loud signals of resolve."<sup>10</sup> This case study, however, shows that a major nuclear alert occurred in a manner that was not made public. On the one hand, the fact that the nuclear alert did not produce the intended effect

---

9. Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970); James D. Fearon, "Domestic Audience Costs and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577–592; James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sunk Costs," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (February 1997), p. 69; and Kenneth A. Schultz, *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

10. Bruce G. Blair, "Alerting in Crisis and Conventional War," in Ashton B. Carter, John D. Steinbruner, and Charles A. Zraket, *Managing Nuclear Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987), p. 75. See also Peter D. Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 32–36.

on the Soviet leadership may support James Fearon's theory that signals with "domestic audience costs" are likely to be more effective, especially in a democracy.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, this case suggests that theorists need to rethink their assumptions about the linkage between talk and action in diplomatic and military signaling. In international relations, actions do not always speak louder than words: There can be "cheap signals" of military readiness preparations that are suggestive of bluffs, and "costly talk" that produces public commitments and thus creates domestic and international pressures to take action if necessary to maintain one's reputation. Public threats may not only reflect resolve; they can also create commitments that did not previously exist.<sup>12</sup> Secret military maneuvers, however, are more likely to be cheap signals in that they avoid public commitments, can be explained away if discovered as military exercises, and therefore do not raise the stakes that leaders face if they back down in a crisis.

The article has four parts. First, we briefly discuss the historiography and alternative explanations that exist about the October 1969 alert. Second, the body of the article is an analytical narrative, not only showing what happened but also demonstrating the different motives of various actors and the outcomes that their interaction eventually produced. Third, we discuss nuclear safety problems and crisis diplomacy counterfactuals that provide a sense of the risks involved in the nuclear alert. Finally, the article concludes with observations about the significance of the October 1969 alert for understanding the role of nuclear weapons today. The fact that Richard Nixon placed U.S. nuclear forces on a high state of alert to support his madman theory has major implications for how scholars and practitioners should think about democratic control of nuclear weapons. It also has important implications for how they should think about the consequences of nuclear proliferation. The Cold War is over, but with nuclear weapons technology spreading into the hands of more governments in South Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia, the temptations and dangers of nuclear signaling are likely to reemerge with a vengeance. What lessons should be derived from this new and disturbing evidence about U.S. nuclear saber rattling in 1969 for understanding how new nuclear weapons states may behave in the future?

---

11. Fearon, "Domestic Audience Costs and the Escalation of International Disputes."

12. See Scott D. Sagan, "The Commitment Trap: Why the United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and Chemical Weapons Attacks," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), pp. 85-115.

### *The Madman Theory, Vietnam, and the Sino-Soviet Dispute*

The October 1969 alert was kept secret from both the American public and from scholars of Cold War diplomacy for many years. Hints about the alert operation and its purpose have, however, surfaced. Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, wrote in his 1978 memoirs that Nixon believed President Dwight Eisenhower had convinced North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union to end the Korean War in 1953 by issuing a nuclear threat. Nixon planned to apply the same tactics in Vietnam. Haldeman quoted Nixon as telling him in the summer of 1968: "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I've reached the point that I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he is angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."<sup>13</sup> In 1983 journalist Seymour Hersh published an important account, based on two interviews with military personnel involved in the October 1969 operation, in which he reported that Nixon and Kissinger had ordered a secret nuclear alert as "a direct military signal to the Soviet Union and its allies" to end the Vietnam War.<sup>14</sup> Hersh stated that SAC B-52s had been placed on DEFCON 1, the highest state of nuclear alert, for a whole month and that nuclear-armed air-to-air missiles had been secretly placed on F-106 interceptor aircraft at civilian airports throughout the country. Reviewers of Hersh's book were skeptical about such claims and the report of a secret 1969 alert was not mentioned, much less analyzed, in the scholarly literature on nuclear crises published in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>15</sup>

In 1985 Nixon himself hinted at another crisis in 1969 that could have produced a decision to alert U.S. strategic nuclear forces. In a *Time* magazine interview, Nixon stated that he had "considered using nuclear weapons" during the 1969 "border conflicts" between China and the Soviet Union: "Henry

---

13. H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), p. 83. See also Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), pp. 82–85; and Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *The Nixon Presidency* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 82–83.

14. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 124.

15. Stanley Hoffmann, "The Kissinger Antimemoirs," *New York Times*, July 3, 1983, sec. 7, p. 1; Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987); Blechman and Kaplan, *Force without War*, pp. 47–49; Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, pp. 525–542; and Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 99–139.



[Kissinger] used to come and talk about the situation. . . . Henry said, 'Can the U.S. allow the Soviet Union to jump the Chinese?'—that is, to take out their nuclear capability. We had to let the Soviets know we would not tolerate that."<sup>16</sup> In August and September 1969, the Soviet press and journalists abroad had hinted at the possibility that Moscow would launch a preventive conventional or nuclear attack on China's nuclear facilities. Scholars had known for many years that a Soviet KGB intelligence officer had privately approached a U.S. diplomat to ask how the United States would react to such an attack.<sup>17</sup> Based on an interview with a SAC B-52 pilot, *New York Times* reporter Patrick Tyler argued that the United States had secretly gone on a high-level nuclear alert as a signal to Moscow—and perhaps also to Beijing—that the Nixon administration would oppose any such attack on China.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1992, the Strategic Air Command released a portion of its top secret history of the "Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969." This document demonstrated conclusively that SAC had indeed assumed a heightened nuclear alert posture, but it provided no evidence on the motives behind the operation for the simple reason that the SAC commander was not told why he was being ordered to increase readiness for nuclear war. Faced with this continued absence of evidence, scholars could only speculate on the causes of the alert. Some largely accepted Hersh's account, arguing that the alert was Nixon's effort, under the madman theory, to scare the Soviets and North Vietnamese into thinking that he was getting ready for a major conventional or even nuclear attack on North Vietnam if a negotiated settlement was not reached immediately.<sup>19</sup> Others have speculated that Nixon may have been telling the truth in his *Time* interview: U.S. political authorities might have ordered a nuclear alert to underscore their public and private statements that they would not condone a Soviet nuclear or conventional attack on China.<sup>20</sup>

The second explanation—to deter an attack on China—appears logically to be the most likely one. After all, many deterrence theorists would argue that

---

16. Roger Rosenblatt, "A Nation Coming Into Its Own," *Time*, July 29, 1985, p. 53.

17. The best analyses are William Burr, "Sino-American Relations, 1969: The Sino-Soviet Border War and Steps towards *Rapprochement*," *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 2001), pp. 80–86; and Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1994), pp. 236–238.

18. Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), p. 68.

19. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p. 164; and Paul Bracken, *Fire in the East* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 102.

20. Scott D. Sagan, "Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), p. 197; Burr, "Sino-American Relations, 1969," pp. 80–86; and Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1993), p. 180.

nuclear threats are most effective, and perhaps can only be used, to deter another state's nuclear attack. According to this logic, the October 1969 alert was a signal of U.S. opposition to Soviet aggression and preventive war. This explanation also appeals to a common perception that U.S. nuclear weapons serve defensive purposes, and indeed, one could even argue that deterring Russian aggression in this manner was a responsible use of extended nuclear deterrence. Using a nuclear alert, under the alternative explanation, to influence events in Vietnam appears convoluted, at best. How would the sight of nuclear-armed B-52s flying toward Siberia convince the Soviets to procure concessions for the United States in Southeast Asia? How could Nixon have thought that secret nuclear threats would force the North Vietnamese to accept a negotiated peace on U.S. terms?

Despite the strained logic, newly available evidence demonstrates compellingly that Nixon ordered a nuclear alert in October 1969 to influence events in Vietnam, not China. In October 1969, Alexander Haig was a colonel serving as Kissinger's military assistant on the National Security Council (NSC) staff. He coordinated this secret military operation. According to Haig, "The discussion of U.S. alerts and other options was related to Vietnam matters. I do not recall our doing anything regarding the Sino-Soviet border matter other than the diplomatic initiatives."<sup>21</sup> Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird similarly recalls that "Nixon thought it [the nuclear alert] would help in Vietnam. . . . Nixon said things like, I just want to keep them off balance. Keep them questioning what I will do."<sup>22</sup> The declassified evidence, provided below, fully supports Haig's and Laird's recollections.

### *What Happened in October 1969?*

The first six months of the Nixon administration saw no progress in the four-party negotiations in Paris to reach a peaceful settlement of the Vietnam War. On July 15, 1969, President Nixon sent a letter to North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh through a secret courier (Jean Sainteny, a French figure with longstanding Vietnamese connections) promising to be "forthcoming and open-minded" in working together for "a just peace." Nixon also asked Sainteny to tell the Hanoi government that "unless some serious breakthrough had been

---

21. Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., U.S. Army (ret.), correspondence with authors, June 27, 2002.

22. Melvin Laird, telephone interview with author (Sagan), December 9, 2002.

achieved by the November 1 deadline [the one-year anniversary of the U.S. bombing cease-fire], I would regretfully find myself obliged to have recourse to measures of great consequence and force.”<sup>23</sup> Kissinger reinforced this message in his secret meeting with North Vietnamese representatives in Paris on August 4. Kissinger offered to start confidential bilateral negotiations aimed at ending the war, but also threatened that “if by November 1, no major progress had been made toward a solution, we will be compelled—with great reluctance—to take measures of the greatest consequences.”<sup>24</sup>

Ho finally replied to Nixon’s letter on August 25. In what Nixon later characterized as a “cold rebuff” of his offer, the North Vietnamese leader refused to budge from his earlier negotiating position calling for immediate U.S. withdrawal. Ho stated that the Vietnamese people “were determined to fight to the end, without fearing the sacrifices and difficulties in order to defend their country and their sacred national rights.”<sup>25</sup>

#### DUCK HOOK AND INTERNAL OPPOSITION TO ESCALATION

Ho’s letter led Nixon and Kissinger to abandon carrots for sticks. The NSC staff began working in earnest with military planners at the Pentagon to formulate a secret conventional strike plan called Duck Hook. According to the plan, the United States would launch a four-day air attack on twenty-nine military and economic targets and mine virtually all of the seaports under North Vietnamese control.<sup>26</sup> “Boldness of action, surprise, and mass attack are key elements of the concept plan,” a JCS paper explained in its overview of proposed military operations. If these plans were implemented, U.S. forces would destroy an unprecedented number of targets in North Vietnam, providing a

---

23. See *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon: 1969* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 910; Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard M. Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), pp. 393–394; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 153; and Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 40.

24. Memorandum of Conversation between Henry Kissinger, Vernon Walters, Tony Lake, Xuan Thuy, Mai Van Bo et al., 4 August 1969, Folder: Camp David–HAK Background Material and Memcons thru April 1970 [3 of 4], Box 121, Kissinger Office Files, NSC files, Richard Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives, College Park, Maryland [hereafter Nixon papers]. See also Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 280.

25. Nixon, *RN*, p. 397; and *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon: 1969*, p. 910.

26. The best discussions of Duck Hook planning are Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 158–165; William P. Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 80–81; and Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, pp. 54–60.

“strong psychological shock to the enemy.”<sup>27</sup> Duck Hook would not defeat the North Vietnamese, but it would—according to Nixon and Kissinger’s logic—convince leaders in Hanoi that they needed to be much more forthcoming in the proposed peace negotiations with the new administration.

Nixon was strongly inclined to order this massive conventional attack on North Vietnam, and he began to prepare the Soviet Union for a potential escalation of the war against its ally. On September 27, the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, revealed to Kissinger that the North Vietnamese had told Moscow about the secret August 4 meeting in Paris. Kissinger held out the prospects of trade liberalization and talks over the status of Berlin with Dobrynin, but noted that “the Soviet Union should not expect any special treatment until Vietnam was solved. . . . As soon as Vietnam was out of the way and especially if the Russians took an understanding attitude, we could go further.” Nixon made a prearranged phone call to his national security adviser during this meeting with the Soviet ambassador, and Kissinger passed on the following threat: “It was a pity that all our efforts to negotiate [with Hanoi] had failed. The President had told me in his call that the train had just left the station and was now headed down the track. Dobrynin responded that he hoped it was an airplane and not a train and would leave some maneuvering room. I said the President chooses his words very carefully and that I was sure he meant a train.”<sup>28</sup>

Nixon called again after Dobrynin had left. Kissinger suggested that the leaders in Hanoi must have taken his threat in Paris seriously; otherwise they would not have told the Soviets about it. He further stressed that “if we go the hard route [execute Duck Hook],” it was important to keep Moscow “quiet.” Nixon asked Kissinger: “You have no doubt that he [Dobrynin] is reminded of the fact that we are going the hard route?” Kissinger answered, “Yes; he had been very tough on him.” In this context, Nixon asked Kissinger if he could change the schedule for the Duck Hook attack to before October 15, 1969—the date of the nationwide Vietnam Moratorium protest—because he did not “want to appear to be making the tough move after the 15th just because of the rioting at home.” Kissinger replied that the attack could occur before then, but cautioned the president to give the Vietnamese more time to make a concilia-

---

27. JCS to Secretary of Defense (JCSM-600-69) 1 October 1969, pp. 1, 4, Folder: JCSM 401-69 to 694-69, Box 185, Records of the Chairman of the JCS, Record Group 218, National Archives, College Park, Maryland [hereafter NA].

28. Memorandum of conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin 27 September 1969, pp. 1-4, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, Nixon papers.

tory move on the negotiations: “His only worry is that if we went ahead with the tough move before the 15th—and there was a 10% chance Hanoi might want to move, if we hit them before they have a chance to move, it will look as if we tricked them.”<sup>29</sup> No decision was made, but NSC officials drafted a speech in which the president would announce to the nation that “the United States has no choice but to take action to prove to Hanoi that we mean to have an honorable peace in Vietnam. . . . Our military action has been measured. It is swift, concentrated and punishing.”<sup>30</sup>

During the first week of October, Kissinger clearly wanted Nixon to order the attack on North Vietnam. Nixon spent October 3 at his Key Biscayne retreat discussing Vietnam, while lounging in his swimming trunks and sport shirt, with a group of his closest advisers. Haldeman, in his diary entry, describes the meeting as “sort of one of those mystic sessions which he [Nixon] had obviously not thought through ahead of time.” According to Haldeman’s diary, Kissinger told Nixon that the United States only had two options, to “bug out or accelerate—and that we must escalate or [the] president is lost.” When Nixon observed that he “would be lost anyway if that failed—which it well may,” Kissinger said that his main concern was “whether the president can hold the government and people together for the six months it will take.”<sup>31</sup> Nixon shared this concern. He told Haldeman on October 9 that he did not rule out Kissinger’s plan, but that he worried that “it will take 6–8 months” and feared “that he can’t hold the country that long.” On October 11, Haldeman noted that Nixon had told him that he “will go ahead with the November 3 speech plan—agrees with my recommendation to stay clear of war from now until then.”<sup>32</sup> The president confronted what he described in his memoirs as mounting public opposition and worries about a serious “internal disruption” if he proceeded with plans for military escalation.<sup>33</sup> Opponents of

---

29. Transcript of telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, 27 September 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

30. Draft of a Presidential Speech 27 September 1969, Folder: Vietnamese War—Secret Peace Talks [“Mr. S File”] (5), 9/1/69–9/30/69, Box 34, National Security Adviser Kissinger–Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969–1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

31. 3 October 1969, Handwritten Journals and Diaries of Harry Robbins Haldeman [hereafter Haldeman diaries], Nixon papers. The published version of these diaries—H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994)—excludes a number of important passages related to foreign policy, and the October 1969 alert in particular. We have relied on the more complete, original handwritten version of Haldeman’s diaries.

32. 9 October 1969 and 11 October 1969, Haldeman diaries.

33. Nixon, RN, p. 414. See also Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 164–176; Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, pp. 80–81; and Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, pp. 56–57.

Duck Hook included high-ranking members of the administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers. Nixon later recalled that he feared Laird and Rogers would resign if he attacked Hanoi in 1969: "I just wasn't ready for that."<sup>34</sup>

Nixon personally favored Duck Hook, but he rejected military escalation because of domestic protests and internal opposition within his cabinet. Nixon and Kissinger, however, were not yet willing to give up on using threats of force to achieve their objectives. It was necessary to find a new military maneuver that might intimidate adversaries without antagonizing the American public.

#### NIXON'S NUCLEAR ALERT ORDERS

Nixon believed that Eisenhower had successfully used nuclear threats to coerce the North Koreans, Chinese, and Russians into agreeing to the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953. He later claimed that Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's purported warning that "unless the logjam is broken it will lead to the use of nuclear weapons" had ended the war. "It worked," Nixon argued. "It was the bomb that did it."<sup>35</sup> Nixon was not alone in holding this view. Eisenhower had made this claim in his memoirs, and Nixon privately repeated the argument not only to Haldeman but also to a group of delegates at the 1968 Republican National Convention, suggesting that he might similarly bring an end to the Vietnam War.<sup>36</sup> Nixon later stated that he learned from observing Eisenhower's actions that it is important to be an "unpredictable president": "If the adversary feels that you are unpredictable, even rash, he will be deterred from pressing you too far. The odds that he will fold will increase and the unpredictable president will win another hand."<sup>37</sup>

Although he had not yet firmly decided against the Duck Hook conventional bombing campaign, Nixon took the first steps toward implementing the madman theory when he called Secretary of Defense Laird on October 6, 1969.

---

34. 3 October 1969 and 9 October 1969, Haldeman diaries; and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 248.

35. Quoted in Rosenblatt, "A Nation Coming Into Its Own," p. 50.

36. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years*, Vol. 1: *Mandate for Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 181; for Nixon's statements in 1968, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p. 82. This interpretation of the end of the Korean War has been widely challenged. See David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 334; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 107–110; and Rosemary J. Foot, "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 92–112.

37. Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), pp. 254–256.

He informed Laird, according to a subsequent top secret summary, that he wished to “initiate a series of increased alert measures designed to convey to the Soviets an increasing readiness by U.S. strategic forces.” Laird promised to send the White House a set of proposed actions the next day.<sup>38</sup>

This conversation between Nixon and Laird triggered a set of complex bureaucratic maneuvers between the White House, the Pentagon, and U.S. military commands about whether and how to implement the president’s orders. The State Department was excluded from the plans and preparations and thus did not contribute to the ensuing debate. Laird, who had opposed the Duck Hook escalation option, also was opposed to brandishing nuclear weapons as an alternative coercive move. Although the Joint Chiefs of Staff were by necessity told of the purpose behind the president’s plan, U.S. military commanders in the field were deliberately kept in the dark about why they were being asked to increase their readiness to use nuclear weapons. The result was a global nuclear alert that was ambiguous in its purposes, poorly coordinated in its operational details, and inadequately analyzed in terms of its geopolitical implications.

Problems became apparent as early as October 7, 1969, when Col. Robert Pursley, Laird’s military assistant, delivered the Defense Department’s response to Nixon’s request for an increase in the alert level of U.S. nuclear forces. Haig complained to Kissinger that this plan “was merely a resume of an already approved East Coast air defense exercise, which was not responsive to the president’s instruction.” Haig therefore gave Pursley a more specific—though still somewhat ambiguous—set of criteria for the desired nuclear alert: “[1] be discernible to the Soviets and be both unusual and significant; [2] not be threatening to the Soviets; [3] not require substantial additional funding or resources; [4] not require agreement with the allies; [5] not degrade essential missions; [and 6] have minimum chance of public exposure.”<sup>39</sup>

Pursley responded that evening with a more extensive menu of nuclear alert options: “[1] Implementation of radio and/or other communications silence in selected areas or commands, e.g., in SAC and Polaris forces; [2] Stand-down of flying of combat aircraft in selected areas or commands, e.g., for 48 hours in SAC and EUCOM [European Command]; [3] Increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to North Vietnam; [4] Increased reconnaissance sorties around

---

38. Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Haig Chron, October 1–15, 1969 [1 of 2], Box 958, NSC files, Nixon papers.

39. *Ibid.*

the periphery of the Soviet Union; [5] Increased ground alert rate of SAC bombers and tankers; [6] Dispersal of SAC aircraft with nuclear weapons to only military dispersal bases, with or without dispersal of CONAD [Continental Air Defense Command] forces; [and 7] Alerting or sending to sea of SSBNs [nuclear ballistic missile submarines] currently in port or by tender." In closing his memorandum, Pursley conceded that he was drafting military plans in the dark: "The significance of the costs and risks entailed by the military actions outlined above must be related to the over-all effect desired, which is not known at this time."<sup>40</sup>

On October 9, after discussing the options with the Joint Chiefs' planners, Pursley sent Haig an additional memorandum, evaluating the "possible advantages and disadvantages" of each alert activity. The most startling element of this document is its repeated refrain that the Soviets were likely to see many of the proposed U.S. alert activities as part of an obvious bluff. For example, Pursley cautioned against a stand-down of SAC combat aircraft because "lack of supporting action, such as recall of personnel on leave and dispersal of forces, might expose the overall-action as a sham."<sup>41</sup> Yet these supporting actions could not be taken without increasing the likelihood of public knowledge of the alert. The operation was in danger of becoming what we have called a "cheap signal." Although Pursley did not believe that Nixon was really preparing to use nuclear weapons, he shared Laird's concerns that alerting the U.S. nuclear arsenal to spook the Soviets under the madman theory was inappropriate.<sup>42</sup> He nevertheless did his best to follow orders. Yet he found it difficult to design operational military measures that would appear serious to the Soviets while remaining secret from the American people.

Despite these problems, Haig and Kissinger recommended that Nixon order all of the measures implemented immediately, excluding the increased reconnaissance around the periphery of the Soviet Union and the dispatch of U.S.

---

40. Pursley to Haig 8 October 1969, Folder: Schedule of Significant Military Exercises, Vol. 1, Box 352, NSC files, Nixon papers.

41. Pursley to Haig 9 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69-12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

42. Lt. Gen. Robert Pursley, U.S. Air Force (ret.), telephone interview with author (Sagan), November 4, 2002. Haldeman later also stated that he did not believe that Nixon ever intended to use nuclear weapons: "He believed conceptually that it was important that the enemy and those counseling or controlling the enemy, as then perceived in Vietnam, have, if not a conviction, at least a concern that he might be pushed to a point where he might do something totally irrational. That was a strategic concept, not a planned intent, and there was never any consideration given to doing anything to carry out the 'madman' theory. . . . Yes, it was a bluff." Quoted in Thompson, *The Nixon Presidency*, p. 83.



strategic nuclear submarines.<sup>43</sup> The rejected actions are as revealing as the recommendations. Pursley had noted that Soviet “shore spotters” would easily detect and promptly report on SSBNs leaving their submarine bases, but he also warned that the American public would learn about the alert as crewman rushed to their submarines for previously unscheduled duty.<sup>44</sup> It is also noteworthy that Haig and Kissinger accepted the recommendation to disperse SAC bombers to additional satellite military air bases, but to exclude dispersal to civilian airports, which were in the plans to be utilized (as they had been during the Cuban missile crisis) at high states of alert. Use of the civilian airports on SAC’s bomber and tanker dispersal plan—JFK, Dulles, Logan, and O’Hare were all scheduled to host B-52s in an emergency—would have quickly led to press reports on the operation, which the Nixon White House wanted to avoid at all costs.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Kissinger rejected aerial reconnaissance activities on the periphery of the Soviet Union after Pursley cautioned that they would increase the risk that it or “other Red countries” would shoot down a spy plane.<sup>46</sup> During the previous decade, a series of incidents with American reconnaissance planes over or near enemy airspace increased Cold War tensions: the Soviet shoot-down of an American U-2 on May 1, 1960; the destruction of an American U-2 by Soviet surface-to-air missiles stationed in Cuba during the last weekend of the Cuban missile crisis (October 27, 1962); the accidental U-2 flight into Soviet airspace during the same tense day (October 27, 1962); and most recent, the North Korean shoot-down of an American EC-121 reconnaissance plane on April 14, 1969.<sup>47</sup> The White House wanted to frighten Soviet leaders without producing a provocation, an accident, or a public controversy. Ironically, increased aerial reconnaissance activity near the Soviet Union was seen as creating too many risks in the madman nuclear alert that Nixon and Kissinger hoped to tightly control.

---

43. Kissinger to Nixon 9 October 1969, Folder: Schedule of Significant Military Exercises, Vol. 1, Box 352, NSC files, Nixon papers; and Haig to Kissinger 9 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69–12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

44. Pursley to Haig 9 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69–12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

45. HAA-1666, SAC Recap of Msgs, FOIA.

46. Pursley to Haig 9 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69–12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

47. On the U-2 crisis of 1960, see Michael R. Beschloss, *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986). On the U-2 incidents during the Cuban missile crisis, see Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *“One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 277–287; and Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, pp. 135–142. On the EC-121 crisis, see Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 313–321.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SECRET NUCLEAR ALERT

Nixon approved Kissinger's recommendations on October 9, and the Joint Chiefs were immediately told to prepare "an integrated plan of military actions to demonstrate convincingly to the Soviet Union that the United States is getting ready for any eventuality on or about 1 November 1969."<sup>48</sup> The next morning General Wheeler sent the following top secret message to the commanders of all U.S. unified and specified commands:

We have been directed by higher authority to institute a series of actions during the period 130000Z-250000Z Oct. [October 13–25] to test our military readiness in selected areas worldwide to respond to a possible confrontation by the Soviet Union. These actions should be discernable to the Soviets, but not threatening in themselves. They may include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following types of actions:

- A. stand-down of combat aircraft in selected areas or command, to improve operational readiness.
- B. Implementation of radio and/or other communications silence in selected areas of commands.
- C. Increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to Vietnam.
- D. Increased ground alert rate of SAC bombers and tankers.<sup>49</sup>

Wheeler then requested that individual military commanders "nominate further actions compatible with the guidance herein, and cognizant of local problems peculiar to your areas, allies, and environment."<sup>50</sup> He immediately sent a follow-on message to SAC headquarters, however, directing SAC to stand down training flights and put B-52 bombers that had been taken off day-to-day alert because of crew shortages (caused by the Vietnam War) back on their regular SIOP (single integrated operations plan) alert "to [the] maximum extent possible" by October 13.<sup>51</sup>

The JCS thus ordered SAC (and other U.S. military commands) to take specific alert measures that Soviet intelligence organizations were likely to pick up and consider significant. The JCS also requested that commanders nomi-

---

48. Lt. Col. William Lemnitzer to General Wheeler 9 October 1969, Records of the Chairman of the JCS, Earle Wheeler Papers, FOIA. Originally cited in William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Text, October 1969," *Cold War History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (January 2003), pp. 113–156. We thank William Burr for providing us with this declassified document.

49. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 1.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

nate other alert readiness measures for implementation. The history of the October 1969 alert demonstrates the problems that can occur in managing military signals when the president's penchant for secrecy is so high that the U.S. military commanders implementing the action are only able to guess at the basic purpose of the operation.<sup>52</sup> It also demonstrates how difficult it is to fine tune military readiness operations, including nuclear alerts, given the complexity of the activities and the parochial interests of the implementing military organizations.

On October 13 Gen. Bruce Holloway, the commander in chief of SAC, reported that SAC had canceled most of its aircraft training flights and reinstated many nuclear-armed B-52 and B-58 bombers on ground alert to try to meet the 40 percent SIOP war plan guidance level (this increased the number from 110 to 174 bombers on alert).<sup>53</sup> He acknowledged that he had approved limited exceptions to the JCS order, continuing what he considered essential combat crew training and routine rotational flights between SAC bases. Holloway also refrained from placing 20 B-52 bombers stationed at Andersen Air Force Base (AFB) on Guam back on their scheduled SIOP nuclear alert.<sup>54</sup> SAC did not explain this decision to the JCS, but internal communications demonstrate that SAC did this to protect parochial organizational interests. The SAC vice commander privately informed Holloway that nuclear weapons and additional B-52s were available at Andersen AFB, but it would be operationally easier to use B-52s back in the continental United States. Moreover, SAC had been complaining that the demands of the Vietnam War were reducing its ability to meet its "real" mission requirement—to provide nuclear deterrence through SIOP readiness at home. It would therefore embarrass the organization to admit that SAC could have addressed this problem on its own. As the vice commander warned Holloway, placing B-52s on nuclear alert at Andersen AFB "could raise questions about why, with excess resources and substantial SIOP degrade, we haven't already established some alert sorties on Guam."<sup>55</sup>

---

52. According to the SAC history, SAC's commander in chief, Gen. Bruce Holloway, had requested information from the JCS on the purpose of the readiness test, but was given no clarification. *Ibid.*, p. 12. Hersh reports that Lt. Gen. Ray Sitton (U.S. Air Force) also asked Haig to clarify the objective of the operation, but Haig answered cryptically: "You're doing all you need to do." Hersh, *The Price of Power*, p. 124.

53. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 2; and History of Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, Historical Study 117, 20 April 1971, pp. 153–154, FOIA. We thank William Burr for providing us with a copy of the latter document.

54. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 2.

55. *Ibid.*

This was an important decision, made off the radar screens of White House officials in Washington. Had President Nixon really been preparing to launch nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, the B-52s at Andersen AFB would have been the most likely aircraft used in the attack. If Soviet base watchers or Soviet navy electronic and communication intelligence collectors (known to be operating in the Pacific at the time<sup>56</sup>) learned that no nuclear weapons were being loaded on to those B-52 bombers, then it would be apparent to Moscow that while the United States might be preparing for a global military conflict, it was not getting ready to use nuclear weapons in North Vietnam. SAC's unilateral decision potentially exposed Nixon's bluff. SAC's decision was not overturned by the JCS, and there is no evidence in the available records that White House officials were even informed of this important detail of the nuclear alert operation.

General Holloway also recommended three further readiness measures, "within the objectives of this exercise as understood here." First, he proposed that SAC "increase peripheral reconnaissance as feasible." Second, he suggested that he could place extra SAC bombers on runways in the United States with nuclear weapons on board, but without aircrews. This special "maintenance readiness posture" would permit SAC to have an increased number of B-52 and B-58 aircraft visible out on runways, though there were no aircrews available to fly them if necessary. Third, and most important, Holloway recommended that SAC receive authorization to launch B-52s with nuclear weapons on board on a special airborne alert mission called SEAGA (selective employment of air and ground alert).<sup>57</sup> SEAGA was a new crisis alert concept that had replaced the peacetime SAC airborne Chrome Dome alert operation after two serious B-52 crashes: the January 1966 crash in Palomares, Spain, and the January 1968 accident in Thule, Greenland. As a consequence of these accidents, seven crewmen died; one nuclear weapon was lost at sea for three months; and radioactive materials spread over wide areas requiring expensive cleanup efforts.<sup>58</sup> After the Thule accident, political authorities decided, against SAC's objections, that the command could no longer place nuclear weapons on any

---

56. Adm. John S. McCain Jr., Commander in Chief of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC) to General Wheeler 12 October 1969, Folder: 381 World-Wide Increased Readiness Posture (October 1969), Box 109, Records of the Chairman of the JCS, Earle Wheeler Papers, NA, released under FOIA, p. 3. We thank William Burr for providing us with this document.

57. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 2; and History of Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, pp. 153–154.

58. Randall C. Maydew, *America's Lost H-Bomb: Palomares, Spain, 1966* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1997); and Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, pp. 156–203.

airborne alert exercise or other training missions.<sup>59</sup> This restriction reduced the risks of serious accidents, but SAC complained that it also limited its ability to train under realistic war conditions. If accepted, Holloway's recommendation to launch a SEAGA alert with weapons would permit SAC to load thermonuclear warheads on airborne alert missions for the first time since the January 1968 accident, undoing a resented restriction on SAC's operational autonomy. This special nuclear alert activity went well beyond the readiness measures contemplated by Pursley in his October 7 military options memorandum and those ordered by President Nixon on October 9.

Finally, Holloway informed the JCS that he "strongly recommended against dispersal for the current readiness test," on the grounds that dispersing aircraft would reduce SAC's ability "to implement further readiness actions in an actual emergency."<sup>60</sup> This argument was a trump card: It would be exceedingly difficult for higher authorities to insist that SAC take alert actions that the commander said would reduce readiness if war became more likely. The SAC history reports simply that "the JCS did not pursue the matter further."<sup>61</sup> Holloway's argument also suggests that he suspected the purpose of the alert was not actually to prepare for an imminent confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Back in Washington, bureaucratic resistance to Nixon's orders was growing. On October 14, Haig angrily wrote to Kissinger that the Joint Chiefs had failed to implement "two of the original items *directed for execution*" by the president: Dispersal of SAC aircraft and increased surveillance of Soviet ships en route to North Vietnam had been "held in abeyance because of additional costs and widespread implications."<sup>62</sup> Secretary of Defense Laird was also not cooperating. When first asked by Nixon to prepare a nuclear alert to signal the Soviets, he had responded by suggesting minor changes in an ongoing military air defense exercise. Now he was using the existence of another military exercise—HIGH HEELS—as a rationale against implementing new nuclear alert measures. This exercise was designed to test the ability of major U.S. military

---

59. *Status of U.S. Strategic Power*, Hearings before the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 90th Cong., 2d sess., April 30–May 10, 1968, p. 237; and Department of State, Message 126481, 7 March 1968, Nuclear Overflights, RG 59, State Department Records, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–1969, Political Affairs and Defense, DEF 12 1/11/68, Box 1673, NA.

60. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," pp. 4–5.

61. History of Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, p. 154.

62. Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Haig Chron, October 1–15, 1969 [1 of 2], Box 958, NSC files, Nixon papers (emphasis in original).

commands to react to a simulated Soviet and Chinese attack on the United States and its allies. It also sought to familiarize senior Washington officials, including the secretary of state and secretary of defense, with the SIOP execution procedures.<sup>63</sup> Laird objected to further alert measures on the grounds that the HIGH HEELS activities, if mixed with real alert measures, “would result in confused signals to the Soviets.” He further argued that the exercise should continue as planned, because significant funds had already been spent in preparation and should not be wasted.<sup>64</sup> Finally, Gen. Andrew Goodpaster—commander in chief of U.S. forces in Europe and NATO’s supreme allied commander in Europe—also objected to Nixon’s alert orders because they involved U.S. forces on allied territories without allied consultations.<sup>65</sup>

On October 14, Haig advised Kissinger that he would have to discuss the problems of implementation with President Nixon immediately:

Inform the President of Mel Laird’s reluctance to proceed with the alert measures because of the conflict with exercise HIGH HEELS and the view of General Goodpaster that consultation with allies should precede the stand-down of military training flights. Tell the President that you are convinced that these objections are not overriding and that you will meet with Laird and Wheeler this morning to make the necessary adjustments in both HIGH HEELS and alert measures to ensure that the alerts are carried out this week. Emphasize to the President that evidence of reluctance in Defense may require some “tail twisting” which you are prepared to do providing you can rely on strong support from the President.<sup>66</sup>

“It would appear,” Haig wrote, “that the primary problem is the failure of all concerned to understand the time sensitiveness of the measures directed by the President and the reasons for which they have been directed.”<sup>67</sup> The real explanation, however, was the opposite: Laird understood precisely that Nixon was implementing the madman theory and thought it would be, at best, ineffective with respect to the Vietnam War, and potentially “dangerous” if the

---

63. CM-4614-69, JCS to Secretary of Defense 6 October 1969, “Briefing on Exercise HIGH HEELS 69,” Folder: 381 Exercise HIGH HEELS 1969, Box 108, Records of the Chairman of the JCS, Record Group 218, NA; and L.M. Mustin, Vice Admiral U.S. Navy to Assistant to the Chairman of the JCS 4 November 1969, *ibid.*

64. Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Haig Chron, October 1-15, 1969 [1 of 2], Box 958, NSC files, Nixon papers, p. 3.

65. *Ibid.*; and Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69-12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

66. Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69-12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers.

67. Haig to Kissinger 14 October 1969, Folder: Haig Chron, October 1-15, 1969 [1 of 2], Box 958, NSC files, Nixon papers.

Soviets misinterpreted U.S. military preparations as part of an imminent attack. Laird later recalled in an interview: "I was using a bit of the delay tactic. . . . I had some questions about whether it [the nuclear alert] would help at all on Vietnam. I didn't want the SAC training program to get all fouled up. The Joint Chiefs were not enthusiastic; neither was Wheeler. . . . [The alert] was dangerous, however...if they [the Soviets] thought we would go all the way."<sup>68</sup>

Nixon backed Kissinger's "tail twisting." The readiness of U.S. military forces for war was heightened around the globe. All military movements in exercise HIGH HEELS were canceled on October 14, with only a simulated decisionmaking exercise in the Washington area continuing.<sup>69</sup> On October 17 the JCS ordered SAC to implement its proposal for "increased maintenance readiness" of B-52 and B-58 bombers and to prepare to execute a SEAGA airborne alert, "Show of Force" option with weapons, starting on October 26.<sup>70</sup> The Pacific Command was ordered to "enhance SIOP naval forces" (on aircraft carriers and SSBNs in the Pacific), increase the alert level of conventionally armed tactical and air defense aircraft throughout the Far East and Pacific, and increase surveillance of Soviet vessels enroute to North Vietnam.<sup>71</sup> General Goodpaster's objections were also apparently overruled because U.S. aircraft in Europe became actively involved in the subsequent alerting activities.<sup>72</sup> Kissinger informed Nixon on the morning of October 17 that the JCS and Laird had started "a complete scenario" of alert actions that would "intensify up to October 30 and will be monitored carefully" for signs of Soviet reaction.<sup>73</sup>

#### SIGNALS AND THE SOVIETS

Later that day, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin suddenly requested a meeting with President Nixon. "Kissinger has all sorts of signal-type activity going on around the world to try to jar the Soviets and NVN [North Vietnam]," Haldeman noted in his diary, adding that it "appears to be working because Dobrynin has asked for an early meeting." Kissinger surmised that there "is [a] good chance of [this] being the big break. President is more skeptical."<sup>74</sup>

---

68. Laird, telephone interview with author (Sagan) December 9, 2002.

69. JCS message 141822Z October 1969, Folder: 381 Exercise HIGH HEELS, 1969, Box 108, RG 218 Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Earle Wheeler Papers, NA.

70. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 5.

71. JCS message 17 October 1969, 1800, available on the National Security Archive website at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB81/nnp09.pdf> (accessed February 25, 2003).

72. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," pp. 5-7.

73. Haig to Kissinger 17 October 1969, Folder: Items to Discuss with President, 8/13/69-12/30/69, Box 334, NSC files, Nixon papers, p. 2.

74. See 17 October 1969, Haldeman diaries.

Kissinger prepared Nixon for what he hoped would be a breakthrough on Vietnam: "Dobrynin's request to see you comes against the background of several developments, including among others. . . . Moscow's undoubted awareness of unusual military measures on our part, preceded by the stern comments I made to Dobrynin on September 27."<sup>75</sup> Kissinger reminded Nixon that "your basic purpose will be to keep the Soviets concerned about what we might do around November 1"<sup>76</sup>; "Should Dobrynin refer to our current readiness measures, you should simply tell him that these are carefully controlled exercises which in view of the uncertainties of the future you feel it incumbent on you to undertake. They involve no threat."<sup>77</sup> Nixon had rejected Duck Hook because of domestic pressures, but Kissinger hoped that these cryptic comments and the nuclear alert would frighten the Soviets into putting pressure on the North Vietnamese government to end the war. Kissinger closed his briefing by reminding the president that "our main concern with the Soviets at present is their support of Hanoi's intransigence and their heavy strategic weapons program."<sup>78</sup>

Meeting with Nixon and Kissinger on October 20, Dobrynin focused on the latter issue—offering to start the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), in particular. The Soviet ambassador made no mention of "unusual" U.S. military activities. His aide-mémoire did, however, refer to the "hints by American representatives about possible use by the United States of some 'alternative' methods of solving the Vietnam question" and issued the Soviet Union's own warning: "Moscow feels that the President should be frankly told that the method of solving the Vietnam question through the use of force is not only without perspective, but is extremely dangerous." Nixon responded that "if the Soviet Union would not help us to get peace, the U.S. would have to pursue its own methods for bringing the war to an end. . . . We would not hold still for being 'diddled to death' in Vietnam."<sup>79</sup>

After the meeting, Kissinger continued to believe that U.S. threats of force—including the nuclear alert—had colored Dobrynin's comments. Kissinger

---

75. Kissinger to Nixon 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

76. Kissinger to Nixon (Briefing) 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

77. Kissinger to Nixon 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

78. Kissinger to Nixon (Briefing) 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

79. Memorandum of conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Dobrynin 20 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 305; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 202.



wanted to continue these maneuvers, and he played to Nixon's vanity, telling the president that he "had the guts of a riverboat gambler . . . had played it *very* cold with Dobrynin, giving him one back for each he dished out."<sup>80</sup> Kissinger explained that "Dobrynin's basic mission was to test the seriousness of the threat element in our current posture and to throw out enough inducements (SALT, Berlin, direct informal contact with you) to make it politically and psychologically difficult for you to play it rough over Vietnam." Despite these Soviet inducements, Kissinger recommended that Washington should "continue backing up our verbal warnings with our present military moves."<sup>81</sup>

U.S. officials, including the president, greatly valued the agreement to start the SALT negotiations. Kissinger later acknowledged that the Soviets were practicing their own shrewd form of reverse linkage.<sup>82</sup> Moscow's gambit worked. On October 25 Secretary of State Rogers announced that Soviet-U.S. nuclear arms control talks would begin in November. Kissinger had strongly objected to this, still hoping that the Soviets might put pressure on North Vietnam, but Nixon followed the advice of Rogers instead. Although the possibility of military escalation in Vietnam was clearly closed, Nixon still held to the madman theory. Kissinger, however, had given up faith in such maneuvers and apparently did not cooperate further. According to his memoirs:

As was his habit Nixon sought to compensate for his unwillingness to face down his old friend [Rogers] by escalating the menace to the Soviets. He immediately told me that I should convey to Dobrynin that the President was "out of control" on Vietnam. In serving Nixon one owed it to him to discriminate among the orders he issued and to give him another chance at those that were unfulfillable or dangerous. This one was in the latter category. I knew that Nixon was planning to take no action on November 1. To utter a dire threat and then take no action whatever would depreciate the currency. So I waited to see whether Nixon would return to the theme. He did not.<sup>83</sup>

### *Nuclear Operations and Hidden Dangers*

Despite these crucial political developments, the secret nuclear alert operations approved previously continued unaffected by what was happening in Washington. SAC had lobbied successfully against dispersal of its bomber force to

---

80. 20 October 1969, Haldeman diaries (emphasis in original).

81. Kissinger to Nixon 21 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

82. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 305.

83. *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306. We have found no evidence to corroborate or contradict Kissinger's account of his opposition to additional U.S. threats after October 25, 1969.

satellite military bases in the United States. It had also procured approval for two critical actions: the special “maintenance generation” (placing thermonuclear weapons on aircraft on the runways of main SAC bases, despite having no crews available to fly the bombers if necessary) and the special Giant Lance airborne alert operation, “show of force” option, with nuclear weapons on board.

SAC headquarters issued its maintenance generation instructions on October 23. By October 25, approximately 65 percent of the non-alert SIOP aircraft were loaded with nuclear weapons and placed out on SAC runways.<sup>84</sup> On October 26, SAC also began the Giant Lance airborne alert. Thermonuclear weapons were loaded on to B-52s at March AFB in southern California and Fairchild AFB in Washington. KC-135 refueling aircraft were deployed to Eielson AFB in Alaska. Between October 27 and 29, eighteen nuclear-armed B-52s flew eighteen-hour missions over the northern polar cap. The bombers flew north, along the Canadian coast, toward the Soviet Union. They crossed Alaska, were refueled in midair by the KC-135 tankers, and flew oval patterns toward the Soviet border and back.<sup>85</sup>

On the night of October 28, the JCS directed SAC and all other U.S. military commands to terminate their special alert activities effective October 30.<sup>86</sup> Giant Lance thus ended soon after it had begun. Lt. Gen. Paul Carlton, commander of the Fifteenth Air Force at Fairchild AFB, commended the aircrews and weapons maintenance officers, praising “the quality of maintenance achieved and the fact there were no incidents involving weapons.”<sup>87</sup>

At the most basic level, given that Nixon had already decided not to bomb North Vietnam and Rogers had just announced the start of SALT, these final SAC alert operations were loosely coupled to U.S. diplomatic activities at the end of October. More important, when one looks closely at the details of SAC operations, a number of the specific alert actions can be seen to have created hidden risks, dangers that ran counter to Nixon and Kissinger’s intentions. First, the president and national security adviser had ordered that no reconnaissance flights take place on the periphery of the Soviet Union so as to avoid

---

84. History of the Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, p. 155.

85. History of the 92nd Strategic Aerospace Wing (Heavy) and 92nd Combat Support Group, 14 September–31 December 1969, KWG-92-HI, AFHRC, Maxwell Air Force Base; and SAC to Eielson, March, and Fairchild Air Force Bases 21 October 1969, FOIA.

86. History of the 92nd Strategic Aerospace Wing (Heavy) and 92nd Combat Support Group, 14 September–31 December 1969, pp. 142–144; and History of Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, p. 156.

87. Quoted in the History of the 92nd Strategic Aerospace Wing (Heavy) and 92d Combat Support Group, 14 September–31 December 1969, p. 44.

a diplomatic incident. Yet SAC flew B-52 bombers over the Arctic ice, on routes toward the Soviet Union and back, without the use of ground-based navigational aids from radar sites in Alaska.<sup>88</sup> Similar flights had produced an incident earlier in the decade when a B-52 accidentally strayed into the Soviet Union's air defense warning net, a fact not known to Washington officials in 1969 who had approved the new operation.<sup>89</sup> Second, although Nixon and Kissinger wanted to avoid any nuclear weapons accident that would create public awareness and alarm, SAC's improvised maintenance generation alert led to the suspension of some of the strict peacetime nuclear safety requirements. At Grand Forks AFB in North Dakota, for example, SAC issued a "temporary explosive safety waiver," so that noncertified personnel could participate in the alert operation.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, SAC had to issue a "quantity distance waiver" at another bomber base, permitting nuclear weapons there to be placed in closer proximity to one another than normal peacetime safety rules permit.<sup>91</sup> Finally, and most significant, officers in the 92d Strategic Air Wing discovered that the routes and timing of the nuclear-armed bombers were poorly planned in the SEAGA alert. "Several B-52s were required to orbit in close proximity with other aircraft, an air traffic situation that was considered unsafe," the after-action report noted.<sup>92</sup>

Although Nixon and Kissinger wanted this to be a "safe" signal of U.S. readiness to use nuclear weapons, some increased risk of accidents and incidents was unavoidable. SAC recognized these dangers: It recommended that ground-based radars be used to help SAC bombers stay on course in the future. The scheduled flight times and orbit patterns for the bombers and tankers were changed in the 1970 SAC Giant Lance operational plans to avoid collisions.<sup>93</sup> Nixon and Kissinger never learned this lesson about the dangers of nuclear weapons alerts because they were never informed of the operational problems and safety concerns that emerged during the first nuclear alert operation they ordered, but did not really control.

---

88. Message 211841Z Nov 69, 15th Air Force to SAC, Subject: Problems Encountered in SEAGA Operation, FOIA.

89. On August 23, 1962, an airborne alert B-52 flew 1,500 miles off course, coming within 300 miles of the Soviet coast. The incident was not reported to civilian officials in Washington. See Sagan, *The Limits of Safety*, pp. 73–77.

90. Peake, "Notes on Increased Readiness Posture of October 1969," p. 8.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

92. 92nd Strategic Aerospace Wing and 92nd Combat Support Group History, 14 September–31 December 1969, pp. 44–45.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

POLITICAL DANGERS: BACK TO THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT

We have little evidence indicating what the Soviet leaders knew about the U.S. nuclear alert and how they interpreted it. Since the end of the Cold War, a number of former senior Soviet officials have claimed that the Moscow leadership received intelligence reports indicating that U.S. forces had gone on alert in October 1969. These former officials report that Soviet intelligence did not understand why the U.S. military was increasing its readiness for nuclear war.<sup>94</sup> Such confusion about the American signal is understandable. After all, the details of the alert operation would not lead an objective observer to focus on North Vietnam as the potential target: The B-52s on Guam were not placed on SIOP runway alert, the airborne alert was over the Arctic—not on the alternative Pacific or Far Eastern airborne alert routes outlined in SAC plans<sup>95</sup>—and military forces were alerted in Europe and the Far East as well as in the United States. Soviet intelligence officers might have thought that the global nuclear alert was an effort to heighten readiness to deter Soviet military intervention or escalation elsewhere in the event of a major U.S. conventional bombing campaign over North Vietnam. But other aspects of the alert, specifically details that were left out because of the administration's concern that the U.S. public would learn of the action, would also have led an objective observer to think that this was not a serious preparation for a nuclear confrontation: Many U.S. strategic nuclear missile submarines were left in port, where they were vulnerable to an attack, and U.S. bombers were not dispersed to civilian airports, as they had been in earlier crises.

We do not know if this led the Soviet intelligence agencies to deduce that the nuclear alert was a bluff, a cheap signal without intent to follow through with military action. More evidence from the Russian archives is necessary to answer that question. But one of the most interesting aspects about the U.S. declassified documents is that they reveal how little White House officials considered an obvious alternative interpretation that Moscow leaders might entertain when informed of U.S. nuclear readiness increases: a threat of American intervention in a potential Sino-Soviet border conflict.

Large military skirmishes between the two communist states dated back to March 1969. A particularly heavy series of engagements occurred in early Au-

---

94. The officials are Ambassador Dobrynin, former Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh, and a former first deputy commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces, Col. Gen. Victor Esin (ret.). Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War*, p. 180 and n. 16, p. 339; and Victor Esin, interview with the author (Sagan), December 3, 2002.

95. History of the Strategic Air Command, FY 1970, p. 140.

gust.<sup>96</sup> Throughout the summer and early fall of 1969, the Soviet Union threatened to launch a preventive strike against Chinese nuclear facilities. Moscow even went so far as to approach Washington for possible collaboration.<sup>97</sup> The Nixon administration explicitly rejected these suggestions.<sup>98</sup> During August and September, Kissinger closely watched events along the Sino-Soviet border, warning the president as late as September 29 that the possibility of expanded, potentially nuclear, hostilities between the two communist states was still very much “alive.”<sup>99</sup>

Concerns about Vietnam in October distracted Nixon and Kissinger from heightened tensions on the Sino-Soviet border. On September 30, following a military report that “the Soviet revisionist leadership” planned “to launch a quick war against China,” Lin Biao (Mao’s designated successor) placed Chinese military forces on a state of “first-degree combat readiness.”<sup>100</sup> On October 17 he went one step further and issued a “Number One Order,” instructing the army chief of staff (Huang Yongsheng) to prepare all units for immediate action. Chinese military forces moved to forward positions throughout the country. Leaders and citizens evacuated cities in anticipation of Soviet air raids. All told, China moved more than 940,000 soldiers, 4,000 airplanes, and 600 naval ships in preparation for what the government called “the coming of

---

96. See Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American *Rapprochement*,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 2000), pp. 21–37; and Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969,” pp. 80–86.

97. See Memorandum of Conversation, William Stearman and Boris Davydov, 18 August 1969, Folder: Political Affairs and Relations, 3/1/69, Box 1973, POL CHICOM-US, RG 59, Central Files, NA; and Department of State Telegram to American Embassy, Hong Kong et al., 21 August 1969, Folder: Political Affairs and Relations, 2/1/69, Box 1974, POL 1 CHICOM-USSR, RG 59, Central Files, NA. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 183; and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 237. In early August, U.S. intelligence agencies determined that Soviet air forces in the Far East had entered a heightened state of alert. Recent Soviet operational exercises suggested preparations for a preventive attack, possibly including nuclear weapons, against the Chinese nuclear weapons complex. See Holloway to JCS 8 August 1969, FOIA; and Allen S. Whiting, “Sino-American Détente,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 82 (June 1980), p. 336. For British speculation on the KGB’s role in spreading rumors of a Soviet preventive strike, see Cambridge to Giffard 19 September 1969, FCO 28/800, Public Records Office, Kew, London [hereafter PRO].

98. Kissinger to Nixon 20 September 1969, Folder: USSR, Vol. 5, Box 710, NSC files, Nixon papers; Kissinger to Undersecretary of State circa 20 September 1969, Folder: USSR, Vol. 5, Box 710, NSC files, Nixon papers; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 184.

99. Kissinger to Nixon 29 September 1969, Folder: HAK/Richardson Meeting, May 1969–December 1969, Box 337, NSC files, Nixon papers.

100. Report by Four Chinese Marshals—Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian—to the CCP Central Committee, “Our Views about the Current Situation, 17 Sept. 1969,” in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Vol. 11 (Winter 1998), p. 170; and Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” pp. 40–41.

war.”<sup>101</sup> The Chinese military also prepared to use the country’s small nuclear arsenal, in the event of a Soviet attack.<sup>102</sup>

The documentary record reveals that Nixon and Kissinger neglected this growing crisis on the Sino-Soviet border as they focused on Vietnam. They paid little attention to Dobrynin’s continued probing of White House reactions to a potential Soviet attack on China.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, despite the war scare on the Sino-Soviet border, Nixon and Kissinger were so obsessed with Vietnam that they barely discussed China. In his briefings to the president before his October 20 meeting with Dobrynin, Kissinger did not even mention Sino-Soviet tensions.<sup>104</sup> When Dobrynin handed the president an aide-mémoire warning the United States against intervention in the Sino-Soviet conflict, both Nixon and Kissinger failed to address the possibility that Moscow (and Beijing) could interpret the nuclear alert in this light.<sup>105</sup>

In short, for all of their talk about “linkage,” Nixon and Kissinger treated their nuclear alert orders as isolated acts, only relevant to the Vietnam War.

---

101. See Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” pp. 40–41. For British evaluations of Chinese war preparations, see Murray to Wilford 8 December 1969 and Wilford to Permanent Under-Secretary 9 December 1969, FCO 21/483, PRO; and Walden to Appleyard 12 January 1970, FCO 21/683, PRO. British officials emphasized that the Chinese war preparations also served domestic purposes—helping Mao Zedong to reassert central control after years of upheaval during the Cultural Revolution.

102. Lin Biao’s October 17 telegram to Huang Yongsheng led to the official declaration of the “Number One Order” to all army units on October 18. This order included reference to combat readiness in the Second Artillery, responsible for Chinese nuclear forces. In late September, China conducted two nuclear tests within six days of each other. Between 1964 and 1978, the Chinese never again detonated nuclear weapons in such quick succession. A number of authors have interpreted the September 1969 tests as Beijing’s signal to the Soviets that China had nuclear weapons it could use if attacked. See Tyler, *A Great Wall*, p. 73; and Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969,” p. 94. The most authoritative source on Chinese nuclear developments during this period remains John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 190–218, 244–245.

103. On September 27, 1969, Dobrynin asked Kissinger “whether he thought they (the Soviets) were going to attack the Chinese.” Kissinger replied: “As a historian, he thought the Soviets were considering it.” Transcript of telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger 27 September 1969, p. 2, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC Files, Nixon papers. Kissinger focused so little on this comment that he neglected to include it in the written account of his meeting with Dobrynin. See Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin 27 September 1969, *ibid.*

104. Kissinger to Nixon 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers; and Kissinger to Nixon (Briefing) 18 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

105. Memorandum of conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Dobrynin 20 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers; and Kissinger to Nixon 21 October 1969, Folder: Dobrynin/Kissinger, 1969 [Part 1], Box 489, NSC files, Nixon papers.

They did not consider how foreign leaders in Moscow or Beijing might link these military activities to other dangerous crises, occurring at the same time. Ironically, Nixon and Kissinger appear to have assumed that the Soviet leadership would rationally analyze and clearly understand the strategic signal sent by a president who wanted to be seen as so irrational that he would do anything to end the war in Vietnam.

*Conclusions: In Command, but Out of Control*

This article has looked behind the veil of secrecy that has surrounded the events of October 1969. Although many mysteries remain, the available information reveals a disturbing and seemingly anomalous picture of the U.S. government's decisionmaking concerning nuclear weapons threats. It is crucial that scholars carefully study events that first appear to be abnormal, however, for as Thomas Kuhn has noted, such inquiry can spark scientific advancement: "Discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations. . . . It then continues with a more or less extended exploration of the area of anomaly. And it closes only when the paradigm theory has been adjusted so that the anomalous has become the expected."<sup>106</sup> A close examination of the available record from October 1969 can alter the paradigmatic assumptions about our nuclear history and perhaps even our nuclear future.

First, contrary to most assumptions about crisis signaling, the October 1969 alert demonstrates that a major increase in military readiness, even a global nuclear alert, is not necessarily a public event. Secret military alerts, however, do not create the kind of costly commitments that can enhance the credibility of a threat by placing the reputation of a leader at stake. The October 1969 alert was certainly a loud signal of increased military preparedness for global nuclear war. But the existing evidence that the Soviet leadership did not react in any meaningful way to this significant increase of U.S. military readiness suggests that it was also a cheap signal, one that was indicative of a bluff, rather than resolve.

Second, Nixon and Kissinger did not intend for the nuclear alert to be "a threat that leaves something to chance," and yet their orders nevertheless produced a number of dangerous nuclear weapons operations. Even in the highly

---

106. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 52–53.

centralized world of nuclear weapons management, the president commands but he does not entirely control. Senior authorities in the White House endeavored, with commendable seriousness, to make the madman nuclear alert a safe and risk-free operation. The U.S. military was told not to take actions that were threatening to the Soviet Union; potentially provocative reconnaissance flights near Soviet borders were not approved; and Nixon and Kissinger even planned to tell Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, if he raised the issue, that the alert actions were “carefully controlled exercises” that involved “no threat” to the Soviet Union. Despite these efforts, however, nuclear-armed B-52s were flown outside Soviet airspace in what was arguably a provocative and threatening “show of force” posture, a set of strict peacetime nuclear weapons safety regulations were waived by lower level commanders, and B-52 bombers and tankers accidentally flew very close to each other in what SAC later recognized as an “unsafe” orbit pattern. The compartmentalized and complex nature of U.S. military organizations meant that Nixon and Kissinger exerted far less control over the nuclear alert than they anticipated. Moreover, the secretive and specialized nature of U.S. military maneuvers meant that Nixon and Kissinger never learned about the limits to their control over nuclear operations.

Taken together, these insights suggest that the October 1969 global nuclear readiness operation produced the worst of all worlds. Nixon’s secret alert was both ineffective and dangerous. The events of October 1969 should therefore be a cautionary tale for scholars and practitioners of coercive diplomacy, a strong warning against the temptation to issue secret, but cheap, signals of increased military readiness in crises.

Third, the history of the October 1969 alert provides another important, but discomfiting, insight into the nature of command and control of nuclear weapons. Americans tend to assume that democratic institutions will make better decisions about war and peace than less democratic alternatives. Check and balances, it is assumed, assure that a single irrational and ignorant figure cannot create disaster. In October 1969, however, Richard Nixon deliberately exceeded the strategic actions that he believed Soviet leaders would perceive as those of a “rational actor” with nuclear weapons. Nixon brandished U.S. strategic nuclear forces to appear as a madman in his endeavor to coerce cooperation from the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. It is worth asking, in retrospect, whether this behavior really was madness.

Nixon obviously did not create a nuclear disaster in October 1969. Indeed, until Soviet and Chinese archives are fully opened, it will be impossible to as-



sess precisely how dangerous his actions really were. But the fact remains that senior officials in the U.S. government, including the secretary of defense, firmly believed that the commander in chief and his national security adviser were taking unnecessary and risky actions with U.S. strategic nuclear forces. They could not, however, check the direct orders of the president.

Fourth, this new evidence that the United States went on a secret nuclear alert in October 1969 should produce significant modesty about how much scholars really know about Cold War nuclear diplomacy. Scholars too often have assumed that nuclear crises ended with the Cuban missile crisis and that nuclear deterrence under strategic parity automatically assured stability.<sup>107</sup> The fear of nuclear devastation may well have encouraged caution and helped to prevent war during numerous conflicts over Berlin, the Taiwan Strait, and Cuba. And it may also be true that the Cold War crises after 1962 were less dangerous than the crises before Cuba. This, however, is only the easily visible part of the story. When one lifts the veil of secrecy, one can also see moments when the presence of large nuclear arsenals and faith in deterrence encouraged risky and even belligerent behavior. October 1969 may only be one such case, and future research should be a high priority to expand scholarly knowledge of other still secret moments of nuclear crisis during the Cold War.<sup>108</sup>

#### ROGUE REGIMES AND THE MADMAN THEORY

Finally, the evidence of cavalier and imprudent White House behavior in the Cold War highlights the inherent risks created by nuclear weapons proliferation.<sup>109</sup> The spread of nuclear weapons capabilities will create new temptations for governments (and potentially nonstate actors) to exploit their military

---

107. For thoughtful examples of this approach to nuclear weapons and the history of the Cold War, see Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, pp. 229–231, 237–243; and Kenneth N. Waltz, “More May Be Better,” in Scott D. Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), pp. 3–45.

108. Cold War incidents and crises that deserve renewed attention include the Jordanian crisis of 1970, the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, the October 1973 Middle East war, the false-warning incidents of 1979 and 1981, the SAC alert following the assassination attempt of President Ronald Reagan in 1981, and the events surrounding the 1983 Able Archer NATO exercises. On the last two topics, see Herbert L. Abrams, *The President Has Been Shot: Confusion, Disability, and the Twenty-fifth Amendment in the Aftermath of the Attempted Assassination of Ronald Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp. 118–125; and Jeremi Suri, “Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 68–71.

109. See Peter D. Feaver, “Proliferation Optimism and Theories of Nuclear Operations,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1993), pp. 159–191; Scott D. Sagan, “More Will Be Worse,” in Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, pp. 46–87; and Marc Trachtenberg, “Waltzing to Armageddon,” *National Interest*, Vol. 69 (Fall 2002), pp. 144–152.

power for political purposes. American policymakers and scholars often assume that states controlled by powerful dictators hostile to the United States are “rogue states” and thus pose unique dangers to global stability.<sup>110</sup> There are certainly good reasons to question the degree of prudence or even rationality exhibited in some of the mysterious decisions made by key leaders in so-called rogue nations that seek or have acquired nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War. For example, it is difficult to find the logic or prudence behind Saddam Hussein’s 1991 Gulf War decision to launch a Scud missile at Israel’s Dimona nuclear reactor, given that a successful strike might have led to a widespread release of radioactivity and likely Israeli nuclear retaliation against Baghdad.<sup>111</sup> But it is also difficult to be confident that reasonable nuclear crisis decisionmaking will take place in more democratic proliferant countries. For example, Pakistan’s democratically elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif approved the 1999 military incursion into Indian-held Kashmir without considering the strategic consequences of the attack and may have not even known that his nuclear-capable missile forces were put on alert during the ensuing crisis.<sup>112</sup>

The emerging evidence about new nuclear powers and the once-secret history of the Cold War point to the same disturbing conclusion. Leaders in democratic, undemocratic, and mixed regimes can behave irresponsibly with nuclear weapons. Leaders in both democracies and nondemocracies are susceptible to poor decisionmaking and pressures that induce dangerous activities. Both can give commands that produce complex military operations that they cannot control.

If this argument is correct, there is a continuing need to discourage potential nuclear states from abandoning the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and taking steps to acquire their own nuclear weapons. But creating a safer world will also require that existing nuclear states take their NPT commit-

---

110. The best explanation and critique of the rogue state concept is Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).

111. See Avigdor Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons, and Deterrence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 72–75; and Timothy V. McCarthy and Jonathan B. Tucker, “Saddam’s Toxic Arsenal,” in Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 47–78.

112. See Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 100–104; and Bruce Reidel, *American Diplomacy and the 1999 Kargil Summit at Blair House*, Policy Paper Series 2002 (Philadelphia: Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 2002), <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/casi/reports/RiedelPaper051302.htm>.

ment—to work in good faith toward eventual nuclear disarmament—more seriously. It is not at all likely, of course, that the world will reach that ultimate goal anytime soon. Still, more restraint in U.S. nuclear policy—such as a commitment not to develop new tactical nuclear weapons, the adoption of a no-first-use doctrine, and improved security assurances to potential adversaries—could signal the good-faith efforts promised under the NPT and make it less likely that the United States would use nuclear weapons in the future. A better understanding of the dangers caused by nuclear weapons operations in the Cold War, including the 1969 alert, may be helpful for both objectives. It could usefully reduce the hubris that permits many Americans to think that other governments cannot control nuclear weapons but their government can safely hold on to thermonuclear weapons forever. A better understanding of the past may also inspire more modesty and self-criticism in contemporary U.S. nuclear nonproliferation efforts. Washington officials should advise other state leaders to act with the nuclear prudence that American administrations have long espoused, but have not always followed.