

ABLE ARCHER 83, NEAR NUCLEAR CATASTROPHE

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Abstract

In 1983, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states completed a command post exercise referred to as Able Archer 83¹. In response to the exercise, the Soviets nearly launched a nuclear strike. Did these events cause President Ronald Reagan's military policy to change from a hostile policy to a cooperative one? Using a methodology that consisted of combing through Nate Jones's published compilation Able Archer 83, I conducted a thorough review of intelligence documents, memorandums, President Reagan's diary entries, and other documentation contained therein. I supplemented my research with information found in the digital collection of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. My research indicated that President Reagan desired peace with the Soviets as early as 1981, but addressed the world with his reformed policy in January of 1984. Though an exact date and time for President Reagan's change in attitude could not be ascertained, it was clear that the near tragedy following Able Archer 83 had an effect on his policy.

Introduction

Able Archer 83 was the name of a command post exercise completed by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states in 1983, when Cold War tensions were high. The realistic military operation, coming on the heels of hostile discourse by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leadership, led to a close call but not nuclear war. As President Reagan became more informed of the Soviet response to American military operations and

NATO's Able Archer 83, he changed his policy as well as his words. Reagan moved away from rhetoric describing the Soviets as evil or threatening to writing handwritten letters to their leaders and giving a speech at a Moscow university. This was not a linear change; there were times where Reagan was ambivalent or changed his message based on recommendations from cabinet staff. Over time, however, the shift was clear.

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This essay contains the following sections: a historical introduction, a review of pertinent literature, an explanation of the utilized research model and methodology, a defense of the case selection, my research results and analysis, and a conclusion. The literature review was performed on key primary source documents, such as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports, or the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board Report from 1990, which specifically deconstructed the Soviet

response to Able Archer. Other literature includes secondary sources such as the article by Robert Hamilton, a retired Colonel who served in the US Army for over 30 years. The literature supports the thesis and is easily defensible in the subsequent text. The research shows that Reagan learned of the potential damage that could come from realistic military training, especially when combined with inflammatory discourse.

What was Able Archer 1983? A Historical Description

Ronald Reagan became president of the United States in 1981, during the Cold War with the Soviet Union (USSR). In the years following the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the United States and the USSR had entered a period of détente, or reduced tensions, between the two rivals. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and placed Saber missiles in Europe (Jones 2016, 93), it signaled the beginning of the end of détente. President Jimmy Carter took actions that deteriorated relations further, such as boycotting the Moscow Olympics and placing embargoes on the Soviet Union. The détente was over as Reagan took office. In his first press

conference, Reagan established his opposition to détente; he stated that it was a "one-way street" for the Soviets to "pursue its own aims... of world revolution and a one-world Communist state" (Jones 2016, 15). Soviet KGB leadership were convinced that the US was a threat and Reagan was unpredictable (Hamilton, Jones 2016, 20). In 1981, they formed Operation RYaN to detect the first strike by the US. Throughout Reagan's campaign and most of his first term, he made references to the Soviets that indicated a negative assessment of their character and a desire to weaken Soviet imperialism. During a speech in 1983 to the National Association

of Evangelicals, Reagan said that the Soviet Union was “the focus of evil in the modern world,” and that the struggle against communism was a spiritual one, a “test of moral will and faith” (Jones 16). He also likened the relationship with the Soviets to being “two spiders in a bottle locked in a suicidal fight until both were dead,” (Jones 2016, 3).

Changes in the heads of the Kremlin had also resulted in a new desire to reverse gains made by the U.S. globally (Jones 2016, 1). Starting in 1983, the US and USSR fought proxy wars in the Middle East, with both nations providing arms and other assistance to opposing states (Jones 2016, 1). Both the American and Soviet leadership had been hurling negative rhetoric towards each other before domestic and international audiences (Hamilton, Jones 2016, 84). Then, in the spring of 1983, the US forces tested Soviets’ responsiveness by conducting air and sea exercises near their borders. The Soviets quickly grew intolerant of them (Jones 2016, 27). In August of that year, NATO began conducting their Autumn Forge 83 exercises (Jones 2016, 29). Autumn Forge 83 plans had directed noticeable movement of military cargo and large numbers of NATO troops across Europe (Jones 2016, 29). Thus, in September,

when Korean Airlines Flight 007 crossed into Soviet airspace inadvertently, a tense Soviet leadership ordered the plane shot down (Hamilton). Reagan condemned the act and lambasted them further (Hamilton).

The following month, the US invaded Grenada, a move that was vigorously opposed by Britain. It caused a flurry of encrypted communications between the two countries (Jones 2016, 31), something that Operation RYaN personnel had specifically told its operatives to watch for (Jones 2016, 32). This contributed to the Soviets’ apprehension.

Able Archer 83 was the command post exercise that was part of Autumn Forge 83 (Jones 2016, 25). It was conducted during the time period between November 7th, and November 11, 1983. Able Archer simulated a nuclear release and was a test of the NATO communication systems (Jones 2016, 25-26, 29). Mentions of a nuclear strike were broadcast on open radio during this time, while dummy warheads had been used as training props (Jones 2016, 32). These actions were understandably troublesome for Soviet leadership. The actual level of danger has been debated. According to the Soviet

double agent Oleg Gordievsky, the world was “frighteningly close” to nuclear war. Rainer Rupp, an East German spy, also believed danger was imminent and stated that he had provided Moscow officials with information to assuage their fears of Western invasion during Able Archer (Jones 2016, 34-35). Another explanation for the Soviet Union’s inaction could be that their intelligence personnel assessed that the threat was negligible. The noticeable increase of Soviet activity was also picked up by U.S. intelligence, but the US did not act, as they had assessed that further escalation was not

required (Jones 2016, 38).

Following the Able Archer event, Ronald Reagan’s policy and discourse regarding the Soviet Union changed. The potential for disaster was sobering, and it became an impetus for Reagan to cooperate with the Soviets to reduce nuclear arms (Jones 2016, 47). When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, Reagan was ready to meet with him. Political and economic factors played a part too, but the end of the Cold War was largely attributable to the actions of Reagan and Gorbachev.

Able Archer Enabled A Policy of Peace: Three Schools of Thought Reviewed

NATO’s Able Archer exercises in 1983 provoked a Soviet response that almost led to nuclear war. When President Reagan became aware of the Soviets’ actions, understandings, and intentions, he ultimately changed both his mind and his policy regarding the USSR. The available literature reviews the Able Archer events from three different perspectives: the Soviet Union as rational actor, Reagan as a leader lacking strategic empathy, and the domestic institutional bias of the United States that gives rise to hostile containment policies.

One prevailing school of thought is that Soviet officials were acting rationally. The rational actor model is widely cited in policy analysis, and assumes that leadership will make “informed, calculated decisions that maximize value and perceived benefits” (Norwich University Online 2017). Soviet intelligence gathered in the 1970s and early 1980s led them to believe the U.S. would attack them (PFIAB 1990). The President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board report is a primary government document that was requisitioned

specifically to determine the nature and reason behind the Soviet Union's response to NATO's Able Archer exercises (PFIAB 1990). The report provides solid historical background, names key players, and is one of the most recently declassified government documents regarding Able Archer. It is also more focused on the environment, and Soviet perceptions, than Reagan and his actions. The perceived hostility of the environment and opposing leadership, is deemed the primary causation for the Soviet response. After a history filled with tension and hostility, being presented with signs that the U.S. military was becoming even stronger, and President Reagan's speeches indicating little tolerance for communism (PFIAB 1990), it is understandable and perhaps inevitable that the USSR would expect attack, take action to mitigate attack, as well as taking any actions to strengthen their own military power or expend intelligence. As a rational actor, the Soviet Union would move to diminish any outside threat and increase their own power.

Another school of thought involves the institutional bias of the United States. Retired Army Col. Robert Hamilton attributed the near calamity following the Able Archer exercises to leadership in

the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as failures in intelligence (2018). Confirmation bias and the political structures that support them were behind the Able Archer exercises and Reagan's speech denigrating communism, as well as the Soviet and American responses to each other (Hamilton 2018). Hamilton drew from declassified Soviet documents KGB orders from 1981 and an analysis of the Able Archer completed in a Soviet military journal in 1984 (2018). United States intelligence, specifically the CIA, had received and disregarded indications that the Soviets were anticipating an attack by the US (Hamilton 2018). We can see use of the bureaucratic politics model in this article, as the CIA influenced the decision to maintain the status quo. This school of thought is relevant to my thesis, if not in direct support. The CIA would be one of the sources of information for Reagan, and their discourse was part of the bounded rationality in which Reagan made his decisions.

The final and most important school of thought to this essay is the lack of strategic empathy. The aforementioned piece, Hamilton's *Able Archer at 35: Lessons of the 1983 War Scare*, views Reagan's actions from a cognitive model of

individual analysis. Reagan did not know the full impact of his speech or of American military actions on the USSR, which laid the groundwork for the hostile environment in which NATO performed their training exercises (Hamilton 2018). The *Sfera Politicii* article written by Hadrian Gorun also investigated the political climate and President Reagan's actions leading up to the Able Archer exercises and the end of the Cold War. Reagan called the Soviet Union an "Evil Empire," while the US had deployed Pershing missiles in West Germany, and the United States announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (Gorun 2014). The Gorun article primarily attributes the end of the Cold War to Reagan's actions (2014). Advances in technology and improvements to the Western way of living are also noted, as contributing to the Soviets' perception of a gentler, less war-like brand of capitalism (Gorun 2014). Gorun employs the Historical Realism model for his analysis.

Nate Jones compiled and summarized numerous declassified documents in his 2016 book titled *Able Archer 83*. These documents included the aforementioned report from the President's Foreign Advisory Board, as well as intelligence from the CIA

and the US Army, British military defense documents, a speech annotated by Ronald Reagan, and other government documents. Though Reagan acted in a Cold War environment he inherited from Carter and Nixon, Jones shows that Reagan's decline in discourse with the Soviets, combined with his aggressive policies and speech, was a major contributing factor to the Soviet misunderstanding of the Able Archer event (Jones 2016, 6-7). Jones also demonstrates that Reagan's shift in attitude toward the Soviets paved the way for more positive and cooperative discourse. Initially, Reagan was operating within his bounded rationality, or with incomplete and erroneous information, as reported by the US intelligence community (Jones 2016, 44). British intelligence was the first to report that the Soviets genuinely feared attack (Jones 2016, 44). In Reagan's diary entry on November 18, 1983, shortly after Able Archer was terminated, he said the Soviets were defense-minded to the point of paranoia (Jones 2016, 48). The next day, he met with top staff, including Secretary of State George Shultz, Vice President George H. W. Bush, CIA Director William Casey, and others. They determined one of their top goals was to reduce the threat of force in

international disputes (Jones 2016, 48). In 1984, Reagan was given Director Casey's Special National Intelligence Estimate indicating that the Soviets did not consider the Able Archer exercises to be military bluster (Jones 2016, 47). A few days prior to receiving the report, Reagan had met with Shultz and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, and noted that they had discussed the Soviets' consideration of the United States as a threat to them (Jones 2016, 47). Reagan responded to this report with surprise, acknowledging that the Soviet response to Able Archer had been "really scary" (Jones 2016, 47). In 1985, Reagan received British intelligence from their Soviet source, Oleg Gordievsky, regarding Operation RYaN (Jones 2016, 47). This intelligence included information on the Kremlin's psychology and strategy, which Reagan had read closely (Jones 2016, 47). Reagan obtained information about the Soviet Union from Gordievsky (Jones 2016, 48). As Jones stated, Reagan had advised in 1990 that one of the reasons for improved relations between the United States and

the Soviet Union was due to the danger of having a world "so heavily armed that one misstep could trigger a great war" (2016, 45). Jones has developed an individual cognitive model for Reagan's change of policy resulting from his change of heart. The Jones literature seemingly supports the hypothesis.

In summary, the literature digests the Soviet response to Able Archer and provides us with systemic level analysis in the form of the rational actor, a domestic level analysis by way of bureaucratic politics, and an individual analysis of Reagan. This individual level of analysis is the strongest reflection on my thesis, with arms for cognitive theory, historic realism, and personality trait models. My hypothesis is that when President Reagan's understanding of the effect of NATO's Able Archer exercises on the USSR (independent variable) increased, his policy shifted (dependent variable) away from hostility and attempted containment to an approach favoring negotiation and cooperation.

Did NATO's Able Archer exercises change President Reagan's military policy from hostility to cooperation?

As the literature review has demonstrated, in 1983, the Soviets nearly launched a nuclear strike. This was in response to military training and intelligence exercises performed by the United States and NATO within an atmosphere deemed to be threatening by the USSR. More documentation regarding the Able Archer event has become available in recent years, such as the report from the

President's Foreign Advisory Committee in 1990, that was titled "The Soviet War Scare."

This document and others suggest that Reagan was initially unaware of the full nature of the incident, and as his knowledge and comprehension increased, so did his policy change to one of turning the Soviet Union from foe to friend.

Reagan's increased understanding -> a decrease in U.S. hostility and increase in discourse and formation of cooperative policy.

This model shows a relationship between the increasing understanding of the near catastrophe that was Able Archer and Reagan's policy shift towards decreasing hostility, while increasing discourse and fostering cooperation. The method for determining changes in this relationship will be to review intelligence documents, memorandums, meeting minutes, Reagan's diary entries, news reports, and other items provided in Nate Jones's compilation *Able Archer 83*, for evidence known to Reagan

regarding Soviet threats, shifting or massing military forces, forming new organizations or initiatives, or communicating intentions or concerns regarding a US invasion or defense thereof. Date, month, and year, as well as communications or events, will be compiled in brief. Another compilation of Reagan's communications and policies regarding the Soviet Union and the NATO Able Archer event will be created, with date, month, and year, along with an assessment of the verbal and written messages. They

will be deemed either hostile or cooperative in nature. If an assessment cannot be made, the data will not be analyzed. Ambivalent discourse containing any hostile signals will be considered hostile. Discourse that uses words such as evil or suggests a desire to contain the Soviet Union or extinguish

communism or the like will be considered hostile. Positive communications will include a desire to meet or negotiate or signals that the United States wanted to be good neighbors. The data will then be analyzed.

In Defense of *Able Archer 83*

Nate Jones's *Able Archer 83* has both primary and secondary source material and was specifically recommended for this project by Sheila Rucki, an Associate Professor in the Political Science Department at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Jones's material is expansive, recent, and relevant, making it a worthy source of data. Primary sources in the book include reports and memorandums from the CIA, the National Security Administration, as well as other domestic and

foreign intelligence sources. The Jones book was my initial source for scraping data, which I supplemented with information obtained from speeches, diary entries, and other public documents housed by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Nate Jones is a historian and a director at the National Security Archive. The aforementioned sources of data for this project are therefore deemed of quality and defensible.

The Able Researcher's Methodology

I began by combing through *Able Archer 83* for events that fit predefined criteria, and recorded them in rows on a Microsoft Excel worksheet. The criteria for inclusion were events, documents, and discourse that were relevant to *Able Archer*, the Cold

War, or Soviet foreign policy; the criteria also included items that had an identifiable month and year or that could be dated according to context if only the year was specified. To further qualify, the recorded events or communications must have fallen

between the Reagan's nomination for president by the Republican party on July 17, 1980, and the completion of his second term on January 20, 1989. If I could not ascertain enough information to complete the row on my worksheet from the Jones book, I consulted the documentation housed online by Ronald Reagan's Presidential Library and Museum. This library included Reagan's speeches, memorandums, and daily diary entries. I labeled the communications and documentation that came from Reagan as positive or negative. I labeled the events as "factors," which were learning opportunities for Reagan (and others).

An Informed Reagan Changed the Course of U.S. Policy, But Not Overnight

The results showed that Reagan desired peace with the Soviets as early as 1981 (see Exhibit A). We know that Able Archer 83 was not the sole cause of Reagan's initiatives for peace with the Soviet Union. In the following year, he also had an early indication that the Soviets were suspicious of our peace efforts, when Brezhnev announced that he

In addition to the data I intended to use as criteria for my project, I collected information to complete the historical introduction for this essay. Some of the historical events were labeled "pillar" to designate that they were meant for the introductory segment of this paper, but I allowed them to remain in my final worksheet since they also provide timeline orientation. Ultimately, I also discarded events and communications after the date of January 16, 1984, which is the date Reagan had addressed the world with his changed policy, one that desired to work with the Soviet Union.

would no longer be attempting to cooperate with the U.S., in response to U.S. rhetoric (Jones 2016, 16). The data does not show a date where a clean line may be drawn for when Reagan had fully realized what had transpired but does demonstrate that Reagan had enough knowledge in November of 1983 that his communications towards the Soviets had changed.

Exhibit A: Data from Excel compilation. This information was obtained from Nate Jones book titled Able Archer 83, and was supplemented with data from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.

Event/Act	Month	Year	Positive, Negative, Factor, or Pillar
Republicans nominate Ronald Reagan for US Presidential candidate	7	1980	Pillar
Reagan's Inauguration - 1st term	1	1981	Pillar
Reagan replied to Brezhnev letter	4	1981	Positive
Operation RYaN is created	5	1981	Factor
Reagan interview with domestic reporters	12	1981	Positive
Chief of Staff of Soviet Military Nikolai Ogarko pamphlet released	1	1982	Factor
Reagan Speech to British Parliament	6	1982	Negative
Brezhnev announced end of attempts at cooperation with the US	11	1982	Factor
Andropov appointed new general secretary of Soviet Union	11	1982	Pillar
Andripov speech in Prague to Warsaw Pact members	1	1983	Factor
NSDD 75 regards resisting Soviet imperialism and pressuring them to reduce their imperialism	1	1983	Negative
KGB telegram to London re: indicators of nuclear sneak attack	2	1983	Factor
Reagan met with Ambassador Dobrynin	2	1983	Factor
Reagan speech to National Association of Evangelicals in FL	3	1983	Negative
Reagan launched SDI	3	1983	Negative
NSDD 85 - SDI "Star Wars" defined	3	1983	Negative
Andropov publicly rebukes Star Wars and warns of escalation	3	1983	Factor
Korean Airlines Flight 007 shot down	9	1983	Pillar
Reagan speech regarding Korean flight 007	9	1983	Negative
Reagan sees the movie called "The Day After"	10	1983	Factor
US deployment of Pershing II and Gryphon missiles	11	1983	Negative
Able Archer begins	11	1983	Pillar
Able Archer ends	11	1983	Pillar
McFarlane provides intelligence to Reagan	11	1983	Factor

Reagan diary entry post-Able Archer event	11	1983	Positive
Reagan met with Schultz, McFarlane, and others	11	1983	Positive
US Article - In Pursuit of the Essence of War	11	1983	Factor
CIA Report "Soviet Thinking on the Possibility of Armed Confrontation with the United States"	12	1983	Factor
Reagan addressed the Soviets and the world	1	1984	Positive
Chernenko appointed new general secretary of Soviet Union	2	1984	Pillar
British intelligence reports to US	3	1984	Factor
Reagan wrote regarding Soviets fears after meeting with Schultz and McFarlane	6	1984	Positive
Memorandum from CIA Director Casey to Reagan and his top staff	6	1984	Factor
Reagan's Inauguration - 2nd term	1	1985	Pillar
Gorbachev appointed new general secretary of Soviet Union	3	1985	Pillar
Reagan and US Officials receive Gordievsky's data on Operation RYaN	9	1985	Factor
Reagan Speech to Moscow University	5	1988	Positive
Gorbachev Speech to UN	12	1988	Pillar
End of Reagan's Presidency	1	1989	Pillar
President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board Report	2	1990	Factor

Able Archer 83 is a compelling topic, and as the literature review has shown, there were multiple factors that caused the near-tragedy. Specifically, a lack of strategic empathy and confirmation bias affected both the US and Soviet leadership. Reagan's speeches and written communications did not always align with his goal of reducing tensions and nuclear arms, which evidence shows he had prior to any of

the events falling under the umbrella of NATO's autumn 1983 exercises. Ultimately, Reagan did change his tactics and became more committed to an ideal of cooperation, but it was not a sudden change with an identifiable corresponding event. It was not just the Able Archer scare that made him change his mind. Reagan expressed a desire to negotiate to the Soviet leadership as early as April 1981, when he

responded to Leonid Brezhnev's letter requesting peaceful negotiations. We must also consider intervening events that pushed the peace initiative off course, such as the attack on the Korean Airlines Flight 007. Though the US contributed to the tensions and confusion regarding that specific event by invasively testing their boundaries, Reagan did not know this, and he condemned the Soviets publicly. It may be said that confirmation bias was at work here and there was no strategic empathy engaged. An enemy who randomly shoots planes from the sky is truly evil, and Americans instantly leapt to this conclusion instead of performing a comprehensive review of why it may have happened. The Soviets were not engaged in an ongoing attack, and so an analysis was possible. If Reagan, his staff, and the U.S. public had not already condemned the Soviets, such an analysis may have occurred rather than weakening relations further between the two nations.

My methodology included carefully combing through *Able Archer 83* for events and Reagan's communications that specifically related to NATO's Able Archer exercise during Reagan's first term. Then I augmented information as needed with the

information from the digital collections of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.

The results do generally fall in line with my thesis, which argues that President Reagan's knowledge of the Soviet response to Able Archer 83 led him to change his rhetoric and policy toward the Soviets from negative to positive. My research project sought to identify a moment or period of time by which Reagan had accumulated enough information to convince him to abruptly change his mind regarding Soviet policy. This moment could not be identified precisely, but perhaps it shows something else: a leader's decision-making process is not clean and linear. Reagan had moments of clarity and empathy, but his cabinet and high-level government officials did not always agree (Jones 55). They exercised influence on Reagan, as did the downing of the Korean airplane.

Avoiding nuclear war benefits people on both sides of a potential conflict. A well-informed public is more likely to be a conscientious society, so citizens should read up on this event as well as the Cold War. Reagan and the Able Archer event are an interesting and informative case study for academicians and policy makers alike. Not only do

these events show the potentially devastating consequences when leaders act without strategic empathy, but they also demonstrate how confirmation bias works against us when we otherize instead of seeking to understand. We might apply these same sentiments to conflict in the Middle East. Westerners often portray Middle Eastern men as evil terrorists who hate Americans, while women are supposedly despairing in their oppression. There are several countries, many nationalities, religious sects, and people with origins from all over the world.

Fairly or not, they have all been equally condemned in American society. Perhaps it is time to seek a greater understanding.

Avenues to expand research on this topic could be a review each of Reagan's speeches, memos, and diary entries made during his presidency. This information is presently available on the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library website, hosted by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

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