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LIVES

THE OUTLOOK INTERVIEW: ROBERT S.

How We Helped Push the

McNAMARA TALKS TO ROBERT SCHEER

Soviets Into Their

Q: We hear how the Soviets have gotten stronger and how they've made gains all over the world.

A: I, myself, believe they've gotten weaker. That may sound naive when one says it in the face of what has clearly been an increase in the number of their nuclear weapons and an increase in their conventional forces — not nearly as great, by the way, as many say, but still an increase. But I think they've gotten weaker because, economically and politically, there have been some very serious failures. In my opinion, they are in a weaker position today than they were 14 to 15 years ago.

Q: You said that the increase in Soviet conventional forces is not as great as many say.

A: Soviet conventional strength is not as great as many state it to be, and the NATO conventional weakness is not as great as it is frequently said to be. Therefore, the conventional balance is not as favorable to the Soviets as is often assumed. The Soviet advantage in tanks is frequently used to illustrate the strength of the Soviets and the weakness of the West. I believe the Warsaw Pact countries have three times as many tanks as the NATO countries. But our response to the Soviet tanks should not necessarily be a one-to-one expansion of our tank force, but rather an expansion of our antitank weapons, and that is exactly the way NATO has responded. So the fact that the Soviets have three times as many tanks as NATO is not necessarily an indication of Soviet strength and NATO weakness. One could argue whether NATO has adequate antitank forces, but they certainly have very strong antitank forces. I simply use that as an illustration of the point I'm making. In this country we commonly exaggerate the imbalance of Warsaw Pact and NATO conventional forces. In my opinion, NATO conventional forces are very strong indeed. They are not as strong as I would like to see them, not as strong as they ought to be, not as strong as they can be by applying mod-

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Arms Build-Up

A: They no more have a first-strike capability today than we had then. No one has demonstrated to me that the Soviets have a capability of destroying our Minutemen [land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles]. But even if they could destroy our Minutemen, that doesn't give them a first-strike capability, not when they are facing our Polaris submarines and our bombers. The other two legs of the triad are still there.

Q: The argument that is made is that they would destroy enough of ours that they could come back —

A: The argument is without foundation. It's absurd. To try to destroy the 1000 Minutemen, the Soviets would have to plan to ground-burst two nuclear warheads of one megaton each on each site. That is 2,000 megatons, roughly 160,000 times the megatonnage of the Hiroshima bomb. What condition do you think our country would be in when 2,000 one-megaton bombs ground-burst? The idea that, in such a situation, we would sit here and say, "Well, we don't want to launch against them because they might come back and hurt us," is inconceivable! And the idea that the Soviets are today sitting in Moscow and thinking, "We've got the U.S. over a barrel because we're capable of putting 2,000 megatons of ground-burst on them and in such a situation we know they will be scared to death and fearful of retaliation: therefore we are free to conduct political

blackmail," is too incredible to warrant serious debate.

Q: Those in the United States who put forward such a Soviet view stress that the argument is one of nerve and perception, and that the Soviets will perceive us as being weak and take advantage.

A: The world isn't run that way. Political leaders, responsible political leaders, don't behave that way. The first responsibility of a political leader is to preserve the safety of his people. No political leader I know of — including the Soviet political leaders — would run that kind of a risk.

Q: Their argument is that an American president would not order our submarines to fire their missiles once our Minutemen were destroyed because that would just invite a greater retaliation from the Russians.

A: But when they say that, they fail to take account of the fact that the Soviets know

that he might, and I am convinced he would. No Soviet leader would wish to accept that risk.

Q: Let's return to the issue of the buildup of nuclear forces. How did it occur?

A: Go back to 1960 when many in the U.S. believed there was a missile gap favoring the Soviets. With hindsight it became clear there wasn't any missile gap. But Kennedy had been told there was. What actually happened was this: In the summer of 1960, there were two elements in the U.S. intelligence community disagreeing on the relative levels of the U.S. and Soviet strategic nuclear forces. One element greatly overstated the level of the Soviet nuclear force. When one looked over the data, it didn't justify this conclusion.

“I have no question but that the Soviets thought we were trying to achieve a first-strike capability. If I had been the Soviet secretary of defense, I'd have been worried as hell at the imbalance of force.”

Robert Strange McNamara is now 66. Born in San Francisco, he graduated from the University of California and received a masters degree in business administration from Harvard. He spent 15 years as an executive of the Ford Motor Co. before becoming secretary of defense in 1961. From 1968 until last year, McNamara was president of the World Bank. He lives in Washington.

A: The way you explain it — and you must understand that I am not justifying it — the way you explain it is by putting yourself in their shoes. When I've done that on several occasions, I must say I would do some things that were very similar to what they did. I'm talking about the action they took to build up their force. Read again my memo to President Kennedy. It scares me today to even read the damn thing: "The Air Force has rather supported the development of forces which provide the United States a first-strike capability credible to the Soviet Union by virtue of our ability to limit damage to the United States and our allies to levels acceptable in light of the circumstances and the alternatives available." My God, if the Soviets thought that was our objective, how would you expect them to react?

Q: When I interviewed Ronald Reagan as a candidate, he said that the problem with that whole calculation — and he mentioned your name and MAD (mutual assured destruction) and everything — is that the Russians are monsters, they don't have the same respect for human life that we do, therefore they could take the 20 million, 30 million or 40 million casualties.

A: The Russians are people that I would not trust to act in other than their own narrow national interest, so I am not naive. But they are not mad. They are not mad. They have suffered casualties, and their government feels responsible to their people to avoid those situations in the future. They are more sensitive to the impact of casualties on their people than we appear to be in some of our statements and analyses of fighting and winning nuclear wars which would extend over a period of months. So they are not mad. They are aggressive; they are ideological; they need to be restrained and contained by the existence of our defensive forces. But they are not mad, and I see no evidence that they would accept the risks associated with a first strike against the United States.