



Confessions of a Cold Warrior

These days, the word *bomb* is most often associated with terrorism. We use the term to describe car bombs, roadside bombs, improvised explosive devices, and the feared — but never seen — *dirty* bomb. When we think of bombs, we think of wounded American Soldiers, dead or injured Iraqi civilians, and innocent victims in European train stations. But for the first two-thirds of my life, the word meant something altogether different.

I was a child of the Cold War. I was born in the shadow of Sputnik, when our nuclear adversaries, the USSR, dominated the strategic high ground of outer space. I took my first steps at just about the time a Soviet surface-to-air missile blasted Francis Gary Powers and his U-2 spy plane out of the sky over Svedlovsk. I was learning to brush my own teeth right about the time the Cuban Missile Crisis had the world teetering on the brink of nuclear holocaust. John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev managed to drag us back from the edge of destruction, but it was nearly a foregone conclusion that, sooner or later, the Cold War was going to heat up.

Back then *the bomb* was the *big one*: the A-bomb. The term didn't refer to any individual weapon. Outside of James Bond movies and the pages of *Dr. Strangelove*, there was no ultra-secret doomsday device waiting to bring nuclear annihilation to the human species. The bomb was the label we gave to the collective nuclear arsenals of the world. It was cultural shorthand for our bombs, and China's bombs, and the bombs of the Soviet Union. And, in carefully unspoken subtext, the term signified the eventual extermination of man by his own hand.

That was the world I grew up in. A world in which it was taken for granted that we would see Armageddon within our lifetimes. When I enlisted in the Navy that was the world I served in. We didn't look forward to it. We certainly didn't *want* it. And, despite what you may have seen in movies or political commentaries, the militaries on both sides went to extraordinary lengths to prevent it. But many of us labored under the mortal certainty that a nuclear showdown was inevitable. The United States and the Soviet Union were

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His naval career spanned more than two decades and half the globe—from chasing Soviet nuclear attack submarines during the Cold War, to launching cruise missiles in the Persian Gulf.

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going to unleash their nuclear arsenals upon each other and the world. It wasn't a matter of *if*; it was a matter of *when*.

A decade and a half after the fall of the Berlin wall, those fears seem distant and even a bit foolish. We worry about terrorism at home and abroad. We're concerned about the stability of the Middle East. We're nervous about the threat of nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran and North Korea. But the specter of the Russian bomb has been laid to rest. The apocalypse will not arrive riding on the shoulders of a Soviet-built ICBM. Or will it?

The Russian military, under-funded at the best of times, is having trouble paying its own people. According to the U.S. National Intelligence Counsel, Russian Strategic Rocket Forces are suffering from wage arrears, food shortages, and housing shortages. Put simply, the Russian military is having difficulty paying, housing, and even *feeding* the very people entrusted with safeguarding their strategic nuclear weapons.

In 1997, the 12th GUMO (Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense) was forced to close a nuclear weapons storage site due to hunger strikes by its workers. In 1998, the families of Russian nuclear workers organized protests to recover back pay and benefits. The Russian media reports that the pay problems have been ironed out, and that most Russian military personnel are now paid regularly. But even on full pay, many members of the Russian military cannot afford to feed their families. Russian officers rarely receive more than \$70.00 a month, and their enlisted personnel are paid considerably less than that.

Contrary to the reassurances of the Russian press, the problem hasn't gone away, and it doesn't stop at pay shortages. The U.S. intelligence community believes that weapons-grade plutonium seized in Bulgaria in 1999 originated in Russia. Some time between 2001 and 2002, Chechen rebels stole radioactive materials from the Volgodonskaya nuclear power station near the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Control over the material at the site in question was so lax that the date of the theft can only be estimated to within about 12 months. This is not the plot of a bad science fiction movie; it's an ongoing state of affairs.

In 2000, sailors aboard a Russian submarine in Kamchatka stole nine radioactive catalyst tubes used for igniting the nuclear reactor. The tubes contained palladium, which is more valuable than gold. Not realizing that the stolen tubes were radioactive, the sailors hoped to sell them to a local scrap metal dealer. Following the incident, the Kamchatkan newspaper *Vesti* reported that the thieves had nearly caused a nuclear disaster when they attempted to lift the control rods out of the reactor. The *Vesti* article claimed that an accident was only averted because an unidentified Russian submarine engineer had the foresight to weld the handle of the control mechanism in the *down* position, so that the thieves couldn't lift it.

Two senior Russian submarine officers were relieved of duty after the incident came to light, and two Russian admirals and ten other officers were penalized for negligence. The deputy head of the Russian North East Army Group's press center accused the press of exaggerating the danger.

The crime rate in the Russian military is skyrocketing, with theft, criminal assault, drug dealing, and illegal weapons trafficking as the most persistent problems. Desertions and suicides



are both on the rise among the enlisted ranks. The problem, in other words, appears to be getting worse rather than better.

If the difficulties were confined to the conventional Russian military, I'd call it an internal problem. After all, the crime rate in the Russian Federation and the readiness of their military are their business, not ours. But the incidents mentioned above and many more like them make it clear that the integrity of the Russian nuclear forces is being affected. Men guard Russian nuclear stockpiles. And the mounting evidence tells us that those men are in serious trouble.

As a veteran of the Cold War, I feared the former strength of the Russian military. Now, in the wake of its virtual collapse, I'm beginning to fear its weakness even more.

The more I learn of the ongoing problems in the Russian military, the more I am reminded of the closing verse of T. S. Elliot's *The Hollow Men*.

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

I've never been a big fan of Mr. Elliot's work, and I've frankly always taken this piece as little more than pseudo-poetic babble. But I'm suddenly wondering if the man knew something we don't know. Or, even worse, something we're about to learn the hard way.

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