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Who Is Your Perspective Pointed At?

While the war was thankfully cold, rising heat was inevitable. Over the course of five decades, through the latter half of the twentieth century, the Cold War remained a constant pressure on the hearts and minds of millions across the globe. Depending on where one found themselves geographically, their perspective of the war varied drastically. While many Europeans and Cubans found themselves at the foot of becoming proxy-states, Soviets and Americans feared imminent demise daily with the rise of nuclear technologies, the space race, and political propaganda. Furthermore, the manner in which one was involved with the war heavily altered their perspective of it. In the late seventies and early eighties, the world would experience what is described as one of the single most dangerous events in the history of the Cold War during an already tumultuous, bubbling moment. To the average American, the Soviets came to be known as the “Evil Empire.” To Stanislav Petrov, a high-ranking “stormtrooper” with his finger on the extinction trigger, perspective would make the difference between seeing tomorrow and falling today. Lieutenant Colonel Petrov and his world-saving conscience reveal the influence of perspective throughout the war, not only by highlighting their variance, but also by illuminating the need for truth and morality during the darkest of times filled with the greatest of lies.

1983 was a year dressed in black, seemingly preparing the world for its own funeral. While a September saint would appear like an angel in the night, the month would begin with 269 civilian casualties as a Korean passenger plane was shot down on the first of the month by

the Soviets with numerous Americans on board. Unfortunately, this was gasoline on the fire. By this point in the Cold War, the United States was becoming heavily involved with NATO, looking for continued support in Europe, and eyeing more potential locations for nuclear silos on their enemy's doorstep (Pederson).

Notably, at this point, the United States had nuclear weapons as a part of its arsenal for nearly four decades. Originally, their intended use was the destruction of the Soviet Union, implicated through the extensive Soviet spy ring present at Los Alamos, only using them in the second world war as a means of putting an end to it, showing their strength on the world stage, and to see what would actually happen (Langer). Piling even more logs onto this forest fire, one need only peek back a few months to May 23, 1983 when then President of the United States Ronald Reagan delivered his infamous “Star Wars” speech. In it, he introduced the world to his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) claiming the United States was moving to defund and restrict the military, while improving the mess that was Soviet-American relations (Peterson). To the dismay of many, especially those who supported the Soviets, the truth behind the “Star Wars” initiative was rather disappointing. Specifically, the “astrodome” aspect, which was eventually renamed Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) in the nineties, was meant to protect the United States from any number of enemy missiles attempting to reach its soil; today, its intended purpose might be compared to the Iron Dome of Israel. Moreover, it is noted in Reagan’s speech his attempt to make nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete,” while in reality the American government spent close to 55 billion dollars in the 15 years after Reagan’s speech, culminating in almost nothing—as far as the public was concerned—other than a direct contradiction to the initial goal (Hartung).

Why is this all relevant? “Being an actor is not more disqualifying for the presidency than being a rich man’s son, teacher, lawyer, football player and law student, or peanut farmer,” though it is a mighty propaganda tool during war times (Peterson). In 1983, once again, the pen was mightier than the sword. With an actor as president, the perspective his own country was exposed to, as well as the one of his enemies, fell on its knees before him. With the Soviets and Americans analyzing each other’s every move, altering opinions became a “walk in the park.” From Kitchen Debates to Star Wars speeches, competition was assumed, and finding pressure points was like car spotting through a freshly-cleaned window. In 1983, it was Star Wars which cast nuclear shadows across the Soviet Union. With the franchise itself in the midst of a boom across the world, it was a fine metaphor to arm oneself with. Reagan, someone who had made a living by pretending, was able to mold his people like clay, making them view him as Luke Skywalker, the prophetic Jedi, and Yuri Andropov—and all future Soviet leaders for that matter—as the despicable dictator, Darth Vader. What immediately becomes clear now are the outside, civilian perspectives at this time in the war. To Americans, Soviets were dehumanized, drawn as an “Evil Empire” consisting of simple communists. To Soviets, Americans lived under the hubris of their weapons, and were simply starved, rabid animals waiting for an opportunity to pounce. With U.S. troops and silos planted all over Europe, invasion, and the switch to extremely hot warfare, appeared to be peeking its head around the corner (Pederson). This eye-opening perspective reveals the facades put up in front of the general public in order to garner support through ominous times. Truth is not often found in abundance when searched for here, though in this realm, things are taken at face value and truths tend to be hidden in plain sight, not often searched for with much vigor.

On September 26, 1983 (September 25 depending on time zone) the Lieutenant Colonel of the Soviet Air Defenses, Stanislav Petrov, who was not supposed to be on duty that night, would trust his gut and save the world from accidental extinction (Pederson). Born near Vladivostok, Russia to a fighter pilot father and a nurse mother, Petrov would lead a simple, grounded life. He would go on to attend the Kiev Military Aviation Engineering Academy, joining the forces in 1972 after graduating. His life would find him with a loving wife and two kids, while his career would find him oscillating between the top and bottom of a long rollercoaster (Wikipedia). In his later life, he would be described by the few who could find him to be a frail, older gentleman who was clearly at arms with his shadow-filled past (Libak). It appears safe to assume Stanislav was not a man meant to create chaos, but to stand in the face of it, bearing the weight of many worlds so others would not have to. This becomes clear after saving the world, when he is reassigned to a less important position, only to be retired and work for the company whose very radar system he would note as malfunctioning, and which would very nearly end the world before quitting to take care of his wife who had fallen ill with cancer (Man). What is important here is the perspective of one individual, both the truths he believed and the moral compass which directed his conscience, allowing for false narratives and personal motives to be thrown out the window, replaced only by humanistic incentives.

On an unimaginably eerie and terrifying night, Stanislav pulled from his own perspective to make a world-saving decision. In charge of computer and satellite warning systems, Stanislav was covering for a sick comrade during what should have been like any other routine shift, however, it would become anything but. Suddenly, alarms related to missile and nuclear weapons detection began blaring. According to protocol, the incident should have been reported immediately, and the Soviets should have moved to initiate a real “Launch on Warning” ICBM

attack against the Americans. All Stanislav had to do was “reach for the phone,” but like many of his colleagues, they had doubts of any real threat, as only one missile was initially detected (Burke). Unfortunately for Petrov, the decision ultimately would fall on him. He would trust his gut and his experience analyzing American launches from their nine military bases, making the call to shut the alarm off after questioning the detection of only one missile (Libak). In his mind, if an attack was on its way, it would be a much larger number of missiles than one; enough to prevent any potential retaliation. However, soon more missiles would be detected, reaching a total of five. Still, Stanislav and his colleagues would trust their instincts, never signaling for a counter attack, waiting only a few minutes, which unimaginably felt like eons (Pederson). This brief moment in purgatory for Stanislav would be the difference between insightful hero and naive villain.

After the Cuban missile crisis, a hotline was set up between the two nations in case anything ever happened like this again. They would be able to ring the hotline and find out if missiles had been launched, although there was always the assumption the U.S. would have simply lied, so the hotline was never wrung (Scharre). This subtlety speaks to perspectives and the truths and morals housed within them. For an individual privy to many more real truths than the public, a boiling-point turned into a moment of calm and clarity, allowing for Petrov to analyze the moment in its entirety; both what was really going on, as well as all potential outcomes. To him, the war was cold, and it was meant to stay that way. For all he knew, within seconds he and the rest of his country were about to be obliterated (Libak). Thankfully, his perspective on the matter allowed for a sound assessment of the situation, saving the world in the process. As for the governmental powers feeding their respective propaganda machines, the hotline once again illustrates the variance of perspective and the lack of truth present in this

moment. With so much scheming and plotting occurring between both sides, their perspectives of one another were so battered they could not even pick up the phone to ask whether the world was about to end. Clearly, greed, power, and shameful morals do not stop for the end of the world, but their Kryptonite is the truth, and a dose as small as Stanislav Petrov can bring even the biggest of monsters down.

After 1983, the Soviets and Americans were far from being on good terms. Once again, perspective would continue to shape the lives of everyone the war touched. Simultaneously, Cold War espionage was running rampant across the globe (Gill). The inevitable next step for the Soviets was to question Stanislav. His superiors would turn his life upside down in an attempt to “pin the snout on the spy.” Although nothing would be uncovered, the Soviet perspective on Stanislav switched immediately from promising, young officer to someone worth keeping an eye on (Pederson). A man saves the world and is repaid with a demotion, simply based on the idea he helped “the enemy,” rather than the humanist sentiment put forward with his actions. This speaks volumes to the importance of truth in formulating perspective. Like Reagan making the American citizen believe him to be some prophetic hero, when false information is perpetuated it becomes a doctrine—a manifesto even—for which people are willing to devote themselves entirely. All of a sudden, one side is dehumanized for what they *might* believe in, allowing for no second thought to be given regarding their well being. There is no limit to greed and what it will make someone do. Stanislav’s intervention would not become public knowledge until his superior reported the event to the media in 1998, after his wife passed away having known nothing about the event (Nagesh). If no one knows about the event, it cannot die a martyr. In other words, suppressing the event is suppressing the real story, the whole truth, and the grounded morals of one man. He was once quoted saying “they were lucky it was me on shift

that night.” The event can no longer be marketed in any capacity, so as not to affect the perspective they had worked so many years to build. In the end, Stanislav was neither rewarded, as initially expected, nor was he punished, as the questioning would have led him to believe—although Petrov would experience a mental breakdown from the emotional trauma induced by the event (Man).

At the end of this perspective tunnel, there would be light. Decades after the official end of the war, during the early 2000s and 2010s, Stanislav would be presented with the new perspectives of the post-war world. He would be presented with the Dresden Peace Prize, an award from the Association of World Citizens, and the honor of having a documentary made about his life, specifically the moments in which he managed to save the world (REPORTS). Across the world, as perspectives began shifting due to post-war revelations and truths, so did the perspective on a hero who was painted as a villain for so long.

Although the Cold War reached a boiling point on numerous occasions it, fortunately, never boiled over. Over the course of five decades, much occurred, with constants rarely showing their face. This remains true when speaking to perspectives. While the idea of perspective never leaves, perspectives themselves are subject to constant change, as noted across the board during the Cold War. From presidential metaphors narrating the thoughts of millions, to the graceful morals of one enemy, time and time again perspectives reveal their innate variability, as well as the importance of truth and morality when it comes to the world as a community. In another universe, Stanislav Petrov is not the hero, pushing the big, red start button (that did not actually do anything), ending the world. Thankfully, in this one, he trusted what he *knew* to be true, and thought not of potential punishment or his country's demise, but rather of the people on the other side of the wall. Perspective is a weapon when placed under the control of

power mongers. Fortunately in this scenario, like most weapons, it inevitably finds its way into the hands of civilians. What one does with their weapon is up to them. Will they continue shooting aimlessly because they are “supposed to,” or will they question why a machine of death ended up in their possession to begin with, putting it down to promote peace instead?

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