

CHAPTER ONE

“WE CAME SO CLOSE”

The London-based *Spectator* is the oldest continuously published periodical in the English language, dating back to eighteenth-century London coffeehouse literary culture. It has survived as a respected general interest weekly, politically eclectic, culturally snobbish in a louche Old Etonian way, with highly regarded sources from within the old boy network in the leading British ministries.

But it rarely discloses anything as sensational and chilling as it did in the opening paragraphs of an article in the October 6, 2007, issue. It stopped me dead. It was not just the invocation of the jolting phrase “World War Three.” It was the deadly serious way in which it was invoked.

In most of the post-Cold War period, the so-called “holiday from history” when many succumbed to a historical amnesia about the dailiness of nuclear dread, the term “World War Three” has had a ring of unreality. It usually sounded or read like an antiquated paranoid fear from a half-remembered past, the way we feel when we read of the “Black Plague,” a relic of the bad old days that still nonetheless conveys a ghostly chill. We were worried about nuclear *terrorism* in 2007, but not nuclear *war*. Nuclear war: so retro.

But here, in these *Spectator* paragraphs anyway, nuclear war, “World War Three,” was something that had almost just happened:

“SO CLOSE TO WAR”

We Came So Close to World War Three That Day

James Forsyth and Douglas Davis

6 OCTOBER 2007

On 6 September, when Israel struck a nuclear facility in Syria . . .

The article described what it called a “meticulously planned, brilliantly executed surgical strike by Israeli jets on a nuclear installation in Syria.” It claimed the raid “may have saved the world from a devastating threat. The only problem is that no one outside a tight-lipped knot of top Israeli and American officials knows precisely what that threat involved.” The article went on to say that this report has been confirmed by a “very senior British ministerial source,” who’d said: “If people had known how close we came to world war three that day there’d have been mass panic. Never mind the [seasonal] floods or foot-and-mouth [disease]—[Prime Minister] Gordon [Brown] really would have been dealing with the bloody Book of Revelation and Armageddon.”

There is no doubt, as was later confirmed, the raid happened. But how close did it bring us to World War Three? The question was a wake-up call, the return of the repressed—“the bloody Book of Revelation and Armageddon.” We thought we had left that all behind.

But one could not read the story without war-gaming concatenations of regional nuclear wars that might cascade, through miscalculation or misperception, into global conflagration from such a close call.

It was not inconceivable.

Consider: the raid began with Israeli jets taking off after dark and proceeding north toward the northeast corner of Syria, toward a bleak barely habited stretch of land near the Euphrates. Subse-

quent reports indicated that electronic countermeasures (ECMs) were used by the Israelis to blind Syrian radar and antiaircraft installations as the planes crossed the border and approached their target.

Their target, later identified as a not yet operational nuclear reactor modeled on the Yongbyon reactor in North Korea—a uranium-fueled reactor that is capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium as a by-product—was destroyed. But the action could have triggered dangerous consequences. For one thing, the former Soviet Union, as well as the United States, is known to have satellite look-down capacity focused on trouble spots. There is little doubt the Russians would have picked up the Israeli jets' takeoff and—in the context of threats and counterthreats exchanged between Iran and Israel over the Iranian nuclear weapons program—they may well have warned the Iranians, with whom they have murky military and nuclear ties, that a potential Israeli attack on their nuclear facilities was under way. The Russians could easily have fired off an electronic warning to the Israelis not to attack Iran—and/or Syria—and implicitly or explicitly threatened "severe consequences" or some other euphemism for putting nukes on the table.

The Soviets, for instance, are reported to have sent an indirect nuclear warning to the Israelis at least once before—at the close of the 1973 war when the Israeli army was threatening to crush the Egyptian Third Army, the last barrier before Cairo. They dispatched an aggressive note to the United States warning of intervention if Israel persisted, which led the U.S. to raise its nuclear alert status to DEFCON-3 before Israel backed off. In other words, the Russians may have invoked that night what is known as a "nuclear umbrella"—or as U.S. nuclear savants more euphemistically call it, "extended deterrence"—in which a nuclear power uses nuclear threats to deter attacks against a nonnuclear ally.

Israel of course, though it has still not acknowledged it officially, is a substantial nuclear power with as many as two hundred warheads at its disposal, according to some estimates. Shortly after the Cold War, journalist Seymour Hersh reported that it had targeting contingency plans, which included sites in the Soviet

Union in preparation for a retaliation should such a Soviet threat have been carried out.

Complicating matters, if the Russians had issued an implicit ultimatum to the Israelis to back off, the Israelis would likely have instantly relayed that threat to the U.S., once again involving two nuclear superpowers in a potential nuclear showdown.

While the United States and Israel deny any formal nuclear umbrella arrangement, there is widespread speculation that the U.S. has warned nations contemplating a nuclear strike on Israel of severe consequences, which implies anything up to and including nuclear reprisal by the U.S. The possible existence of this putative assurance was brought out into the open by presidential candidate, now secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, who declared during the 2008 primary campaign that the U.S. would “obliterate” Iran if it attacked Israel with nukes.

And so by the time the Israeli jets reached the northeast corner of Syria and turned toward the Syrian reactor on the Euphrates, threats and counterthreats may well have been zapping through the ether and suddenly both nuclear superpowers with approximately five thousand land-based nuclear missiles on “hair-trigger” alert were on the verge of—only one misperception or hasty overreaction, one degree of separation away—being drawn into a potential regional nuclear war.

Then there’s the wild card, Pakistan, with its “Islamic bomb,” which is shorthand for some sixty to one hundred warheads under the kind of loose, decentralized control that could allow a regional commander with ties to Islamic nations such as Iran and Syria to step in and set off another variety of regional nuclear war with equal potential for escalation.

All those signals, threats, and counterthreats flashing through the night could easily have been known to the “very senior” British minister quoted in *The Spectator*, assuming he had access to GCHQ, Government Communications Headquarters, the legendary British signals interception facility, which, in tandem with the U.S. gov-

ernment's NSA (National Security Agency and its spy satellite system), can listen in to just about everything, even to secret military encryptions, in near real time.

What the very senior minister was describing was perhaps the most perilous—and emblematic—crisis of the second nuclear age thus far: it is a new world in which the bipolar “stability” of the “balance of terror” has degenerated into a chaotic state of multipolar nuclear powers with less control and less restraint and a greater chance of touching off a regional nuclear war that could escalate to global scale.

Nuclear proliferation scholar Benjamin Frankel tells us the “inherent complexity” of the new nuclear age “dooms multipolar systems to instability making them susceptible to crisis and war.”

“The world has arrived at a nuclear tipping point,” a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace study warned. “We are at the tipping point,” former Senator Sam Nunn, co-founder of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, has said, “and we are headed in the wrong direction.”

“The current global nuclear order,” declared Harvard's Graham Allison, “is extremely fragile.”

Already India and Pakistan nearly used their nuclear arsenals against each other in 1999 and 2002. That was still bipolar. The Syria raid, however, was the most dramatic embodiment of the difference between the bipolar Cold War type of nuclear war close calls, and the new type of multipolar chain reactions that could reach critical mass in our new nuclear age.

THE COLD WAR CLOSE CALLS EMERGE

How should we gauge the seriousness, the closeness of close calls? How close are we from the beginning of the end? One disturbing result of recent nuclear historiography—and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) declassifications—has been the revelation that even the purportedly more stable nuclear deterrence system of the Cold War produced a far greater number of close calls during the first nuclear era than we imagined. It turns out we weren't scared

enough, or as much as we should have been. The more historians excavate the history of the Cold War, the more close calls they discover. We're only now learning the truth about how much closer we came—and how often—to nuclear war than we knew at the time. One of the great debates about nuclear deterrence—threatening genocide to prevent genocide—is whether we got through the Cold War because of the ingenious design of deterrence—the finely calibrated threats of annihilation—or because of sheer luck in close call moments. These new revelations tend to substantiate the luck rather than design theory of why we survived.

There was the revelation by Michael Dobbs in *One Minute to Midnight*, his 2009 book on the Cuban Missile Crisis, that Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba were both armed and ready, contrary to U.S. intelligence, and that command over their launch had been turned over by the Russians to Fidel Castro. Castro swore that in the event of any kind of attack—of the sort the Joint Chiefs pressed on President Kennedy, confident the Soviet nukes were not yet assembled—he would have fired them at the U.S. mainland even if the move touched off a global nuclear war, as it likely would have. There was also the revelation by Dobbs that the captain of the Soviet submarine, which was escorting the Russian cargo ship testing the U.S. blockade of Cuba, said that on October 27, 1962, he had armed and aimed a nuclear-tipped torpedo at a U.S. blockade vessel at the height of the crisis, and was about to fire when the Russian sub fleet commander, who happened to be on board, overrode his decision.

Historians of the Cold War have also unearthed “false positive” nuclear alerts that could have led to mistaken launches: in the 1950s it was a flock of geese mistaken for incoming nukes on the U.S. side; in 1997 it was a Norwegian weather satellite launch taken for an incoming missile on the Russian side.

President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser told his CIA director, Stansfield Turner, a chilling story of his own. On June 3, 1980, at 2:26 A.M., Zbigniew Brzezinski was awakened by the NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) warning center in Colorado, and was told he must notify the president

that their screens showed an incoming nuclear strike. According to Brzezinski the error was detected only "one minute" before Brzezinski had planned to tell the president of a NORAD warning that 2,200 Soviet missiles had been launched against the United States. Brzezinski hesitated long enough for NORAD to call back and say a mistake had been made: the call had been triggered by nuclear warning training tapes being fed into the warning room screens and mistaken for the real thing.

And then there was Colonel Petrov; the midlevel Russian officer in the Strategic Rocket Force who was manning the Kremlin's underground warning center on September 26, 1983, when radar signaled a massive nuclear strike coming over the pole from the U.S. He had minutes to decide to awaken Soviet premier Yuri Andropov for a decision about whether to launch the Russian arsenal. He decided not to and it turned out to be a technical error.

There were other close calls on the Soviet side. A British mole in the KGB, Oleg Gordievsky, was able to convince his British intelligence contacts that the Kremlin believed an upcoming NATO exercise (in the fall of 1983, known as Operation Able Archer) was some kind of cover for a surprise attack against the U.S.S.R.—and that the Kremlin was making preparations for a preemptive nuclear attack to get the jump on the West. Gordievsky's warning led to some key decisions to diminish Soviet suspicion, such as President Reagan not leaving the White House for his "undisclosed location" command bunker that October as he would have if a real attack had been planned. No one can know how things might have turned out if a well-placed mole had not stopped the mutual ratcheting up of suspicion.

Luck: who knows what would have happened if Brzezinski had not hesitated, if it had been someone other than Petrov on duty, or if Gordievsky had not spoken up. Nuclear triumphalists look at this history and maintain that "the system worked." Nuclear deterrence worked. But did it work because it was so well designed, or only because we were extraordinarily lucky its failures and close calls did not result in nuclear holocaust?

Does that mean the system, such as it is, will continue to work

under very different twenty-first-century circumstances with wild-card nuclear powers now in the picture?

The conviction that the system worked has allowed us to avoid the haunting questions of the morality of the system's mutual suicide pact. It allowed us to avoid serious consideration of the most profound moral question: is there an alternative to the system—to our continued dependence on the Cold War-generated genocidal threat of nuclear deterrence?

And then there was the question about that question: was it dangerous, perhaps immoral, even to ask the question, because such discussion undermined the credibility of the deterrent threat by depicting the possibility that a nuclear power would dither and moralize—and perhaps *not* retaliate? Would asking the question have the effect of making more likely the attack we were trying to deter, with its inevitable millions of casualties? What place does moralizing have when it comes to nuclear war? Because nuclear bombs may be exponentially more powerful than conventional ones, does the quantity of lives make the quality of moral analysis different? Why exactly should we feel worse about Hiroshima than the firebombing of Tokyo, which killed five times more innocents at least initially? We never settled these questions before the end of the Cold War. Now the threat of nuclear war is back and we have to face them again.

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY AGAIN

The Israeli raid on the Syrian reactor was, for this more than casual observer, the culmination of a number of disturbing developments in 2007, that year of living dangerously again, the year in which it was no longer possible to ignore the return of the repressed: the reality of the danger of nuclear *war*, as opposed to nuclear *terror*, a mere suitcase bomb. (Although nuclear war could be *set off* by nuclear terror.)

Looking back, the concatenation of nuclear events may have begun with the misbegotten announcement in April 2007 by the Bush administration that it was going to install interceptor rock-

ets in Poland, purportedly to shoot down Iranian missiles that might put Europe at risk. The furious reaction of the Russians to the installation of any kind of Western missiles on their border may have soured relations for long after the decision by the Obama administration two years later, to abandon the Polish plan and shift to a sea-based interceptor system. But even that concession has not satisfied Russian opposition to any missile defense system near its borders.

The most dramatic reaction to the April decision was the August 17, 2007, announcement by Vladimir Putin that Russian long-range bombers would be resuming regular "strategic flights." "Strategic" is a widely used euphemism in nuclear affairs for "nuclear-capable."

While there were unofficial reassurances that the flights were "exercises" and that the bombers wouldn't be armed with nukes, it soon became apparent that this was more than a symbolic announcement, and had more than symbolic consequences.

Putin's decision to resume strategic flights meant he was putting his nuclear bombers in the air on a regular basis. It was a Cold War heightened-alert procedure, designed by both sides to prevent nuclear bombers from being caught on the runway by a surprise attack—as well as making possible a devastating first strike. Before the resumption of its "strategic flights," Russia's nuclear-capable bomber fleet had been virtually grounded by inaction, defunding, and disrepair for some years.

This is what Putin said that August of 2007: "I have made a decision to resume regular flights of Russia's strategic aviation. Starting today such tours of duty will be conducted regularly and on a strategic scale. Our pilots have been grounded for too long; they are happy to start a new life."

Do you think he mentioned "strategic" enough times? And "happy" is a curious note to strike about that particular "new life," especially since Putin left unanswered the question of whether these strategic flights would in fact be bearing nuclear bombs then or in the future.

Although that announcement drew a moderate amount of international media attention, the troubling consequences were less

widely noted. Indeed it was only six months later that I happened to read in a small-circulation military magazine *AirForces Monthly* published in the U.K. that the U.S. and NATO were sending fighter jets to intercept Putin's Russian bombers on these strategic flights.

Dogfights with nuclear-capable bombers! I found it so hard to believe this hadn't been bigger news, or that the source was reliable, that I picked up the phone, called the Pentagon, and after a few connections was put in touch with a Canadian Air Force major named Bryan Martin, the designated spokesperson at NORAD's nuclear warning center in the hollowed-out interior of Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado. (NORAD is a joint U.S.-Canadian air defense command.)

I'd been there before—in 1977 on my Cold War-era tour of nuclear war nodes—inside Cheyenne Mountain, the place where the theater-size warning screens tracked every trace of a moving object heading for U.S. and Canadian airspace and determined whether it might be hostile. If two technical sensors—one radar, one satellite—were triggered, and this “dual phenomenology” as STRATCOM, the U.S. Strategic Command (formerly SAC, the Strategic Air Command), likes to call it—registered something incoming, then an “assessment conference” would be called and a decision would be made as to whether to notify STRATCOM's underground nuclear command center in Omaha, and brief its commanders about whether to call the White House so it could fire up the president's “nuclear football” for action.

Yes, the NORAD major confirmed to me, they'd been watching the Russian strategic flights and occasionally scrambling U.S. fighter jets to intercept them. In the six months since Putin's strategic flights program began, there had been no fewer than seventeen U.S. fighter jet interceptions of Russian bombers as they approached NORAD-patrolled U.S. and Canadian West Coast and Arctic airspace. There was an even greater number of such engagements over NATO airspace in Europe, he informed me.

Cheyenne Mountain's Major Martin informed me that the Russians sometimes announced vague exercises that would include such flights, so as to avoid misinterpretations of the strategic

flights' intent. But anyone familiar with Cold War war-gaming knew that the best way to disguise a surprise attack was to have it develop out of what was announced as an exercise. The NORAD major said most of the intercepts were the result of Russian bombers "departing from the flight plan of the exercise they filed and approaching NORAD airspace."

The major described the typical outlines of the seventeen episodes: U.S. fighter jets buzzing the Russian bombers and causing them to turn back from the course that would bring them closer to U.S. coastal airspace.

But those seventeen episodes only involved U.S. pilots—they did not include all the intercepts of Russian bombers performed by every NATO and Japanese fighter in non-NORAD airspace. The major placed that total number at about seventy-five, substantiating the report in *AirForces Monthly*.

I'll mention just one of those interactions reported by the monthly between Russian strategic bombers and NATO jet interceptors. "On September 6, the biggest build-up of Russian airpower in NATO airspace saw as many as eight Tu-95s [nuclear-capable bombers] track their way from the Barents Sea and into the Atlantic . . . shadowed by 20 NATO fighters," it said. Was it a coincidence that the Israeli raid on the Syrian reactor, the one that allegedly brought us so close to World War III, took place on September 6? The monthly also quoted a Russian source that "the NATO jets approached at what he considered potentially dangerous distances—within 16–25 feet wingtip to wingtip." The story went on to say that "the fact that no emergency situation resulted . . . was a testament to the flying skills on both sides." Very reassuring! Let's applaud those flying skills.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice eventually condemned these strategic flights buzzing our airspace, but not before the most provocative development in the strategic flights program: in July 2008, shortly before Putin sent troops into Georgia purportedly to support pro-Russian independent enclaves, the Russian Defense Ministry announced some strategic flights would be landing in Cuba and, shortly thereafter, in Venezuela. This brought a remarkably

sharp reply from U.S. Air Force general who said any such action—landing nuclear bombers ninety miles from U.S. shores—would “cross a red line.”

Suddenly all the elements for a new Cuban Missile Crisis were there. All but one: the two superpowers were no longer declared enemies, locked in a balance of terror, zero-sum death struggle. They were no longer friends, it's true, more geopolitical rivals, but the rivalry was beginning to take a military turn. The strategic background, the context of these flights and intercepts and Cuban landings, was different from that of 1962, but it was getting progressively worse. The situation raised the possibility of what the nuclear strategists call “inadvertence”—an accidental nuclear exchange. To this day, Russia's strategic flights program goes on, as do the dangerous intercepts.

Meanwhile, the effort to limit the buildup of nuclear weapons between the two original superpowers had stalled. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, expired on December 5, 2009. For months, beginning in July 2009 when Russian President Dmitri Medvedev seemed to sign on to U.S. President Obama's goal of “a world without nuclear weapons,” there were assurances from both sides that a new START treaty for further reductions in nuclear arsenals would be signed by that expiration day, or that if it didn't happen, the old treaty would simply be extended until the final, more bold ambitious one, was signed.

But December 5 came and went without any formal stopgap extension. The Russians instead expelled a U.S. verification team at a Russian missile factory, which had been part of START's verification infrastructure. Suddenly verification issues—as well as BMD (Ballistic Missile Defense) issues seemed to be a stalling point, with the Russians demanding less surveillance of them and more of us, specifically the right to be able to inspect the new sea-based missile defense system the Obama administration had decided to adopt after abandoning the Polish interceptors that the Russians so strenuously objected to.

The treaty was signed in April 2010 with much ceremony but only modest reductions in warheads, from 2,200 to 1,550 on each

side. As of October 2010, it had not been ratified. There is opposition to its missile defense provisions in both ratifying bodies—Congress and the Russian duma—for opposite reasons: the Russians say they have the right to withdraw from the treaty if the U.S. takes any missile defense steps not to its liking, and anti-treaty forces on the U.S. side have argued against ratification because they believe it will hamper ballistic missile defense. A formidable stumbling block.

In addition, the Russian government has kept itself busy by announcing ambitious plans to build a trillion-dollar new generation of nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles. The program got the world's attention when one missile test went spectacularly awry in the skies over Norway on November 5 and put on an *Avatar*-blue tinted whirligig sky show just as world leaders were gathering nearby in Copenhagen to discuss global warning.

It is fascinating to hear the apprehension in a voice from deep inside Russia itself about this new bellicosity. Victor Mizin, the director of one of the few remaining independent think tanks in that country, the Institute for International Security Affairs, has written recently about a number of explicit, unilateral acts the Putin regime had taken that show a disturbing change in the superpowers' nuclear postures. In an article called "Russia's Nuclear Renaissance" he cited Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe along with its threats to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which limits the number of nuclear weapons based in Europe and Russia, along with an alarming buildup and modernization of its existing nuclear arsenal. And here's a stunning development not widely reported but that Mizin emphasized: Moscow has threatened, in response to U.S. and European plans for a limited ballistic missile defense, "to retarget nuclear missiles on Europe." Obama's cancellation of the Polish interceptor plan temporarily suspended this highly aggressive threat, but the new Pentagon plan to install BMD interceptors on Romanian soil does not bode well considering the short-fused Russian reaction to missiles on its borders.

Finally, in case anyone needs convincing, Mizin asserts that all of this suggests "that the Russian generals still view a nuclear war

with either the U.S. or NATO as theoretically possible. . . . On a very basic level nothing has changed since Soviet times.”

THE MINOT MISTAKE

On the American side of things, in a sign that nukes seemed to be breaking out all over in the summer of 2007, there was the infamous Minot mistake. It took place in that same August in which Putin resumed the strategic flights. On August 31, an American nuclear-capable B-52 bomber took to the air from the Minot, North Dakota, Air Force Base with six—for some time the number was in dispute—nuclear-tipped cruise missiles suspended from one wing.

The bomber flew south to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana where it was discovered that the cruise missiles were nuclear-armed—the first time nuclear weapons had been flown over American territory in forty years.

It was all a big mistake according to several levels of investigation, which eventually played a part in the firing of the chief of staff of the air force. Nuclear weapons were supposed to be stored in special areas, painted different colors—not stacked next to the conventionally armed cruise missile as these had been. Some said there was a “management problem” and that certainly seems to be true. (The widening investigation by the Pentagon of the management of nuclear weapons disclosed that, in addition, four crucial nuclear fuses had been shipped mistakenly to Taiwan that year, no laughing matter to nuclear-armed China.)

But on another level it was almost as if the loss of dread that once surrounded nuclear weapons seemed to have been exposed. Once there had been a bright line between the nuclear and nonnuclear realm, as there had been between the nuclear and the nonnuclear storage stacks. It reflects the cultural and political view that no matter how small, a nuclear weapon occupies a different military, political, metaphysical category from other weapons.

The Obama administration announced it will pursue its version of the Bush Pentagon’s “Prompt Global Strike” plan to produce ICBMs tipped with highly lethal conventional explosives that would

be capable of slamming powerful but nonnuclear warheads any place on earth within an hour (that "prompt"). The plan has raised both practical and philosophical questions. Won't those nations who see an American ICBM heading for their capital (or wherever) assume it's got a nuclear warhead despite all the "assurances" they may have received? And won't that assumption make them more likely to use whatever nuclear weapons they have in their stockpile before finding out for sure? Even if the ICBM is equipped with a conventional warhead, if its lethality approaches nuclear strength—if this conventional missile is more lethal than a small nuke, say—should its use raise the same moral questions as a nuke?

Are nuclear weapons just very powerful and efficient explosive devices, exponentially more powerful, but when it comes to war just the most explosive, and capable of being used in the same way as conventional weapons of mass destruction? Or was there something particularly demonic, Faustian, insidiously evil—"exceptionalist"—about them? Was it the invisible long-lasting half-life of radiation that made nukes not just different in degree but in *kind*? The way nuclear weapons didn't merely split the atom but somehow cracked the core of Newtonian being—the mechanistic, determinist way of explicating all events by iron rules of causality? Was it that they revealed the demon of unpredictability that reigns on the subatomic level. The ineradicable evil of ionizing radiation?

There was another aspect of the Minot mistake I found fascinating. Either inadvertently or not, coming two weeks after Putin's strategic flights took off into the air, a U.S. strategic bomber "mistakenly" takes off, metaphorically flaunting U.S. nuclear weapons. ("We got 'em too, Vlad.")

I don't actually believe there was a deliberate decision to deploy this mistake to send a message to the Russians. But a message was sent. Nor did I buy into the frenzied biogospheric speculations that began by making a connection between the Minot mistake and all the talk of a possible U.S. or Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear enrichment centrifuges and the raid just one week later on the Syrian installation that purportedly brought us close to World War III. Barksdale, the conspiracists said, was a jumping-off place for U.S.

flights to the Middle East. Ergo the nuclear missiles on the plane were meant for launch at Iran; the Syrian mission was merely a rehearsal for the bigger plan. The blogospheric conspiracy theorists—worth studying as the nightmare id of the second nuclear age—proceeded to conjure up out of thin air an “alternate nuclear chain of command” secretly created by Dick Cheney. (Not that there are no real chain of command issues, as we will see.)

But one didn’t need conspiracy theories to see the potential nuclear flashpoints approaching in 2007.

THE IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM

Pakistan has long been a regional nuclear war ready to happen. According to veteran *New York Times* foreign correspondent Raymond Bonner, “When Bill Clinton briefed President-elect George Bush at the White House in December 2000, he enumerated six major security threats facing the United States. Three were: Al Qaeda, nuclear tensions between Pakistan and India, and Pakistan’s links to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.” In other words: Pakistan, Pakistan, Pakistan.

Pakistan developed what it came to call the Islamic bomb in secret, using stolen and freely available Western technology assembled by the notorious Pakistani bomb maker A. Q. Khan, who has been called a “nuclear jihadist” (by Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins in a book by that name). Kahn’s “nuclear bazaar” delivered nuclear technology, fuel, and possibly assembled weapons to states like Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and an unknown number of “nonstate actors,” i.e., terrorists.

The Pakistani bomb was ostensibly designed as a deterrent to the Indian nuclear bomb, which had first been tested in 1974. Once the two bitter enemy states went nuclear, every troop movement or terrorist incident in disputed Kashmir—the vast northern province ruled by India despite its Pakistan-leaning Muslim majority—became the potential cause of a regional war. So was every terrorist incident, from the bomb that blew up the Indian Parliament in 2005 to the attack on Mumbai by Pakistan-linked terrorists in November 2008.

It doesn't take very sophisticated war gaming to see how that regional war could turn into a global one:

Hindu and Muslim terrorism in Kashmir or elsewhere on the subcontinent escalates into preemptive nuclear exchanges between India and Pakistan. China comes to the aid of its traditional ally, Pakistan, against its traditional enemy, India. A rogue Indian general decides to strike China with a nuke, triggering reprisal. Muslim regional nuclear commanders in southern Russia (long a concern of both the U.S. and Russian military) enter the fray, perhaps seizing the radioactive fog of war to strike Israel, which retaliates against Russia, which strikes back, raising the possibility of drawing the U.S. into the conflagration. Once the nuclear genie is unleashed there may be no part of the globe that remains immune.

If not Pakistan and India, Pakistan and Israel. The more Pakistan has referred to its bomb as an "Islamic bomb" the more the Israelis have felt it as "an existential threat," a threat to its very existence. Israel, for its part, has been described by a nuclear strategist as "a one-bomb state" because one single-megaton-size bomb would be enough to render it an uninhabitable land of the dead and dying.

Thus the margin between existential threat to Israel and Israeli preemptive launch to prevent it is thin and getting thinner. Seconds. Minutes, maybe. Any serious threat, in other words, could be used to justify preemption. (See chapter 7.)

And should the Israelis get involved in a conflict with another Islamic state, Iran or Syria, say, what role would the Pakistani Islamic bomb play? Potentially an intervention on behalf of other Islamic states? Retaliation for Israeli use of nukes? Or could the Pakistani nukes just as likely become the target of a preemptive Israeli strike to ensure they could not be an instrument of any Islamic retaliation against an Israeli air strike against Iran, for example?

The problem with Pakistan is not just that it has a nuclear arsenal and is constantly threatening to use it against India. The problem is also that its government is unstable (in just the last three years, Pervez Musharraf was forced out, Benazir Bhutto came back and was assassinated), and the current prime minister, her husband, is regarded as slowly losing his grip on power and in particular on the

nuclear arsenal to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI, which is widely believed to be infiltrated by Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The agency is deeply involved both in Islamist and terrorist plots against India, Israel, and the West. Some Al Qaeda experts argue that Osama bin Laden's search for some crude self-made nuke, or a suitcase nuke, from a rotting relic of the former Soviet Union hasn't been successful because he wasn't trying very hard. His real goal was simply taking over the Pakistani government and its sixty new nukes ready to fire by the "authorized" command. All he had to do was bide his time, let the trends play out, and ultimately they would fall into his hands.

And then what? Needless to say the war-gaming for this eventuality had been going on in the Pentagon for years. But no one seems to know—no one in the unclassified literature had even proposed—a game-winning strategy should the worst happen and bin Laden or an ally ends up heading a nuclear-armed Pakistani government.

If an ISI/Taliban/Al Qaeda-friendly coup was successful, the U.S. would have some hard decisions to make in a terribly short period of time. Take out, as in destroy, the Pakistani nukes, as many, as fast as we could? "Take custody" of them, as one expert put it? Of course there is the little problem that we don't know where all of them are. We could send in special ops teams to secure the ones we can locate, but even assuming that goes well (preemptive detention of another nation's nuclear arsenal), there is the risk of some remaining out of our reach.

On the other hand allowing an Al Qaeda-friendly government possession of sixty nukes? Hardly tenable. Which of course makes for some hard choices on the part of the putative Al Qaeda-friendly new Pakistani rulers as well. Expecting American intervention, they might well feel they would be in a "use it or lose it" position the moment they took control. We must use them before they're seized or destroyed. Or at least hide them before the Americans can seize them.

The Pakistani government has recurrently reassured the world that only "authorized" arms of the government have control over

their nukes. But nearly simultaneous reports in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* in late 2007 made clear that the U.S. had not given the Pakistanis a key bit of centralized weapons control technology called PALs (Permissive Action Links) that were meant to ensure that some local commander wouldn't decide to start a holy war on his own without the authorization codes from the central government. The obvious problem is that even if the nukes are ensured against *unauthorized* launches, the fragile central Pakistani government can fall into the hands of extremists, who will then have the power to make authorized launches.

A nightmare. And yet such a situation is not unimaginable. More than one nuclear strategist, including Israelis concerned about Iran, have told me that Pakistan is the most immediate, unstable, insoluble, potential nuclear flashpoint we face. Unless you count . . .

THE UNFATHOMABLE AMBITIONS OF NORTH KOREA

North Korea is estimated to have eighty-two pounds of bomb-grade plutonium. That's what they've officially admitted to in the ever-breaking-down Six-Party talks with the North Koreans that are repeatedly announcing gains that are then reversed. This is about enough to make six powerful (one-megaton-plus) nuclear weapons, and some experts think they have enough to make twelve or more. They also have the No-dong missile, whose tests in the Pacific have indicated a range long enough to hit our West Coast. But that probably would not be a madman dictator like Kim Jong-il's primary target. More likely it would be war breaking out, either on purpose or accidentally, between North and South Korea, which is under our nuclear umbrella should it be threatened or come under nuclear attack from its northern enemy. "The bad news about North Korea," Jonathan Pollack, a North Korea expert at the Naval War College, told the *New York Times*, "is that we don't know much about their nuclear control system. Or even if they have much of one."

That's the bad news. He didn't mention any good news. Just

another rogue state flashpoint that could at any moment go from potential nuclear nightmare to horrific reality.

IRAN, ISRAEL, AND THE NIE SCANDAL

It is not uncommon for Israel politicians to use two emotionally loaded phrases, often in the same sentence: “existential threat” and “second Holocaust.” They are, needless to say, inextricably linked. An “existential threat” to the state of Israel, a threat to the very existence of the nearly six million Jews there, means, in effect, a “second Holocaust.” And to many, there is something exponentially more horrific about the secondness of a Holocaust happening to the same people—something that virtually guarantees a third, retaliatory one, in response.

Yes there is dispute over how imminent the threat really is, especially from Iran. At the heart of the dispute is the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran’s nuclear program. The NIE is meant to synthesize the judgments of the entire spectrum of U.S. military and civilian intelligence. Control over NIE conclusions can mean control over policy. The 2007 NIE, if read closely, reported that Iran had suspended work on only one aspect of its nuclear program—warhead design. But according to unequivocal remarks by the high-ranking intelligence officials who signed off on the report—and according to later independently discovered facts by the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors—the press and a world eager to believe that there was no problem anymore *misunderstood* the NIE and incorrectly headlined it as proof that Iran had ceased seeking nuclear weapons. While the warhead design program may have been suspended, work is racing forward on the other two aspects of nuclear weapon making: uranium fuel enrichment and nuclear-capable missile building.

And work on the warhead itself may have been halted because there was little left to do (the blueprints were available from A. Q. Khan, the rogue Pakistani nuclear scientist) but the uranium enrichment process and the missile testing process were bringing Iran inexorably closer to both weapons-grade fuel and bomb

delivery systems—the two more difficult aspects of nuclear weapon making. Maybe not as soon as some said, but soon enough, and in all likelihood, inevitably.

Few in the field seriously believes that the Iranians will suspend their drive for a nuclear weapons capacity because of talks and sanctions and talks about sanctions. Sooner or later they will have enough nuclear weapons for an existential threat if the Israelis (or the Americans) don't act first. And because the Israelis cannot dismiss the ideology of suicidal martyrdom embraced on a national level by some Iranian leaders, they will act. Things will be terrible enough if they do. Perhaps even more terrible if they don't. The Israeli historian Benny Morris has argued that the only thing that would save us from an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran would be a successful Israeli conventional attack.

Let's assume the Iranians get the bomb, a bomb big enough to destroy a "one-bomb state"—and the Israelis for one reason or another don't take preemptive action before Iran weaponizes the uranium it is enriching and builds more than one bomb. On November 19, 2007, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a widely respected middle-of-the-road Washington think tank headed by former Defense Department nuke specialist Anthony Cordesman, published a seventy-seven-page war game simulation of a nuclear war between Iran and Israel. It assumes Iran will have gone nuclear by 2020 at the latest.

Even on the conservative assumption that this will remain a "regional nuclear war" that might escalate to Syria and Egypt but not beyond, the CSIS study predicts a minimum of some 20 million deaths in Iran, close to a million in Israel, and some 18 million in Syria, if they should join in support of Iran, or if Israel preempts Damascus.

And then there is another route from regional to global nuclear conflagration, the Samson Option, a term first popularized in a 1991 Seymour Hersh book by that name. That's the scenario under which, in the aftermath of a second Holocaust, Israel's surviving submarines (reportedly five German-made Dolphin-class submarines) would use their nuclear-armed missiles to do more than

retaliate against Israel's specific attackers but would use their nuclear missiles to bring down the pillars of the world (attack Moscow and European capitals for instance) on the grounds that their enabling—or toleration of—eliminationist anti-Semitism made both the first and second Holocausts possible. Indiscriminate vengeance that might even extend to the holy places of Islam (a nightmarish scenario feverishly discussed on the internet for some time) in retaliation for the hatred that brought about a second Holocaust. Have the Israelis already let the Iranians know that they would be responsible for the targeting of Islam's holiest sites if they struck Israel? Is that "the deterrent that dare not speak its name"?

But wait, we haven't finished enumerating the potential nuclear flashpoints, we haven't considered . . .

THE NEGLECTED FLASHPOINT: CHINA AND TAIWAN

Threatening China with nukes has a history that dates back to John Foster Dulles, the secretary of state under President Dwight Eisenhower, who let it be known to Mao Zedong's mainland regime in 1954 that its threat to take the tiny Taiwanese-controlled islands of Quemoy and Matsu off the Chinese coast might be met with that kind of force.

Similar implicit threats emerged in the late 1990s and early aughts when the U.S. promulgated a doctrine of "nuclear ambiguity"—the refusal to rule out nukes—regarding any mainland attempt at military takeover of Taiwan. It was a threat that spiked every few years when Chinese exercises or coastal invasion fleets built up across the straits from Taiwan. The purposeful vagueness of nuclear ambiguity was meant to discourage Taiwan as well: it couldn't count on U.S. nuclear support if it behaved provocatively.

China is one of the few flashpoints that seem to have dimmed in recent years. But it's still there in America's master targeting plan known as the SIOP, the Single Integrated Operational Plan, now renamed OPLAN, for Operations Plan, 8022. China is still considered a "peer power," as major nuclear powers are called. Estimates

of the number of Chinese nuclear weapons are highly secret. One Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report in the 1990s projected about 360 warheads; another, later, study would only say "more than 100." The Chinese are known to favor a "minimal deterrence policy," enough-warheads to inflict devastating damage on the U.S. with missiles whose range can reach the West Coast. One Chinese general, apparently going off message, in 2005 spoke of their ability to leave Los Angeles "a smoking ruin."

And just when you think a potential World War III flashpoint is diminishing in intensity comes the growing evidence of China's cyber-warfare capability. Since 2006 there have been recurrent reports of the growing sophistication of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's cyber-warfare capability, including hundreds of probes made daily on the Pentagon command and control cyber-infrastructure. And a 2008 report in the *National Journal* cited Tim Bennett, a leading civilian cyber-terrorism expert, who claims on the basis of conversations with government cyber-security experts that Chinese cyber-attacks were responsible for the 2003 North-east power grid blackout. Bennett called this far-fetched scenario "the first act of World War III."

Two years later a front-page report on Chinese militarizing of cyber-space in *The Washington Post* dramatized the unceasing peacetime digital war being waged, making Bennett's World War III seem more than a metaphor. "They think they can deter us through cyber warfare," one source told the paper. Other scenarios had hackers inserting false warnings of attack into our warning and targeting software to provoke us to nuke others—or ourselves.

THE END OF MAD

It was little noted and mostly classified but the administration of George W. Bush sought from its inception, in its 2001 Nuclear Posture Review to break the taboo against normalizing nuclear weapons use: to articulate the idea that nuclear weapons could be deployed in war fighting, in battlefield situations rather than as primarily deterrent threats of revenge. It was an idea that had been

making progress up to the moment the Cold War ended, one that went into limbo until the Bush administration and 9/11, and then began to be embedded in our new nuclear policy as adumbrated by a little noticed but terribly important change in U.S. nuclear doctrine. That change was revealed when someone leaked portions of the top secret Nuclear Policy Review in 2002.

That review abandoned adherence to the Balance of Terror, the defensive standoff of genocidal threats also known as “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD), that had characterized Cold War deterrence. Instead the new doctrine was based on seeking and maintaining “nuclear primacy.” In other words, the U.S. would no longer seek to deter a superpower opponent with nukes but to use nukes to intimidate it into submission, or “denial” of its goals, and if war came to defeat them decisively. In addition the new doctrine lowered the bar to use nuclear weapons on nonnuclear powers—on “rogue states” and “proliferators” such as North Korea and Pakistan, as well as on what are known in the trade as the peer powers of China and Russia.

This new thinking involved everything from a range of new weapons to new strategies. It was obsessed with developing and deploying still unproven ballistic missile defense weapons and with the creation and use of smaller tactical nuclear weapons, even mini-nukes that would purportedly be ideal to deploy against hard and deeply buried targets or HDBTs. The mini-nukes were given the suggestive nuke porn name Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrators.

Few facts have been gleaned about the new master nuclear targeting plan, once called “the most secret document in the world.” But one part of it has been declassified in response to a FOIA request by Hans M. Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists. Almost all the pages are marked top secret and are blacked out. But two blacked-out pages include titles that make clear that “regional states” (that is, nations in troubled regions who are close to going nuclear) have been included in the master nuclear target base list. According to Kristensen this means American doctrine now contemplates nuclear first strikes against them, where nuclear strikes were once restricted to nuclear pow-

ers. Could it be that this partial declassification was designed to draw attention to this new policy development? Was it our intention to let these regional states know we have first-strike targeting plans against them, buried somewhere in the software of the president's nuclear football?

The U.S. had long resisted the pressure by the anti-nuke elements of the international community, and some arms control specialists, to renounce the first use of nuclear weapons. We had adopted a policy of deliberate ambiguity, which in effect was an affirmation of the willingness to be the first to use nuclear weapons in an escalating conflict. During the Cold War we refused to refuse first use largely because of the desire by our NATO allies in Western Europe to feel they had a U.S. nuclear umbrella as protection against the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. To the question of whether we'd be prepared to use nukes to stop an East Bloc advance and risk an almost certain nuclear attack on the U.S. in response—to fight the resulting global nuclear war to protect Alsace-Lorraine, in effect—we wouldn't say "no first use." (We wouldn't say whether we would use nukes to deter North Korea from attacking South Korea either.) Our policy was ambiguity.

Most Cold War historians regard our nuclear ambiguity over first use as especially important in preventing a conventional war from breaking out in Europe during the Cold War. Soviet conventional forces outweighed NATO's and the U.S. refusal to discount the option of going nuclear first—to stop the Soviets if they seemed to be breaking through Western lines—may well have checkmated that possibility, again at the risk of incinerating Europe to save it.

Still the concept of first use is different from first strike. The former is usually used in the context of defense and deterrence—a threat to deter a conventional war. The latter—first strike—is purely an offensive context, a preemptive nuclear strike, a surprise attack.

But first use, first strike preemptive nuclear war has developed a second life among the new Strangeloves, and some of the foremost old Cold Warriors.

On January 22, 2008, the U.K. *Guardian* shook readers with a report on a manifesto issued by former NATO commanders includ-

ing General John Shalikashvili from the U.S., Lord Inge from the U.K., and Klaus Naumann from Germany. Under the headline “PRE-EMPTIVE NUCLEAR STRIKE A KEY OPTION, NATO TOLD,” defense reporter Ian Traynor wrote: “The west must be ready to resort to a pre-emptive nuclear attack to try to halt the ‘imminent’ spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, according to a radical manifesto for a new NATO by five of the west’s most senior military officers and strategists.”

They were trying to shock complacent NATO governments into realizing that we had entered a new age of nuclear war and the rules needed to be changed. They argued that nukes must be brought to the fore again, contrary to NATO’s trend toward de-emphasizing nuclear weapons. The only possibility of peace is rule by an iron hand, enforced by plutonium.

MAD is dead or no longer the certain deterrent it was in the bipolar Cold War. The rise of the ideology of suicidal martyrdom—even *national* suicidal martyrdom (say, Iran sacrificing itself to destroy Israel)—means deterrence can no longer actually deter “rogue states” and “nonstate actors” who are too fanatic to be concerned with retaliatory consequences or who can detonate a deadly “bomb with no return address” that cannot be traced to its origin and so makes MAD’s threat of retaliation an empty one. According to these first strike manifesto generals, we should retain the ability to preempt a nuclear or near-nuclear power: Shoot first and ask questions later.

First on their list of threats that must be countered by nukes was proliferation by rogue states. The “risk of further nuclear proliferation is imminent and, with it, the danger that nuclear war fighting limited in scope might become possible,” the manifesto said. For that reason, they said, “The first use of nuclear weapons must remain in the quiver of escalation as the ultimate instrument to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction.”

These are men, the first-use manifesto signers, who spent years with their fingers on the trigger. Their perception of what they called “an increasingly brutal world” is hard to argue with. And yet it’s not a world that is as close—a shot away—from global nuclear

war at any moment as it was during the Cold War, is it? Wasn't the prevention of global nuclear war an achievement—no small one—of no-first-strike MAD deterrence? Or—the recurrent question—was it just blind luck?

Whichever it was, the implications of the first strike manifesto were not lost on those paying attention. Suddenly, as Elbridge Colby, who served recently in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and has recently been engaged in the renegotiation of the START treaty, told me, it looks as if deterrence is under attack by critics "from left and right." Both groups are arguing that things are no longer simple the way they were during the bipolar balance of terror. The risks are multiple, asymmetrical, not susceptible to the binary logic of deterrence.

Why suddenly the first strike leap in the former NATO chiefs' manifesto? For one thing it's not as sudden as it seems. It represents the tip of the iceberg of a decade of think tank and military strategic revaluation of the post-Cold War, post-balance of terror use of our nuclear arsenal. And that attack on deterrence or passive defense has led to the rise of the movement for active Ballistic Missile Defense of the sort that led the Bush administration to pledge in 2007 to install ballistic missile interceptors in Poland and which may have been the real source of the spike in tensions between the U.S. and Russia that began with the strategic flights and broke out over the invasion of Georgia. Despite its name, Ballistic Missile Defense is considered a first strike *offensive*, not primarily a defensive, capability. It permits an offensive first strike to be carried out with less fear of a successful retaliation (assuming the so far unproven BMD technology actually works).

The Year of Living Dangerously Again may have been as much the product of the shortsighted, think tank, new-Strangelove nuclear strategy reflected in the first strike manifesto, as much as the result of Putin's empire building. But such manifestos are responding to something real and new in this second nuclear age: the loss in confidence in nuclear deterrence, in the stability that MAD once offered. To some, MAD is dead and we are the worse for it in the unstable situation it leaves behind.

THE NEW UNTHINKABLE

When I began writing this book in that watershed year of dawning nuclear war danger, 2007, not many people seemed to share my alarm. Like me, till my wake-up call, most people thought we'd said "goodbye to all that" after the Cold War ended in 1991. We had other things to worry about.

"Nuclear holocaust"—that dreadful compression of the twentieth century's two worst inventions—seemed to be fading into the shadows with the other dread verbal formulations that accompanied it, such as the fate in which "the survivors envy the dead."

And then there is the phrase from that era that may be the ne plus ultra encapsulation of the ultimate end of nuclear war: "the death of consciousness." No one around to notice that there was no one else around.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news but we will have to think about the unthinkable again. But there's a new unthinkable in town: nuclear disarmament. Not a brand-new unthinkable concept, but newly thinkable because it's being pushed by the new president. The controversy over why Barack Obama got the Nobel prize so early in his presidency obscured something that was hiding in plain sight: the very first sentence of the citation he received for his Nobel Prize, which gave "special importance to Obama's vision and work for a world without nuclear weapons."

The Oslo committee members seemed to be reflecting the growing worldwide alarm over the return of nuclear war fear. In other words the prize may have been a hasty gesture because they were scared and knew time was running out on us again and it was a way of sending up a signal flare that the struggle for nuclear disarmament was relevant, urgent again.

Until recently, nuclear disarmament had been relegated to the scrap heap of Cold War–nuclear freeze–Jackson Browne–tied-die-hippie–no nukes nostalgia. It took the president of a nuclear superpower to rescue it for serious consideration. No small accomplishment.

So far whatever you think of him or the idea, Obama has been

dogged about it. He declared in Prague on April 5, 2009, he wanted to see a world "without nuclear weapons," and that even if it didn't happen in his lifetime, the time to start was now. He made the same no nukes declaration in July, in London with Russian president Dmitri Medvedev joining him. It was a feature of his speech in the U.N. General Assembly on September 23, then the very next day he chaired a Security Council meeting on nuclear disarmament. On October 9 they gave him the Nobel, making it clear in the citation that it was not when he was nominated (February) but what he'd done since then was responsible for the prize.

Yes, it was an "aspirational" goal, an aspirational award some might say, gestural and all that . . . but it's hard to disagree with Joseph Cirincione, an arms control specialist in the Clinton administration, that it was a targeted gesture. "This is not about Obama. It is not about Bush. It should not be about domestic partisan politics, nor about who has the sharpest sound bite. This is about Iran being a few years away from a nuclear bomb. This is about Al Qaeda being a few kilometers away from Pakistan's nuclear bombs. This is about 23,000 hydrogen bombs in the world ready to use, thousands in U.S. and Russian arsenals still ready to launch in 15 minutes. Understand this: These threats have grown over the past 10 years. Our policies are not working. They are making the problems worse. We have to change course."

But Obama is up against an entrenched nuclear establishment that has its own self-preservationist agenda. Recent reports suggest he may be opposed by his own defense secretary, Robert Gates, and Gates's Pentagon allies, many of them holdovers from the Bush administration. If Obama's serious about disarmament, he needs a Zero czar.

His dream of Zero quickly turned into the beginning of what may be a full-fledged battle. Indeed I witnessed firsthand the first counterstrike in Omaha. (See chapter 3.) Obama's Prague speech in April 2009 led the Pentagon and the nuclear industrial complex to amass its phalanxes of forces in a supersized conference hastily called by the U.S. Strategic Command, STRATCOM, which has charge of all our nuclear forces. In July 2009 I attended the

STRATCOM push-back conference in which they summoned the nuclear elite not just of this nation but of every major nuclear power, including India and Pakistan, to Omaha, site of the nuclear command post beneath adjacent Offutt Air Force Base, the super-hardened megaton-resistant underground labyrinth that is one of the shrines of the nuclear priesthood.

The conference—held in the aircraft carrier-size Omaha Qwest Center Convention Hall—was called the First Annual Strategic Deterrence Symposium. The fact that it was conspicuously named “First Annual” implicitly suggested there would be many “annuals” to come in an unceasing attempt to rescue nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons policy from Obama’s abolitionist designs. These nuclear commanders were not going to be zeroed out by Obama’s Zero campaign. Is MAD dead? No, said the four-star brass and the defense intellectuals. Cold War MAD may be on life support but the vogue term was “tailored deterrence.” We’re going to modernize and refine and tailor nuclear deterrence, the STRATCOM panelists declared at the Omaha conference.

It was only when coming home from that Omaha conference that I realized a historic struggle was developing, possibly the last chance, as they say, to put the nuclear genie back in the bottle, or as I prefer it, to save the nuclear Faust—us—from the flames of hell. The future is being decided now. Urgent debates unresolved by the “holiday from history” are being reinvigorated by the challenges of the second nuclear age. It may well be now or never. There is never likely to be another confluence of superpower president and an arms race on the brink of, but not quite, out of control. One or both factors may change for the worse at any moment. Later is likely to be too late.

Do you recall the end of the great nuke porn movie *On the Beach*? The last living human has died and in the empty streets of a radiation-poisoned Australian city the only human voice heard is the tinny static from the expiring battery of an abandoned revivalist truck loudspeaker. It is a tape stuck on the phrase “There’s Still Time Brother,” which echoes to the emptiness.

There may still be time. But not much.