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# Was the US Ready to Resort to Nuclear Weapons for the Persian Gulf in 1980?

—by Benjamin F. Schemmer—

**I**t wasn't quite Jimmy Carter's Cuban Missile Crisis, but six years ago the United States seriously considered using nuclear weapons to protect free world oil coming from the Persian Gulf.

It may seem inconceivable today when the world is in turmoil over a glut of oil, but American war planners then soberly debated the first use of tactical nuclear weapons to stem what looked like an imminent Soviet invasion of Iran to seize Persian Gulf oil fields and ports. According to minutes of a meeting which then Defense Secretary Harold Brown held with his senior war planners in the middle of August 1980, the Joint Chiefs of Staff told Brown that the US had "no other" military option to prevent the Soviets from seizing those lucrative targets and said the US would have to resort to the first use of tactical nuclear weapons if Brown and the President considered oil flow from the region "vital" to US interests.

Brown spent much of the meeting objecting to the use of the word "vital" to characterize American interests in the region.

But seven months earlier, President Jimmy Carter had, in fact, proclaimed those interests "vital." In his State of the Union address on January 23rd, Carter proclaimed:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region *will* be regarded as an assault on the *vital* interests of the United States of America, and such an assault *will* be repelled by *any means necessary*, including military force. (Emphasis added.)

(Carter later noted in his Presidential memoirs: "This statement was not lightly made, and I was resolved to use the full power of the United States to back it up.")<sup>1</sup>

US intelligence officials were split almost fifty-fifty on their assessments of Soviet intentions at the time, but most agreed that Russia suddenly had the capability imminently to choke off the flow of the free world's energy supply.

In the preceding weeks, Soviet

units in the Transcaucasia region east of Turkey and north of Iran, between the Caspian and Black Seas, had been secretly brought to such a high level of war footing that they could move into Iran with overwhelming force within days. Brown's military advisers told him that if the Soviets moved south, they could probably overrun Iran's oil fields and seize the northern banks of the Strait of Hormuz—through which 70% of Europe's, 77% of Japan's, and 32% of US oil was moving at the time<sup>2</sup>—within 10 days to two weeks, and perhaps within a week if Soviet airborne units were used.

Throughout a long and—the minutes make clear—agonizing meeting on or



Carter

before August 19th with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their key war planners (officers at the three-star level known as the "Ops Deps," or Service Deputy Chiefs of Staff for Operations and Plans), Brown repeatedly challenged the use of the word "vital"



Brown

to describe American security interests in the Persian Gulf. "There has to be a better word," he told his military advisers time and again. But they, in turn, stressed that if Brown and Carter considered it "vital" to protect the free world energy supplies that

were so close to being threatened, America had "no other option" than to use nuclear weapons.

The meeting ended inconclusively, and the crisis did not abate until almost a month later when, for reasons still not evident, Soviet units stood down in mid-September from their unprecedented war footing.

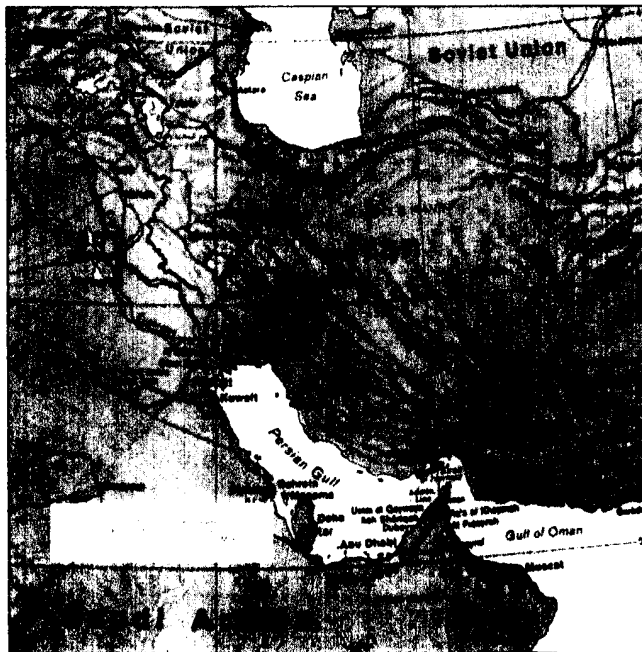
The crisis was serious enough, however, that, Carter later revealed, he sent Warren Christopher, his Deputy Secretary of State, to Europe on or about September 12th to advise NATO allies of the Soviet buildup and "consult with them on how best to coordinate our warnings to the Soviet leaders to stay out of Iran."<sup>3</sup>

The United States has never renounced the first use of tactical nuclear weapons, in large part because such a policy might invite a massive Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe with overwhelming conventional forces which NATO's conventional forces alone might be unable to stem.

## Clear but "Ambiguous" Indicators

In the preceding month, US intelligence sources had reported an ominous, meticulously orchestrated series of Russian moves to ready forces north of Iran for what many concluded would be a lightning thrust to the

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south. Specifically, these sources reported:

- Virtually all 28 Soviet divisions in the region, which had always been in a relatively low state of combat readiness, had been reinforced and fleshed out with equipment and trained personnel to the point that some were in as high a state of readiness as elite Soviet forces stationed in East Germany.

- Their radio frequencies—and, in some cases that American electronic intercept resources were able to verify, their codes—had been changed to types the intelligence community believed reserved only for imminent hostilities.

- Electronic silence was suddenly imposed for some key units, thus making it impossible to fathom Soviet intentions and far more difficult to track the movement of Russian forces.

- Many units had moved out of their garrisons into the field, such that forces in the region appeared geared in an order of battle poised for an attack south.

- A Soviet airborne division in Eastern Europe had apparently been placed on alert, while the two airborne divisions normally stationed in the region were in an unusually high state of readiness.

- Some units had been moved from other areas of operations to where they could spearhead or quickly reinforce an attack into Iran. These included some Soviet *Spetsnaz* (special forces) units normally controlled by the main intelligence directorate of the Soviet General Staff and trained to operate far behind enemy lines for extended periods. No such repositioning of some of the units had ever been observed before.

- Soviet tactical fighter-bomber forces in the region had been reinforced and brought to a much higher state of readiness than normal, with additional pilots and maintenance personnel ready to operate them, while highly unusual stocks of bombs and ammunition were moved into the area and fuel stocks raised to hitherto unseen levels.

All of these steps, as best US intelligence sources could tell, had been taken within a matter of a few weeks—and with a secrecy achieved by massive cover and deception measures unprecedented since the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Under a part of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, in a document on "confidence-building measures," Russia and the NATO countries are required to give each other prior notification "of major maneuvers exceeding a total of 25,000 troops," including "the types and numerical strength of the forces engaged [and] the area and estimated time frame of [their] conduct." The signatories agreed also to invite one another on a voluntary and bilateral basis "to send observers to attend military maneuvers." In 1976, the Soviets held a large exercise in Transcaucasia called *Kavkaz '76*;

they notified the West of it in advance and invited observers from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia. It was a major exercise, one of the first times the Soviets tested an operational maneuver group, a new combined arms formation designed for independent, rapid strikes deep into an enemy's rear area. The exercise was later discussed in open Soviet literature. In 1978, another *Kavkaz* exercise was announced in advance.

There had been no such advance notice of the 1980 Soviet "exercise" under way north of Iran. Nor, as best *AFJ* can determine, has it ever been mentioned in open Soviet writings, although it is common Russian practice to debate openly the "lessons learned" once their maneuvers are over.

Three members of the 1980 Joint Chiefs of Staff told *AFJ* in 1986 that they could not recall any units being alerted for deployment or ordered into higher readiness because of the Soviet buildup. But in late August that year, one US general officer sent to selected military commanders a most highly classified "back channel" message advising them, in an almost exact paraphrase, "I believe a major war is imminent."

The most ambiguous intelligence of Soviet intentions, according to Air Force General David C. Jones, who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, was that "not much" of the Soviet transport aircraft fleet had been repositioned to Transcaucasia.

"We watched that very carefully," Jones told *AFJ* years after the event.

Thus, some intelligence analysts felt, a major airborne assault and resupply of ground invasion forces was neither feasible nor imminent without further preparations that would be detected in enough time to provide more clear-cut indications of Russia's real intentions. Some US military planners argued, however, that the airlift needed for an airborne assault on the Strait of Hormuz could be repositioned within hours, under cover of darkness, or in one of those short time spans when US satellites might not be in position to detect the aircraft's redeployment.

(Because of satellite failures, the US had been caught by near-total surprise when the

Soviets invaded Afghanistan the preceding December, and the US later proved ill-equipped initially to monitor the Iran-Iraq war that broke out on September 21st of 1980. The swiftness with which Russia can mobilize its airlift had also surprised US intelligence experts the preceding December, when Afghanistan was invaded, as it had in the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, when Soviet units in the western USSR were moved into Prague almost overnight. Since much of Russia's Aeroflot civil airline fleet is available for military use, it is difficult to predict how quickly Soviet airborne units can be put into combat.)

The sudden buildup and near war footing of Soviet forces north of Iran might have gone unobserved until after the fact, had the Soviets not invaded Afghanistan only seven and a half months before, thus keying American intelligence collection assets—satellites and National Security Agency listening posts—to focus intensively on the area at a time when it was also feared that



Jones

Russia might really be using the Afghanistan buildup as a base for an attack into Iran from the Turkestan military district east of the Caspian Sea and then to the Strait of Hormuz from the northeast. That invasion route would have involved moving and supporting Soviet forces over a distance of roughly 750 air miles, compared to the much longer route—over 1,000 miles—had the Soviets moved south from Transcaucasia. Moscow was obviously aware that the US was carefully monitoring its military deployments and operations in Turkestan to support the Afghanistan invasion, and Soviet leaders may have assumed that a buildup in and invasion from Transcaucasia, much farther west, could be mounted with both strategic and tactical surprise.

### Combat-Ready Soviet Forces

Those forces—28 divisions and roughly 350 fighter-bomber aircraft in what Russia calls its Southern Theater of Military Operations and located in the Turkestan, Trans Caucasus, and North Caucasus military districts—had always been among the least ready of all Soviet divisions.

Category I units are ready for war within days' notice, a week at most; it takes about 30 days to bring a Category II unit to Category I status and as much as three months to ready Category III units for war.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, only about 15% of them were so-called Category I units, meaning they were "com-



## The Joint Chiefs and Their "Ops Deps"



**THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF** during the 1980 Persian Gulf "incident" were (seated from left to right): Army Chief of Staff General E.C. "Shy" Meyer; the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas B. Hayward; the JCS Chairman, Air Force General David C. Jones; General Lew Allen, Jr., Air Force Chief of Staff; and General Robert H. Barrow, Commandant of the Marine Corps.

Behind them are their so-called "operations deputies," also from left to right: then Lt. Gen. Glen K. Otis, Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, now a four-star general and Commander-in-Chief, US Army Europe; V. Adm. S.R. Foley, Jr., the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans, Policy, and Operations, later promoted to four stars as Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet, now retired and head of the Department of Energy's work on nuclear programs; V. Adm. Fuller "Thor" Hanson, Director of the Joint Staff, and now retired; then Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles A. Gabriel (who had left his post as USAF Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Plans, and Readiness just before the August flap unfolded to become a four-star general and Commander-in-Chief of US Air Forces Europe, and who retired this summer after becoming Air Force Chief of Staff); and Lt. Gen. Adolph G. Schwenk, the Marine Corps' Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, now retired. Shortly after this photo was taken, then Lt. Gen. Jerome F. O'Malley replaced Gabriel as the Air Force "Ops Dep," later becoming a four-star general and Commander of Tactical Air Command. O'Malley was killed in a 1984 plane crash.

bat ready" and manned close to their wartime strength by recently trained personnel. Usually another 15% were in a Category II status, fully equipped but manned at only half to 75% of wartime strength. Close to 70% had always been Category III units, those maintained at only cadre strength with less than 50% of the personnel needed to go to war. (In contrast, all Soviet divisions in Eastern Europe are Category I units, while about half of the divisions in the Far Eastern military district historically have been maintained at cadre strength.)<sup>5</sup>

In late August of 1980, over half of the Soviet forces north of Iran had been brought up to a Category I status and most of the others to Category II, including four or five divisions in Turkestan that were not involved in the fighting in Afghanistan.

Combined, those forces entailed about 3,400 tanks, 370 combat aircraft, 350 helicopters, close to 4,000 artillery pieces, and roughly 8,000 armored personnel carriers or infantry fighting vehicles.<sup>6</sup> The 28 divisions were deployed about as shown in the table here. Opposite them, the US had *nothing*. The first US forces that could inter-

vene were 7,000 miles away. (Theoretically, the US could have airlifted a brigade from Europe, but that would have saved little time while greatly complicating an already difficult problem with highly complex political overtones.)

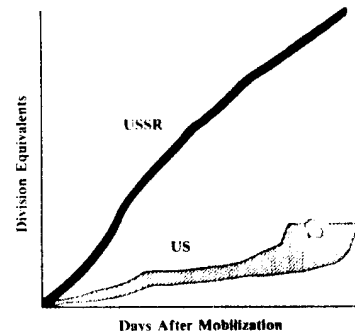
### US Short of Options

Early in 1980, Brown himself had issued a secret *Consolidated Guidance* document which illustrated how poorly US forces

were positioned to intervene in the very kind of Persian Gulf contingency that faced him in August and September. (The chart below reproduces those estimates.)

Even after the Carter Administration's proposed buildup by 1982 of a "rapidly deployable" Indian Ocean task force whose equipment would be prepositioned on floating warehouses, US forces trying to intervene in the Persian Gulf would be outnumbered 6-to-1 a week after mobilization, 10-to-1 two weeks after mobilization, and 14-to-1 at the end of 30 days. And in August of 1980, that buildup was still largely a paper plan. (Formation of a new Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force had been announced in 1979, but then Lt. Gen. Paul X. Kelley of the Marine Corps had not been named as its Commander until February of 1980 and his headquarters had been established only in March of 1980.)

Persian Gulf Force Ratios  
1982



Thus, it is little wonder his war planners told Brown in August of 1980 that, if the Soviets moved south, the US had no recourse but to use nuclear weapons to prevent Russia's seizing the West's supply of vital Persian Gulf oil.

### How Vital Is "Vital"?

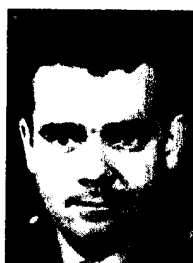
Notwithstanding his repeated objections to the term "vital" during deliberations with his war planners, the characterization was certainly not new to Brown. In his Fiscal Year 1980 *Annual Report*, presented early in 1979, Brown had said: "We are not, and do not wish to be, superior to the Soviet Union in the Caspian Sea or Lake Baikal. . . . [But.] we and our Allies need to be Number One in our ability to halt any attack on Western Europe or other vital areas." (Emphasis added.) Moreover, Brown had warned then, the "three greatest dangers to Western Europe lie elsewhere," and the third one, he cautioned, "is

### Soviet Forces Poised North of Iran in Mid-1980

Divisions	Trans Caucasus	North Caucasus	Turkestan	Total
Motorized Rifle	11	5	5	21
Artillery	1	1	1	3
Tank	1	1	—	2
Airborne	1	—	1	2
Total	14	7	7	28



Chain



Schweitzer



Moreau



Gray

**THE KEY WAR PLANNERS** were Air Force Maj. Gen. John T. Chain, Jr., now a four-star general and Commander-in-Chief of Strategic Air Command; Army Maj. Gen. Robert L. Schweitzer, who retired recently as a three-star officer heading the Inter-American Defense Board; R. Adm. Arthur S. Moreau, Jr., now a four-star admiral and Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe, and Commander-in-Chief, US Naval Forces Europe; and Marine Corps Maj. Gen. D'Wayne Gray, now a three-star commander Fleet Marine Forces in the Pacific.

the vulnerability of Western Europe's oil supply, some 60% of which moves by sea from the Persian Gulf.<sup>77</sup>

Only eight months before the mid-1980 Soviet buildup, Brown in his FY81 *Annual Report* had voiced even stronger concern about that vulnerability: "The two biggest dangers [to non-Soviet Europe] originate outside Europe. . . . The first danger comes from the heavy European dependence on OPEC oil, and the possibility that its supply could be disrupted."<sup>78</sup> (Emphasis added.) Brown emphasized his concern with a full-page map, reproduced here, showing the West's dependence on that oil. Moreover, he noted, "The Soviets are moving closer to the capability to operate simultaneously on several widely separated fronts . . . a considerable departure from their previous capability."

### Not Enough Airlift

And, Brown added prophetically, "I am not satisfied that we have acquired enough strategic mobility to move the forces and their support elements into the two theaters with the necessary dispatch. Nor is it clear that we have all the options necessary for graduated or rapid and complete mobilization."<sup>79</sup>

The Gulf is 7,000 air miles from the East

Coast of the United States, a trip which takes 15 hours in a nonstop, aerially refueled flight by the Air Force's giant C-5 or smaller C-141 cargo transports. As just one indication of the almost insurmountable problems facing US war planners in mid-1980, it would have required 2,450 C-141 sorties to fly just the ammunition from the East Coast to the Persian Gulf needed to sustain a Marine division (about 12,500 men) for 30 days of combat. The US

unit's combat aviation support elements. The first such ship became operational this summer, in 1986.)<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, just as the 1980 Soviet buildup became apparent, Brown's analysts and the JCS staff were nearing completion of a landmark study of US airlift and sealift needs to counter a Soviet invasion of Iran (as well as for other scenarios, such as a war in Europe and various combinations of simultaneous major and minor contingencies). Called the

*Congressionally Mandated Mobility Study*, it concluded that the US needed to be able to move by air 102-million ton miles of cargo a day within the first 15 days of a Soviet invasion of Iran.<sup>11</sup> At the time, the US could move only about 35-million ton miles per day (and that only after mobilizing the Civil Reserve Air Fleet—commercial airliners earmarked for military use in a national emergency, which accounted for over half the US' total airlift capacity).

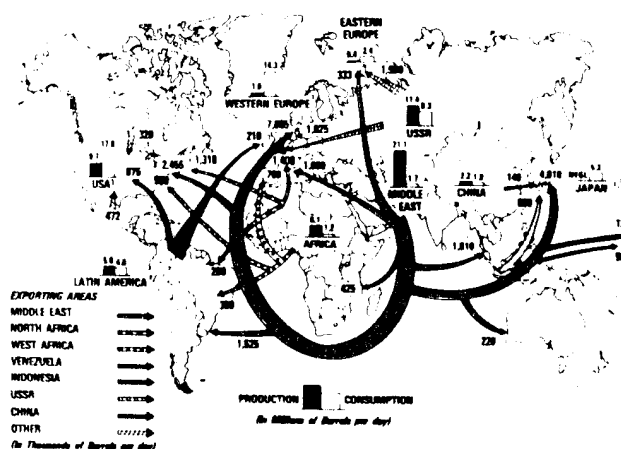
As Brown had told Congress the preceding January, although in a somewhat more positive vein, that was just enough airlift for a suicidal show of force in the Persian Gulf. As Brown had put it:

We can already airlift a unit of brigade size to a remote area quite quickly. But it would

have to be lightly armed. To move a mechanized or an armored brigade an equivalent distance would tie up most of our airlift capability for a considerable time, even assuming enroute basing and overflight rights were available.<sup>12</sup>

"To accelerate this kind of movement," Brown said, "in Fiscal Year 1981 we will fund the first two of 14 Maritime Prepositioning Ships to be acquired over the next five years, as well as the equipment for three Marine brigades to be placed aboard these ships in dehumidified storage." But FY81 would not begin until October 1st of 1980, and in August of 1980 it was evident, as Brown had testified in January, that the Ayatollah Khomeini's "regime appears incapable of dealing [even] with the mili-

## Worldwide Oil Flow—1979



1. The total net imports shown and the difference between production and consumption are not identical owing to spot market purchases and small flows omitted for the sake of simplicity.
2. The Latin American figures for production/consumption and net oil flow include the considerable amount of Middle East crude that is imported, refined, and then reexported by Latin American nations.

Exporter	Importer (Percent of Imports)		
	United States	Western Europe	Japan
South America	17	2	—
Middle East	32	70	77
North Africa	16	11	—
West Africa	12	6	—
Indonesia	7	—	13
Spot or Other	16	11	10
Percent of Oil Consumption Imported	48	87	100

has since prepositioned such ammunition—and the combat equipment for three Marine brigades—on ships anchored at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, 2,300 miles from the Strait of Hormuz.

But the US had only 304 operable C-5s and C-141s in mid-1980, and it takes 249 airlift sorties to move just the "fly-in" echelon of one brigade of that force—Marines carrying just their individual weapons—to the Gulf, where it would take them five days to marry up with their equipment in a non-hostile, secure locale and be combat ready. (Even then, the schedule presupposes that an "aviation logistics support ship" is on station within 10 days of the order to deploy, otherwise an additional 160 sorties would be needed to move maintenance gear for the

tants who have held Americans hostage for nearly three months"—much less the prospect of a Soviet invasion now looming on Iran's northern horizon.

(Brown himself estimated later, in 1983, that it would take "two or three divisions and four or five air wings" to "slow a major Soviet attack" intended for "a quick military grab for the Persian Gulf.")<sup>13</sup>

The disparity starkly evident between US and Soviet forces ready to intervene in the Persian Gulf must have had a chilling effect on Brown and his war planners in mid-1980 as they discussed the score of Soviet divisions suddenly, credibly, and apparently poised for attack into Iran.

### A Well-Kept Secret? Back-Channel Warnings?

It is not known whether a Russian thrust into Iran was aborted because the US made known to Soviet leaders, through direct or back-channel diplomatic means, that America might or would resort to the use of nuclear weapons to protect vital US interests in the Persian Gulf.

Although the US State Department publishes periodic protests of maneuvers the Soviets hold but which they have not notified Helsinki signatories of in advance, *AFJ* can find no public record of any such protest in the case of the 1980 Soviet exercises north of Iran.

The Soviet buildup was so closely held that key Members of Congress apparently were not told of it. Yet, one major general told *AFJ*, referring to the deliberations about using nuclear weapons, "Never before, to my knowledge, did so many planners look at that so seriously and so soberly with the full understanding of what was at risk."

Shown an early draft of this article, JCS Chairman Jones emphasized, "We weren't 'close' [to using tac nucs]; we didn't recommend an *action*; we talked about 'options' and what might happen and what might be necessary. . . . The Joint Chiefs of Staff did *not* 'recommend' the imminent use of tactical nuclear weapons."

Jones told *AFJ* the Chiefs discussed options of both "horizontal" and "vertical" escalation with Brown, "but we never figured out where to hit them elsewhere."

### Horizontal Escalation?

Horizontal escalation was a strategy in vogue at the time to respond to Soviet adventurism in one part of the world by acting in another where they might be more vulnerable. It had been discussed with some prominence and wishful thinking in some of Brown's annual *Consolidated Guidance papers* (and early in the Reagan Administration's renamed *Defense Guidance documents*), but it was eventually discarded as a meaningful strategic option. Its appeal evaporated after the JCS concluded that there were not many places where the Soviets had vulnerabilities that could be

exploited without risking still more serious vertical escalation or, more importantly, turning a regional conflict into a world war. Moreover, many planners believed horizontal escalation was a more attractive option for the Soviets, who had 180 active and reserve divisions at the time, than it was for the US, which had 28 divisions.<sup>14</sup> Most US divisions were "nailed down" in Europe or the Far East, while almost all of the divisions remaining in the continental US were formally "committed" to NATO reinforcement. As one analyst would put it later, "Guess who has the most forces in uncommitted reserve to play horizontal escalation?"<sup>15</sup>

The mid-1980 crisis is not hinted at in anything Harold Brown has said publicly or written since leaving office early in 1981. But in his 1982 Presidential memoirs, *Keeping Faith*, Carter digresses from a long, anguished discussion of negotiations

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over the Iranian hostage crisis in September of 1980 to note:



Christopher

to Europe, as far as other officials in the Pentagon and State Department knew, for the sole purpose of sharing this evidence with the heads of state of Great Britain, France, and Germany, and consulting with them on how best to coordinate our warnings to the Soviet leaders to stay out of Iran.<sup>16</sup>

(Christopher was sent to Europe principally to meet with an Iranian intermediary in Germany who, it turned out, was materially helpful in finally resolving the hostage crisis.)

Carter says nothing further of the Soviet buildup or near crisis that it precipitated. Christopher twice declined to discuss his unusual mission when told *AFJ* was preparing an article on the mid-1980 Soviet buildup north of Iran.

But that hitherto obscure paragraph in Carter's memoirs clearly indicates that Russia's Transcaucasian buildup was of major concern.

American Presidents don't dispatch the Deputy Secretary of State to Europe to brief allies on a Soviet military "exercise," as



Komer

Robert W. Komer, Brown's Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, now characterizes the "incident." (Although he recalls being out of the country at the time and says, "I knew nothing of this," Komer adds, "I would not be surprised if the war plan-

ners told Brown they had 'no other option,' because that is true. The Soviets did *not* go on a war footing; they were having a big exercise. I have no evidence to suggest that we were 'on the brink.' None. But remember, we'd lost Afghanistan; the rescue attempt had failed; and the Soviets were organizing for something. So this was not a normal time. We had never run into [an exercise] like this in this area before.") Briefings about exercises are routinely handled through regular intelligence channels, through US defense attachés posted abroad, or, in more serious cases, by regional commanders-in-chief (in this case, General Bernard W. Rogers, the Commander-in-Chief of the US European Command and also NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe).

### No Soviet Cakewalk

On the other hand, the Soviets faced anything but a cakewalk moving south through western Iran. They would have to advance across the Elburz mountains and then along the slopes or over the spine of the Zagros mountains, 12,000 to 15,000 feet high. It is one of the most uninviting, inhospitable invasion routes on earth. A 600-mile attack to the northern end of the Persian Gulf entails hundreds of choke points—bridges, defiles, rivers, and high mountain passes—and translates to 1,000 tortuous miles on the ground. There are only two roads south: one roughly parallels the Turkish-Iraqi border to Abadan at the northern tip of the Persian Gulf; the other runs hundreds of miles to the east through Tehran, Qom, Esfahan, and then through Kerman and back across the Zagros mountains to Bandar Abbas on the northern bank of the Strait of Hormuz, 500 miles farther south in the Gulf. It is not the kind of terrain through which armored and mechanized forces move smartly. In some places, tank columns have to emerge from defiles one tank at a time.

The classic scenario for a Soviet invasion of Iran involves about 20 to 25 divisions in a three-pronged attack, one involving forces from Turkestan moving southwest, with two axes of advance south from the Trans-

caucasus, one west of the Zagros mountains headed for the northern tip of the Gulf near Abadan, the second aimed southeast at south central Iran and then hooking back to the southwest to seize the northern banks of the Strait of Hormuz near Bandar Abbas.

The best defensive line for US forces trying to stem a Soviet attack is far to the north, before Soviet forces can debouch into the plains near Tehran where two long valleys known as the Esfahan and Yazd corridors are fairly well suited as high speed avenues of advance for armored forces, one 25 kilometers wide at its widest point, another 100. Once there, the Soviets also gain access to a number of airfields from which their fighter-bombers can support operations in the Gulf itself, which is virtually beyond range of aircraft operating from Transcaucasia.<sup>17</sup> (It is 1,807 kilometers from Yerevan to Bandar Abbas, and the combat radius of a MiG-23 is about 1,150 km, only 800 km for a MiG-27.)

But to reach those corridors, Soviet units have to negotiate cruel terrain where their approach is canalized by narrow defiles. (The formidable obstacles in that terrain are evident in that the highest peak in Iran lies between the Caspian Sea and Tehran; it is 18,371 feet high.)

As one of Carter's White House assistants described that terrain, "Great tac nuke targets, don't you think?" Thus, the earlier the US responded to a Soviet invasion, and the farther north, the better the prospects of stopping it.

One of Brown's military options was to insert small special operations units that could parachute into the Zagros mountain passes and block those defiles or blow the bridges with special explosives. But, planners told him, such operations were unlikely to stem a determined Soviet invasion. First, Soviet airborne forces could leapfrog the choke points, which in any case could be cleared unless defended by substantial forces. (As Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., today's JCS Chairman, testified early last month before the Senate Subcommittee on Sea Power and Force Projection, special operations forces "are not designed to hold ground, to fight toe to toe with conventional forces, or to take objectives defended by conventional forces. They are too lightly armed for such tactics.") Thus, special operations teams would serve only as "trip wires" triggering a more credible display of American force<sup>18</sup>—and, under the circumstances, tactical nuclear weapons were the only alternative Brown had. Second, public opinion might become so outraged upon learning that American troops had been sacrificed on "no win, one way" missions that the outcry would foreclose support for more meaningful intervention by conventional forces. Third, the US had no bases in the region from which to insert such teams—or from which tactical aircraft might operate to try to knock out the same bridges or close the same defiles with conventional weapons.

Yet, Brown must have realized, any delay

in responding to a Soviet attack could prove "politically paralytic," forestalling any further options he might develop.<sup>19</sup>

Opinions at the time and recollections now differ on whether Brown and US war planners were discussing a hypothetical possibility or the real prospect of having to use small-yield nuclear weapons delivered by tactical aircraft. But one senior officer says emphatically: "It wasn't just 'another, great big maneuver.' They were loading up; they were going to come. That was not just an exercise that we divined wrong. The Soviets don't exercise like that; nobody does. They were getting ready to go—whatever the considerations were that caused them to undo that decision, and it may have been our resolve and the signaling that was going on. This was no accident that the Soviets backed down."

Thus, minutes of the Joint Chiefs' meeting with Brown make it clear that, had the Soviets moved south, they could have seized Iran's oil fields and denied the free world oil supplied through the Strait of Hormuz unless Carter and Brown, who between them comprised the National Command Authority that has to approve the use of tactical nuclear weapons, authorized their employment.



Gabriel

place at the right time. We didn't have them organized to go into the Zagros mountains. Special forces or special operations teams and F-111s—that was about it."

Gabriel told AFJ in 1986, "We [in USAFE] were aware of the buildup, but our crews were not alerted. We weren't that close to a 'crisis,' but it was serious, that's true."



Meyer

The Army Chief of Staff then was General E.C. "Shy" Meyer. He too emphasizes that the Joint Chiefs discussed, but did not recommend, the use of nuclear weapons. But he acknowledges that had the Soviet forces moved south, "It was a very serious alternative that we would have had to address. There just were no other alternatives. The majority of the intelligence community felt that all of the signals were there that [a Soviet invasion] was possible." Meyer told AFJ he could not recall "a point in history when the US had such limited options."

Since taking office, President Carter and his advisers had grown increasingly con-

cerned about the energy crisis and the possibility of a Soviet incursion into the Persian Gulf.

### The 1980 Oil Crisis

In April of 1977, for instance, soon after Carter entered the Oval Office, the Central Intelligence Agency had predicted that "world oil production would peak as early as 1978 and then fall sharply, forcing the USSR and Eastern Europe to become net importers by 1985."

This assessment, according to Air Force Lt. Gen. Eugene F. Tighe, Jr., who was Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency between 1977 and 1981, "was leading some to believe that the USSR would take military action to gain access to Persian Gulf oil resources."<sup>20</sup>



Tighe

About 60% of the free world's oil came from the Persian Gulf at the time (compared with about 26% today), and most of it had to be shipped through the narrow Strait of Hormuz. The US in 1980 depended upon the Gulf states for almost a third of its oil, compared with only 4% today.

By the fall of 1979, the CIA's Director of Economic Research, Max Ernst, had reported that communist nations as a group were shifting from being net exporters of oil to net importers. Early in 1980, one energy analyst wrote in an exhaustive, unclassified analysis, "The West is approaching a serious energy crisis and there are growing prospects of superpower competition over oil."<sup>21</sup> By that summer, other experts who monitored world energy supplies were saying that for the first time in recent history, the rate of increase in Soviet oil production had dropped to zero in May of 1980; that the USSR had been forced to make serious cuts in its planned net exports of oil in the first six months of 1980; and that the Soviets were experiencing serious exploration problems in their key fields.

A Carter Administration assessment at the time, called National Energy Plan II, also projected serious cuts in the amount of energy available from nuclear power and coal in the US and warned there were no additional oil supplies to import except at the direct expense of America's allies. OPEC had raised its prices 60% in mid-1979, and the economic aftershocks were devastating. Carter called for the US to respond to the energy crisis with the "moral equivalent of war." By mid-1980, his book notes, he had made his "fifth nationwide address about energy."

Persian Gulf oil had become a critical point of Western vulnerability, a jugular vein that, Brown's war planners told him in August of 1980, Soviet forces might be able to sever within 10 days to two weeks, and possibly sooner.



### Turmoil in Southwest Asia

By the time of that buildup, Carter had seen Iran fall to the Ayatollah Khomeini in January of 1979; the American Embassy in Tehran seized for two days in February while Ambassador William Sullivan and his staff were held hostage after two Marine guards were wounded; the Turkish government refuse entry to a small US helicopter force deployed to rescue or evacuate Embassy personnel; the American ambassador in Kabul murdered on his very doorstep; the US Embassy in Tehran fall again in November of 1979, its personnel eventually to be held hostage for 444 days; the Soviet Union invade Afghanistan on December 27th, 1979, the first time since World War II that Russian troops had been sent into combat outside of Soviet borders; and America's crack counterterrorist team, Delta Force, forced to abort its rescue effort in mid-point at Desert One in April of 1980 when a nation spending \$200-billion a year on defense ended up short one helicopter.

Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had labeled the region from Turkey through the Middle East and into the Persian Gulf back up into Afghanistan an "Arc of Crisis" in which the US was ill-prepared to influence events.



Brzezinski

Earlier in that period, in February of 1979, Carter had suffered the ultimate diplomatic indignity: the King of Saudi Arabia had declined to receive the US Defense Secretary after Carter had dispatched Brown to the Middle East for the first visit ever made there by an incumbent of that office. Brown had been sent in part to deliver a personal message to the King from Jimmy Carter.

The King, his ministers explained to Brown after he arrived in Riyadh, was unavailable because he was in the desert playing with his falcons.

(During Brown's flight from Washington to Saudi Arabia, a "senior defense official" aboard his plane had stressed to reporters invited to accompany him on the historic trip that the Secretary was making the trip to "articulate American resolve" to protect its interests and its allies in the region. Brown bristled in silence when one of the reporters asked him what he was planning to do to "demonstrate" that resolve, having heard that Carter had just ordered an aircraft carrier sent from the Philippines into the Indian Ocean to turn back as it was transiting the Java Sea. Brown replied weakly that aircraft carriers were useful only in certain situations and that the US needed to hold them in readiness for contingencies elsewhere. He was not amused when AFJ asked him "What are you saving them for—a parade up the Hudson River?")<sup>22</sup>

Saudi Arabia, apparently, had observed that the United States of America did not have a single aircraft carrier within striking distance of Tehran or the holy city of Qom at the very time when its recent bulwark in the region—Iran—was under siege and

## How Vital Is Vital Depends on When It's Vital

**D**uring the August 1980 meeting at which the nuclear option was discussed at such length, Brown objected five or more times to use of the word "vital" to characterize the importance of Persian Gulf oil to American national security interests, notes taken during the meeting show. But in the 1983 book he wrote after leaving the Pentagon, *Thinking 'About National Security*, Brown uses the word "vital" at least five times to emphasize its importance to the US and its allies.

S&S

The Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute  
School of Advanced International Studies

July 30, 1986

Mr. Benjamin F. Schmitter  
Editor  
Armed Forces Journal International  
Suite 104  
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Dear Ben,

Thanks for sending me the advance version of your screenplay. It is certainly one of your more imaginative efforts. I particularly like your idea of footnoting yourself as an authoritative source.

The Gulf is a region where political instability, Soviet propinquity and interest, U.S. geographical remoteness, and allied energy dependence combine to make the regional military balance difficult for the West. (Surely one of your informants can give you a 1986 version of your 'Persian Gulf Force Mismatch' chart). And such a situation always sharpens the issue of possible use of nuclear weapons.

But the events you purport to describe don't ring a bell with me -- though they have some small overlap with reality. As I read your article, moreover, your description doesn't seem to jibe with the recollections of any former civilian or military official whom you quote by name.

Sincerely,

Harold Brown

"The Europeans and the Japanese," he wrote, "do not even have the choice of managing without Persian Gulf oil. An extended cutoff of oil from the Persian Gulf would be disastrous." He called that prospect a "nightmare" for the United States and "a mortal blow to . . . the industrialized democracies."

In that book, Brown's discussion of possible future contingencies in the region reads as if he is reliving his own nightmare in mid-1980:



What is the overall military balance in Southwest Asia? It is not favorable to the United States. . . . It is doubtful that the US forces rapidly deployable to a Zagros mountain line any time before at least the late 1980s could hold back a determined Soviet attack there. This means that at least for a time the Soviets could see less military risk in an adventure in Southwest Asia than in Europe. And the prize would be nearly as great, because control of Persian Gulf oil would make it possible to dominate Western Europe and Japan.

Nevertheless, Brown wrote, the prospect of "early Soviet military actions along these lines are low." With what may be prophetic reflection on his 1980 war plans meeting, Brown said, "Some have argued that Persian Gulf oil is obviously so vital to the industrialized democracies that the Soviet Union will be deterred by that very fact from a military move to acquire control, knowing that a Western response could in one way or another lead to thermonuclear war." (Emphasis added.)

Perhaps that was Brown's way of acknowledging three years later to his 1980 war planners, "I didn't want to alarm them, but you were right: that oil is vital, and we would have to make it."

However, after being asked to comment on an earlier draft of this article (which was considerably more pejorative than Carter Administration policy in the Gulf region and which the US was closer to using nuclear weapons in the Persian Gulf account conveys), Brown wrote AFJ calling the article a "screenplay." While he acknowledged that the Persian Gulf "always sharpens the issue of nuclear weapons," Brown said the events AFJ described "don't ring a bell with me—though they have some overlap with reality." The letter is reproduced here in full to let AFJ readers see the context.

(See page 104 for the more current "Persian Gulf Force Mismatch" chart which Dr. Brown suggested we include with this article.)



sovereign US soil, the American Embassy in Tehran, overrun by a band of uncontrolled revolutionaries.

Nor, apparently, did the Soviet Union fail to notice the gap between rhetoric and resources—for the clandestine war footing that became evident north of Iran in August of 1980 could not have happened without months of advance planning and debate in the highest councils of Moscow's Politburo.

As it was to Saudi Arabia in February of 1979, it must have been evident to Moscow that US policy in the Persian Gulf was bankrupt: There was *nothing* there to back it up—short of nuclear weapons.

### No Forces, No Bases

By August, the US had deployed two aircraft carriers into the Indian Ocean. But the Soviets had also reinforced their own naval task force there.

While the US had announced that it would form a Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force to protect its interests—and its allies' interests—in the region, all that existed were a plan, a newly formed headquarters 7,000 miles away at MacDill AFB in Florida, and some budget proposals which Congress had yet to fund. There was no

American military force on Diego Garcia, as there is today—just *plans* to store Marine equipment afloat there—3,000 miles from Transcaucasia. There was no American military base in the Gulf or equipment prepositioned there.

(Even today, the US Central Command's "forward headquarters" is at sea on a converted amphibious transport ship that has limited visiting privileges at ports in the Persian Gulf region.)

Some years later, General Robert C. Kingston, the first Commander-in-Chief of US Central Command, viewed the 1980 crisis this way:

Well, in 1980, had the President of the United States directed the military to send a sizable force to the Middle East to protect Iran and block the Russians, nobody, at that time, could have told you *where* the force would come from, *what* the force would consist of, *how long* it would take them to get there, *how* they would get there, the sequence, *how* they would be sustained, and *who* would be in command.<sup>23</sup>

In mid-1984, he was able to say, "I can answer all those questions now."

But in 1980, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were still *debating* what forces could be assigned to the RDJTF's operational control should America need to deploy



Kingston

forces in the Persian Gulf, since virtually all units stationed in the US were already committed to reinforcing NATO.

Even if the US had had forces in August of 1980 that it could deploy to counter the Persian Gulf crisis, it had no place to position them—no "staging area" within credible striking distance of Transcaucasia. Medium-range Navy A-6 bombers launched from carriers in the Indian Ocean would have had to refuel in mid-air two or three times over hostile Iranian air space to drop a tactical nuclear weapon on any of the geographic choke points along the likely Soviet invasion route in western Iran.



Powell\*

But I never sat in on a meeting where specific responses were discussed. Then it just sort of went away.

"But it was certainly clear that you would have to consider the use of *tac nukes*."

"There was a lot of discussion about putting ground forces into Iran. The debate I

## How Does the US Stand Today?

In August of 1986, the US Central Command finished its biennial *Galant Eagle* exercise on the West Coast of the US. Marine Corps General George B. Crist, the CENTCOM Commander-in-Chief, told reporters, "The Soviets now not only possess the desire to expand into the Indian Ocean, but they have established the military capability to do so as well." According to a report of his press conference in the *Baltimore Sun* (CENTCOM did not make a transcript), Crist added, "I really could give them a hell of a fight, but if he wants to pay the price, I expect he could push me out."



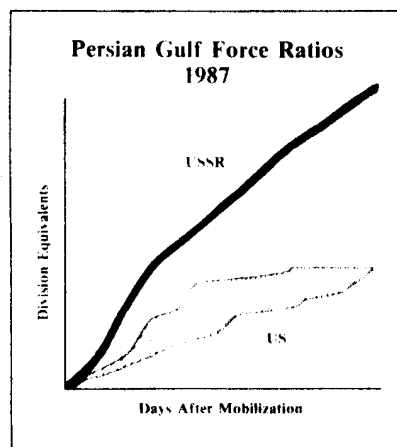
Crist

Today the US Central Command, the successor to Carter's Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, has about five Army and Marine Corps divisions plus seven Air Force tactical fighter wings and three Navy carrier battle groups—over 230,000 men in all—earmarked for Southwest Asia contingencies. In January of 1982 the US launched a multi-billion-dollar investment to build 50 more of the huge C-5 transports, and to complete initiatives Carter and Brown

had launched to lengthen the C-141's fuselage to carry about 33% more cargo and make it in-flight refuelable and to buy a fleet of 44 KC-10 tanker/cargo aircraft. As a result, the US today has a strategic airlift capacity of roughly 45-million ton miles per day, but that is still far short of the 102-million ton miles a day thought to be needed to thwart a Soviet invasion of Iran. The US has almost completed the Carter initiative to preposition on ships berthed at Diego Garcia with enough equipment, ammunition, water, and fuel for a division-size Marine amphibious force geared for Persian Gulf crises. One such ship holds about 220 times the cargo a single C-5 can carry and over 500 times the equipment a C-141 can move; 17 of the vessels are now at anchor in the Indian Ocean. By sea from the US, other forces would still have to travel 8,000 miles through the Suez Canal or 12,000 miles around the Cape of Good Hope, trips that take from 11 to 31 days, depending on what kind of ships are used, once they are ready to sail.

Notwithstanding that significant improvement in readiness for Persian Gulf contingencies—most of it a result of what the Carter Administration set in motion in 1980 once the Shah was gone and it became clear that Iran was a basket case—many former and present government officials question (as Jody Powell wrote *AFJ*, after reading a draft of this article), "that we could now stop a major Soviet offensive in that area without the use of nukes." As he put it, the increases in conventional capabilities "certainly improve our options in less serious scenarios. . . but if the Russkies come down in full force, I get the definite impression that these extra troops will amount to little more than a larger tripwire."

The force mismatch still extant is illustrated here in this 1980 Carter Administration estimate of 1987 force ratios, which Harold Brown suggested in his letter on page 102 that *AFJ* print with this article. ■ ☆ ■



recall was, 'If you put them in, you're likely to lose them: put 'em in to draw a line, a quickly positioned trip wire' [versus] 'Would threatening the use of tac nukes make the Soviets back off?'"

Powell recalled, however, that "late in 1979, we saw them beginning to do things in Afghanistan. The consensus was, 'They're not going to invade.' Thus, in 1980 we weren't going to make the same mistake twice."

Powell said also, "I never kept notes [at such meetings], but I recall there were some choke points discussed, and some of the better ones are fairly far north, and you have to act early."

### The Missing Airfields

Nor, Brown's war planners advised him in the critical hours of that crisis, was the US in *any* position to covertly land special operations forces within reasonable striking distance of the Soviet invasion forces, should they move south. There just were not any airfields near enough. Or so the war planners *thought* when they briefed Brown.

As it turned out, there were at least two such airfields available, ones from which the US might have been able to insert special operations teams by C-130 transports.

The CIA and the Pentagon didn't know about them, nor were they listed on the Joint Chiefs of Staff annually updated master list that's supposed to show every airfield worldwide longer than 3,000 feet and thus able to handle C-130 tactical assault transports or, in grave emergencies, even a nuclear-armed F-111.

Boeing's Commercial Airplane Company had recently sent an expert team to survey the oil pipeline linking Aramco's vast oil fields near Dhahran with port facilities along the Persian Gulf to the east and the Mediterranean to the northwest. Along that fragile 1,000-mile artery are about 20 small airfields, constructed by Aramco to provide inspection, maintenance, and repair teams quick access to the pumping stations which dot the pipeline. Two of the airfields, the survey team had found out in the late spring or early summer of 1980, had been recently *improved*, their runways lengthened to over 3,000 feet. Their runways and turnaround areas had been strengthened to the point that even a twin-engine Boeing 737 airliner could land and take off; so could a heavily laden C-130 land there. (The Royal Saudi Arabian Air Force had bought and operated that very aircraft and improved the airfields to handle them, as well as some of the Aramco and the Saudi Airlines' commercial 737s, "just in case" of terrorist operations against the pipeline's vulnerable pumping stations.)

Just as the Soviet buildup north of Iran was peaking, David Axelson, an affable, middle-management Boeing supervisor working on military airlift projects, received an odd phone call asking him, on a "trust me" basis, to fly across the country that night and bring to Washington all of the

photographs, maps, and soil test results which Boeing survey teams had made a few weeks earlier along the Aramco pipeline—but to tell "no one" at Boeing about the trip. The next morning, the bleary victim of a cross-country "red-eye" flight was hustled into the Pentagon, introduced to a major general and about six war planners, their specific jobs unbeknownst to him, and asked to discourse on everything he knew about recently improved airfields in Saudi Arabia (or others anywhere else in the Persian Gulf area). The session lasted about an hour, according to one of those present, after which Axelson was told by the two-star general that he had done his Nation a "great service," et cetera.

### For some reason not obvious from news reports then, the US desperately needed a few remote airfields.

Barely had the somewhat bewildered Axelson checked into a hotel for some badly needed sleep when he was called and asked to meet with yet another two-star general from another Service and go through the same "briefing" with still more war planners. Although their jobs hadn't been told him, Axelson had "broken the code" by then—discerning that, for some reason certainly not obvious from recent news reports, the United States of America desperately needed a few remote airfields near the Persian Gulf that very few people knew existed.

As events would unfold, Jimmy Carter didn't need them. The nuclear war America had to think about unleashing, didn't happen. Whether or not Jimmy Carter and Harold Brown would have launched it, may never be known. But the record is clear that their military advisers urged them to be ready to use tactical nuclear weapons to protect "vital" American interests in a region that six years ago was the free world's jugular vein ready to be slit wide open.

And, many believe, the threat is almost as precarious today. ■ ☆ ■

In research for this article, six war planners, all general or flag officers involved in the 1980 Persian Gulf "incident," were asked: "Has the United States ever been closer to using nuclear weapons, that you know of?" Three of them answered, in effect, but in almost the same terms, "Not on my watch," or "Not that I know of." ■ ☆ ■

<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, Bantam Books, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1981*, January 29, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Carter, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Collins, *US-Soviet Military Balance, 1980-1985*, Pergamon-Brassey's,

1985. Also, *Soviet Military Power*, US Department of Defense, editions of 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, and 1985.

<sup>5</sup> *Soviet Military Power*, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> "Soviet Order of Battle," *Defense Electronics*, January 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defense *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1980*, January 25, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries: at that time, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Venezuela, Libya, Indonesia, Algeria, Nigeria, Gabon, and Ecuador.

<sup>9</sup> DoD *Annual Report, FY81*.

<sup>10</sup> Lt. Col. George M. Brooke, III, USMC, and Lt. Col. Frederick McCorkie, USMC, "Rapid Response Force Option," *Amphibious Warfare Review*, Summer 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Record, "US Strategic Airlift: Requirements and Capabilities," Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Inc., January 1986.

<sup>12</sup> DoD *Annual Report, FY80*.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Brown, *Thinking About National Security: Defense and Foreign Policy in a Dangerous World*, Westview Press, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> DoD *Annual Report, FY81*.

<sup>15</sup> John H. Collins, "What Have We Got for \$1 Trillion?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Carter, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> "C-17 Southwest Asia Combat Utility Study" (Revised), McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Company, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Such suicidal operations were anathema to the military, however. As General Robert C. Kingston, then Commander-in-Chief of US Central Command, would put it in a 1984 *AFJ* interview, "I don't want to be a party to what I call 'throw-away' teams. These missions will be selected with great care on survivability. Can the team survive? Does it have to go on a survival status immediately upon hitting the ground? Obviously, if they're in for a destruction mission, the enemy will eventually know that they've been there. . . . You've got to watch out for the *Spetsnaz* [Soviet special operations forces], which will precede any invasion or any Soviet move into the [Persian Gulf] area."

<sup>19</sup> Rodney W. Jones, ed., *Small Nuclear Forces and US Security Policy*, Lexington Books, 1984.

The term "politically paralytic" does not appear in minutes of Brown's August 1980 meeting with his war planners but is aptly used in a treatise (published in this reference) by Anthony H. Cordesman on Persian Gulf contingency options.

<sup>20</sup> Lt. Gen. Eugene F. Tighe, Jr., "The DIA Is as Good as the CIA," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Bridget Gail (pseudonym), "The World Oil Crisis and US Power Projection Policy: The Threat Becomes a Grim Reality," *Armed Forces Journal International*, January 1980.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin F. Schemmer, "Harold Brown's Mideast Odyssey," *Armed Forces Journal International*, April 1979.

<sup>23</sup> LuAnne K. Levens and Benjamin F. Schemmer, "An Exclusive *AFJ* Interview with General Robert C. Kingston, USA, Commander-in-Chief, US Central Command," *Armed Forces Journal International*, July 1984.

\*UPI/Bettman Newsphoto.