

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Subject: Harold Brown
Position: Secretary of Defense (1977-1980)
Location: Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute, 1619 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C.
Interviewer: John G. Hines
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In Dr. Brown's view, Soviet civilian leaders did not believe that the USSR could fight and win a nuclear war. For Soviet military leaders, it was inadmissible to say that they could not win, so they said that if nuclear war broke out, they would try to come out better than the other side. They claimed to have the edge and to have a bigger edge if the USSR struck first. Though they did not really believe that the USSR would survive a nuclear war, top military officials tried to improve Soviet chances for survival.

Soviet leaders believed in deterrence, according to Dr. Brown. They built up their nuclear arsenal in order to deter the U.S. Their deterrent rested on a capacity to inflict unacceptable damage, and by the 1960s, though a disparity remained, they thought they had enough nuclear weapons to meet that criterion. Soviet leaders accepted the concept of mutual deterrence but they did not embrace Mutual Assured Deterrence (MAD) to the extent that they rejected attempts to limit damage and they did not believe that a capability only to kill civilians was sufficient to deter the U.S.

According to Dr. Brown, these assessments were close to the positions and interpretations proffered by Fritz Ermarth, the National Intelligence Officer for Strategic Forces at the time. The former Defense Secretary seemed to hold Ermarth and his views in high regard.

The Soviet Union was likely to use chemical weapons. Dr. Brown expected the USSR to employ CW even if NATO did not and even in the absence of nuclear exchanges.

Soviet leaders aimed, in order of priority, (1) to ensure their personal survival and power, (2) to preserve the social and economic structures of the Soviet state, and (3) to hold on to the empire (including Eastern Europe). PD-59⁹ made clear to Soviet leaders

⁹ Presidential Directive 59, a key White House statement on U.S. nuclear strategy that was discussed by knowledgeable U.S. government officials in the U.S. press. Published accounts reinforced the concept of selective use of nuclear strikes under various scenarios and suggested early targeting of Soviet leadership and command and control in the event of Soviet aggression.

that all three priorities would be at risk if Soviet actions led to global war. Selective U.S. targeting held at risk the things that Soviet leaders valued most. The Soviet leadership itself was targeted but was far down on the target list to maintain the possibility for intra-war negotiating. Cities were not on the target list partly because Dr. Brown was unsure where the Soviet population fit into the Soviet leadership's priorities.

The Soviets would preempt only if they were convinced, based on their reading of American intentions, that the U.S. was going to launch a nuclear strike. This was Soviet military doctrine, which the political leadership may or may not have decided to follow. Similarly, the Soviet military may have recommended escalation in the European theater if convinced that the U.S. would escalate, but Dr. Brown was unsure whether the political leadership would accept this recommendation.

Dr. Brown never thought that the USSR would expand a theater nuclear war into a global war, and he doubted that the USSR would even escalate within the European theater. The Soviets might not win a conventional war but they would never lose. Even if a Soviet conventional attack were pinned down for 4 weeks and the Warsaw Pact allies began to pull out, nuclear use would not improve the situation for the Soviet side.

In Dr. Brown's view, the USSR probably did not develop limited nuclear options because it had conventional predominance. In practice, Soviet forces never used nuclear weapons first or selectively. The big question for the Soviet side was whether the U.S. would try to stop a Soviet conventional attack by resorting to nuclear arms. Dr. Brown did not know what the Soviets believed, but if they listened closely to Western leaders, they would probably conclude that the U.S. would resort to nuclear weapons but the West Europeans would not.

The Soviet Union did accept strategic parity. Despite its interest in strategic defense, the USSR's signing of the ABM Treaty reflected its acceptance of parity. The Soviets did not think it feasible to gain a significant edge. They understood that acquiring a greater number of weapons was not necessarily important and that one side's advantages in particular weapons categories were offset by advantages on the other side.

When asked why the Soviets continued to build strategic forces even after they had achieved parity, Dr. Brown seemed to attribute this pattern of force building to a sense that they could never have enough to offset growing qualitative advantages in the West.

By the 1970s, the number of weapons on both sides was so large that capabilities could only be affected by deep cuts (deeper than the START Treaty envisions). Therefore, the U.S. tried to influence Soviet decisions through U.S. strategy. The U.S. wanted to limit SS-18s and SS-19s, which were counterforce systems, in order to make U.S. retaliatory (particularly land-based) forces more survivable.

Dr. Brown never saw the arms race as an economic competition. Since the defense industry was the most efficient part of the Soviet economy, the U.S. in an arms race was competing in the area of the smallest U.S. comparative advantage. Harold Brown used American technological advantages to compensate for the smaller number of U.S. weapons. It was precisely the U.S. technological lead that convinced the Soviets that they could not win an arms race.

Dr. Brown gained some impressions of the Soviets from his time on the SALT delegation 1969-71 (including from contact with Ogarkov) and from the 1979 Vienna summit (where he saw Brezhnev, Ustinov, and Ogarkov). He based his understanding of Soviet intentions on Soviet military exercises, force structures, and policy statements.

Soviet statements on military forces and strategy were subject to broad variations in interpretation because any given statement or body of statements could represent any of three levels of authority: agreed policy statements, arguments put forth in the course of institutional infighting, or the personal views of an individual. Sovietologists, such as Fritz Ermarth, were helpful in interpreting and discriminating among these three sources of Soviet statements.