

The Untold Story of the Washington-Moscow Hot Line

BY JACK ANDERSON

Deep inside the Kremlin, near the mahogany-paneled office of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, a teletype machine suddenly began to clatter last April 15. A small cluster of uniformed Russians—including technicians, a translator and an officer—watched intently as the English words tumbled out. The Washington-Moscow Hot Line, which protects the world against accidental war, was in use.

In less than three minutes, the urgent staccato ceased. It took another four minutes for the translator to complete a verbatim translation. Then the message was relayed at once to Leonid I. Brezhnev, First Secretary of the Communist Party. Did the Soviet Union have any information, the message asked, about an attack by North Korean fighters on an American EC-121 reconnaissance plane in the Sea of Japan? The blunt inquiry was signed by Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States.

This was his first use of the Hot Line. Not long afterward, the teletype clacked out another message from President Nixon, this one a request: Would Soviet vessels in the Sea of Japan assist in the search for survivors? Brezhnev quickly read the message, then issued an order to the Red Navy. Before his affirmative reply was put on the Hot Line, Soviet ships already had joined the search.

During the tense four days, the U.S. sent 11 Hot Line messages to the Kremlin. Each was addressed to Brezhnev and signed by Nixon. Each was written inside the White House. The last message, sent at 4 p.m., Saturday, April 19, informed the Russians that any future attack on American reconnaissance flights would bring military retaliation.

More incidents

Because the leaders of the two superpowers were in immediate contact, aware of each other's actions and intentions, the world was safer from nuclear holocaust. Indeed, the Hot Line has played a far more vital role than the public has been told in preventing misunderstandings during times of tension.

The EC-121 incident was one of more than a dozen in which the Hot Line had been used to keep the world safe—occasions that had not been officially admitted. In each instance, the authorities feared that news of the Hot Line's use would have alarmed the public and worsened the situation.

The Hot Line was opened on Aug. 30, 1963, more than three years after the idea was first proposed by PARADE editor Jess Gorkin.

The implementation of the Hot Line idea got bogged down in bureaucratic inertia, however, until the 1962 Cuban missile crisis convinced both sides that the need was urgent. For 13 days, the fate of the world hung by a tenuous thread as the two superpowers maneuvered on the nuclear brink. At a time when each minute counted, some messages between Kennedy and Khrushchev actually were delayed as long as 18 hours. On occasion, the two nations found it quicker to communicate through press releases which were flashed around the world on the news wires. No confrontation in human history has taken the world so close to catastrophe. Out of the cold chill, the Hot Line was born.

Written record

Contrary to popular opinion, the Hot Line is not a direct telephone hookup over which Presidents and Premiers talk to one another. Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed upon a system that would provide a written record of the exchanges. Result: an instantaneous teletype circuit was established between the Kremlin and the Pentagon command center. The center is in direct contact at all times—via special teletype and telephone—with the President, whether he is working at the White House, relaxing at Key Biscayne

or soaring through the skies on Air Force One.

The first crisis-use of the Hot Line, if we are to believe the official announcements, came during the six-day Arab-Israeli war in June, 1967. George Christian, then President Johnson's press secretary, announced that Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin had taken to the Hot Line to avert any miscalculations. Previously, the Hot Line had been used only for testing and ceremonial purposes, Christian said.

This statement, according to insiders of unquestioned reliability, simply isn't true. The first critical use of the Hot Line came on Aug. 1, 1964. On that black Sunday night, the U.S. ship Maddox was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson ordered immediate retaliatory air attacks against North Vietnam—the decision which was to lead to America's deep involvement in the war. On that occasion, the President sent four secret messages to the Kremlin, via the Hot Line, to inform Soviet leaders of our actions and to reassure them about our intentions.

A few hours after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war erupted, Premier Kosygin got on the Hot Line to inform President Johnson that Russia didn't want a major war over the Middle East. Two days later, the Liberty spy ship was attacked by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats in the Mediterranean. U.S. planes immediately began swarming off the decks of nearby aircraft carriers. Before they had finished

taking off, Johnson rushed a Hot Line message to Kosygin informing him that the planes were being scrambled only to protect the Liberty.

Thereafter, President Johnson got into the Hot Line habit and communicated with Moscow on several unreported occasions. He advised the Kremlin of critical Vietnam developments and sought Soviet help in seeking a settlement. When the spy ship Pueblo was seized by North Korea in January, 1968, LBJ used the Hot Line to inform Russia why U.S. naval units were headed into the Sea of Japan.

In between crises, the Hot Line is tested hourly, and the messages amount to a small-scale cultural exchange. The first historic message from Washington to Moscow was merely: "The quick brown fox..." Then the Russians began sending Pushkin poetry, and the U.S. responded with baseball scores. However, the quality of our messages has improved, and we now transmit passages from such publications as the *National Geographic* and *Encyclopedia Americana*. These messages are prepared on paper tapes with coded perforations and transmitted at the rate of 66 words per minute. The coded tapes, kept at both ends, permit instantaneous, automatic encoding and decoding. A third party, attempting to tap into the exchanges between President Nixon and Brezhnev, would pick up only unintelligible gobbledgeek.

Alternate system

The main International Telephone and Telegraph cable line runs from Washington to New York City, then across the Atlantic to London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki and Moscow. A secondary radio-telegraph back-up circuit is routed through Tangier to Moscow. The alternate circuit has been used more than once. In 1965, a group of teenagers crawled into a manhole north of Baltimore and built a fire that knocked out the primary circuit. The same year, a tractor operator plowing a field in Lohja, Finland, severed the cable. In both instances, transmission was immediately shifted to an alternate system.

The cost of the Hot Line, which provides insurance against accidental nuclear war, is less than a single Minuteman missile. The initial cost of the equipment and installation was \$159,849. Each year the U.S. pays \$102,347 to lease its half of the cable and \$52,480 to maintain the secondary radio circuit. There is an additional operating cost of \$27,608, exclusive of military salaries.

Lyndon Johnson thought so much of his Hot Line messages that when he left the White House, he packed them up and carted them off to Texas. President Nixon searched in vain for the messages so he would know how the Hot Line had been used before his takeover. If he still wants to review Hot Line history, however, he'll apparently have to visit the LBJ library.



Round-the-clock operation in Pentagon: manning the U.S.-Soviet Hot Line.