

A large, glowing orange and yellow mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion, centered in the background. The cloud has a thick, billowing base and a large, rounded top. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, fiery tones.

The Day We Narrowly Avoided a Nuclear Armageddon

with

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Exercise “Abel Archer”

- 1983 Exercise “Abel Archer” conducted amid increasing tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.
- Exercise called for gradually raising the “DefCon” level.
- Abel Archer culminated in the launch of a preemptive nuclear strike.

Soviet National Security Decision Making in the Early 1980's

- Soviet national security decision making narrow and closed to dissenting opinions.
- Leadership in the Kremlin increasingly a “Gerontocracy”. From Brezhnev to Andropov to Cherenko.



Soviet Perceptions of Reagan Objectives

- Soviet analyses increasingly simplistic and stressed worst case conclusions.
- Soviet leadership genuinely concerned U.S. contemplating a “disarming first nuclear strike”.

American Actions and Statements

Lend Credence to Soviet Fears

- U.S. begins conducting military exercises that Moscow interprets as first steps in actual strike on USSR.
- American Navy challenges near USSR under “freedom of navigation”.
- U.S. strategic bombers enter Soviet airspace during exercises.
- Korean civilian airliner KAL007 crosses Soviet airspace en route to Seoul.
- President Reagan jokes about launching nuclear strike on the USSR.... Secretary Haig threatens to send “nuclear warning shot across the bow”.

Soviet Leadership Orders Nuclear “Retaliatory” Strike on U.S.

- At height of “Abel Archer” Kremlin convinced that U.S. will launch preemptive nuclear strike.
- Soviet high command orders Colonel Petrov to launch ICBM’s from his missile site. He refuses.
- Petrov relieved, his successor told to launch the strike.
- Soviets discover radar indications of U.S. nuclear missile launch were instead a flock of birds!!
- When it became clear that Soviet leadership was interpreting this as a real nuclear strike on the USSR, a U.S. General ordered the immediate termination of the exercise.

Conclusions

- In the early 1980's Soviet decision making was closed and prone to worst case analyses.
- U.S. leadership not sensitive to actions or statements that would be considered threatening by Moscow.
- “Abel Archer” exercise came dangerously close to nuclear exchange. But just how close remains uncertain.