In March 1982, during a briefing on a war game scenario called Ivy League, President Ronald Reagan declared that if he was notified that a Soviet nuclear attack had commenced, he wanted to remain in the Situation Room. “My job is to stay here to try to solve the problem,” he told Pentagon officials. “I’ve looked at these systems,” including presidential succession, Thomas Reed, a former secretary of the Air Force and director of the National Reconnaissance Office, told Mr. Reagan. Continuity of government operations during a nuclear war is “Wizard of Oz-like. It won’t work.”

Mr. Reed was not alone in identifying insuperable challenges embedded in the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. With each superpower armed as strongly as the other, deterrence depended on a never-ending nuclear arms race and a willingness to incur millions of casualties. Because the most likely scenario involved a first strike, delivered in a matter of minutes, which would destroy command-and-control systems and second-strike weapons, making retaliation difficult, delegating to other people (including field commanders) the power to press the nuclear button was deemed necessary. Policymakers, moreover, somehow had to factor in accidents and miscalculations.
Although nuclear deterrence has been credited with preventing another world war, we now know that the Cuban missile crisis was not the only time the world came close to a catastrophic conflagration. In “The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare of 1983,” Marc Ambinder, a former White House correspondent for National Journal, draws on declassified government documents and more than a hundred interviews to tell the story of “Able Archer, 83,” a war game that almost unleashed the nuclear doomsday machines. Along the way, Mr. Ambinder provides chilling details about Cold War intelligence gathering, nuclear codes, the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) of the United States and the White House Emergency Plan (WHEP).

As they listened to encrypted voice traffic, realized formats for release orders had been changed, and observed troop and flight movements in Europe, Soviet commanders, Mr. Ambinder indicates, reported to Moscow, that “Able Archer,” a NATO military “exercise,” could well be a cover for a first strike. The Soviets responded with their own military exercises. “It was just insane,” Steven Schwalbe, a Soviet forces analyst for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, told Mr. Ambinder. With Yuri Andropov, the Soviet premier, near death, “all that you needed for war at that moment was someone to drop a match down in a dry forest.”

Mr. Ambinder maintains that “Able Archer” convinced Mr. Reagan that it was time “for a true turning point.” He asked aides why the Soviets were so misguided about America’s intentions. “While we go on believing, and with some good reason, that the Soviets are plotting against us and mean us harm,” he wrote in his diary, “maybe they are scared of us & think we are a threat.” Determined to clear the air, so that “reducing arms wouldn’t look so impossible to them,” the president, according to Mr. Ambinder, reined in the “evil empire” rhetoric of his administration and launched initiatives that led to his summit meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

“Able Archer,” it is worth noting, was one data point among many that influenced Cold War policymakers in the 1980s. And, although Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev did substantially reduce nuclear weapons, it can be argued that Mr. Reagan did not consistently change his approach to the Soviet Union, from confrontational to accommodating. As Mr. Ambinder writes, he “remained a formidable Cold Warrior,” intent on using an arms race, his signature Strategic Defense Initiative and economic warfare “to squeeze the Soviet system into submission.”

Mr. Ambinder also reminds us that “enough hasn’t changed between 1983 and now.” Vladimir Putin still commands 1,790 active nuclear warheads, and “our best guess” is that Kim Jong Un isn’t really prepared to give up his nukes. We cannot “rule out a reality we may face some day, soon,” Mr. Ambinder concludes, when a president will have to make a decision to launch nuclear weapons, a “power he has only in law and theory,” when in fact its real locus is in a command, control and communications system, “whose soundness and reliability is largely a myth, a just-so story,” designed to give us a sense of comfort that our requirements for mutually assured destruction “work in favor of peace.”

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