

# LIVING IN THE COLD WAR

By John S. Halbert

During the *'Korean War'*, many nights we sat in the living room listening to the big console "short-wave" radio's grim-sounding broadcasts of "Radio Moscow" and "Peiping Radio" from *'Red China'*, with their anti-American propaganda and threats. Hearing all this and watching the newsreels at the movie theater, my mother and my aunts collected used clothes for Korean children, sending them off as "CARE Packages". I went to bed on the last day of 1954 wondering if the next year would bring war. ("Are the Russians coming?") In those days, even nine-year-old American kids took such things seriously. Those *were* serious times---they didn't call it the "Cold War" for nothing.

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Ever since the end of World War II, while one Eastern European country after another was being swallowed up behind the "Iron Curtain"---as Winston Churchill had described the spread of Communism---the Soviet Union, and later, "Red" China, were increasingly using their vast (and growing) military power to threaten America and the rest of the "Free World". In the 'fifties, we watched as Russian tanks smashed the Hungarian "freedom fighters", and one Berlin crisis had followed after another---each having the potential to unleash another world war. By the early-'sixties, the Soviet military was facing us from Cuba, only ninety miles from Florida. At the United Nations, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev angrily shook his fist at the Americans and thundered, "We will bury you!" All of us lived in a constant dread of what the next crisis might bring. The world was embroiled in what came to be known as the "Cold War"---not a shooting war but a war of thrusts and parries by the Americans and its Allies, versus Soviet Russia, backed by its "Warsaw Pact". The times were marked by a continuous arms build-up on both sides---the "NATO" forces led by the United States relying on a technological edge; the Soviets depending on unstoppable masses of men, huge intercontinental rockets, the world's biggest navy---with the control of the world as the ultimate prize. Both sides were armed to the teeth with overwhelming military power far in excess of what would be required to wipe out the entire population of the earth several times over. Another factor was "Red" China, an enigmatic country with the biggest population in the world and a growing military machine that had backed North Korea during the Korean War. Daily, the news reports told of conflicts and collisions between the powers and their surrogates, many times in isolated places.

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Americans had especially been on edge ever since we (and as It turned out, also the Russians) had sweated through the "Cuban Missile Crisis", the closest the United States and the Soviet Union ever came (or would ever come) to all-out nuclear war that would have destroyed most, if not all, civilization on the planet.

In the Fall of 1962, I was in the twelfth grade, at long-last enjoying the benefits of being a senior in high school. Good friends, good times, and I had just been tapped for a leading role in the school play. (*In another few weeks, I would get my start in a long-running broadcasting career.*) So, for me, life was going along just fine. The country was strong; it was prosperous, and seemed to be in generally good shape in this second year of President John F. Kennedy's first term.

Late in the afternoon of October 22<sup>nd</sup>, while I was hanging-out with a friend at his house, his dad came outside where my buddy and I taking shots at his basketball goal. "There's something important on the television!" the man called out to us.

The three of us trooped into their family room where a newscaster was saying that President Kennedy would shortly make an address to the nation concerning a very important matter of national security. "I guess I'd better go home," I said. I remembered it was also my sister's fourteenth birthday; we had a gathering set for the evening.

It was an uneasy dinner; the tone of the announcements that kept coming from the TV in the next room were unsettling. Even my sister seemed to have forgotten her important day---everyone was talking about the upcoming address. A couple of my concerned uncles had telephoned my parents to discuss the matter. What was the President going to say about "national security" that would be so important as to pre-empt the regular television shows. (*In 1962, network television was far and away the most popular and important entertainment medium.*) It sounded ominous.

At the announced time, we gathered around the "Zenith" black-and-white television set. President Kennedy's face, framed by his trademark shock of combed hair, came onto the screen from the "Oval Office" at the White House. In somber tones, the President said that Americans had uncovered the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and that he was ordering a "quarantine" of that island---any ships trying to enter Cuba would be turned back, Kennedy said.

Furthermore, he went on, an attack on any portion of the Western Hemisphere would prompt a "total" response by the United States against the Soviet Union.

Those of us in the room looked around at each other, frowning. "This could be war," my dad muttered.

The next day at school, all talk was about the Cuban missiles. In several classrooms, the regular lessons were taking second-place to the TVs that were following heated discourse taking place at the United Nations. The American Ambassador was pointing at enlarged pictures of sites he was claiming were Soviet rockets and their launch pads. He said they would be operational in a few days.

At sea, a convoy of Russian freighters carrying nuclear rockets, shepherded by warships of the Soviet Navy, were headed toward an encounter with units of the U.S. Navy. President Kennedy stated that the ships would be stopped. In Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev angrily said that if the Americans so much as tried to touch the freighters, a shooting war would break out on the high seas. Kennedy re-iterated that the Russian ships would be stopped; Khrushchev repeated his warning that any interference with the freighters whatsoever would result in an all-out nuclear war with the United States. In the meantime, the launch pads for the missiles were nearing

completion.

*All during this time, as it was later disclosed, trains bearing troops, tanks and other weapons were rushing toward South Florida. All United States nuclear forces were on "Full-Alert". At sea, as was later revealed, four Soviet attack submarines were on station, their torpedo tubes aimed at the American navy ships with orders to sink the Americans---whose forces consisted of an aircraft carrier and other warships---if they tried to intercept the Russian freighters. (The Americans were not aware of the submarines' presence.) At Pletsetsk, in Northern Russia, and at Baikonur, in Soviet Kazakhstan, two "Strategic Rocket Forces" Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles---"ICBMs"---both bearing Fifty-Megaton nuclear warheads, each, were fueled and ready to launch at their targets of New York City and Chicago, U.S.A (The detonation of such warheads, aside from destroying everything within dozens of miles, would have rendered the landscape uninhabitable for perhaps hundreds of years.)*

At church that Sunday, some friends and I talked in strained tones about the developments. Things were looking so serious that we did not know if we would even be alive the next day. It was the sort of conversation that was going on all across the country, and, indeed, around the world.

But later in that same day, Sunday, October 28, Khrushchev announced that the Soviets would dismantle the rocket launchers and take the missiles back to Russia. The Americans agreed to not invade Cuba and would also take down some missiles from Turkey. The crisis was over.

Following the easing of the Cuban situation, during somewhat of a lull, we signed a new nuclear treaty with the Soviets and a Moscow-Washington "Hot-Line" was set up to keep communications open. But at the same time, the nightly TV newscasts told us of Communist-backed political and military unrest in faraway places with strange-sounding names such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

While all this was going on, Americans (and as it turned out, the Russians, too) became obsessed with "Civil Defense"---protection of the people on the homefront. Television commercials exhorted citizens to buy this-or-that brand of "fallout shelter", on the assumption that if nuclear war broke out, the only effective measure to avoid being killed by radioactive "fallout", was to be holed-up in your own fallout shelter in one's backyard. We were told that the Soviets had a fallout shelter assignment for each and every one of its citizens, and it was incumbent for every American to at least match the zeal of their Russian counterparts.

The Department of Defense instituted a national fallout shelter program whereby buildings and other structures that met the criteria of being able to fend off radioactive particles that would result from nuclear explosions were stocked with foods, medicines and other items that would be necessary for a specified number of people to survive for an extended period of time in such close quarters. There was an easily-recognized fallout shelter symbol, promoted by public service announcements on TV and in the print media identifying such locations, that became familiar to all Americans.

During that time I became a Fallout Shelter Manager Training instructor. After a course that I took from the Defense Department and the University of Alabama, I taught several sections of classes leading to qualifying people to manage fallout shelters. It might seem prosaic, but cramming perhaps hundreds of people into a tight space for weeks on end meant that many issues would arise, and a designated, trained person with absolute authority would be necessary to keep order. The part that got these student-managers' attention the most was that should an individual or individuals cause problems that might affect the overall safety of the others, it was perfectly acceptable to throw those people outside to face the radiation or, if necessary, to *kill them*.

In the late-'sixties, these were real issues on the minds of Americans.

The backdrop to all this was the seemingly never-ending war that kept grinding on in Vietnam, pulling a whole generation of young men into the military draft. In 1966, student deferments, upon which I, and untold numbers of other college-age young men depended to keep out of the clutches of the "Selective Service's" conscription, was cancelled. Along with millions of others, I received my dreaded "Greetings from the President". As it stated, "---a body of your neighbors has selected you for induction into the United States Armed Forces. You are commanded to appear at---" and it gave a date and time for me to get onto a bus to be taken, along with several dozen others, to Montgomery for a "Pre-Induction Physical Examination". As it turned out, a bad ankle from an injury that had happened several years earlier kept me out of the war. But the draft became a *cause célèbre* for student demonstrators and others who opposed the American involvement in Vietnam.

As the casualty and prisoner-of-war lists grew longer, most Americans would, in due time, come to know someone personally who had died over there and/or who had been seriously wounded or otherwise adversely affected. The student riots of 1968 onward reflected the tension and frustration that was dividing the country into "pro-war" and "anti-war" factions. The appalling assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy that year left many Americans wondering what the country was coming to. The dissension peaked with the 1968 Presidential Election as Lyndon Johnson, who had become politically hamstrung by the war, did not seek re-election. Riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that hot summer, quelled forcefully by the local police, seemed to define the tempo of the times. Richard Nixon was elected on a promise to get the U.S. out of Vietnam, but it was some years, during which time the infamous '*Watergate*' scandal took over politics in 1972 and lasted until Nixon was eventually forced from office. A short time later the Americans withdrew from the war in Southeast Asia.

While the Watergate crisis lurched toward its climax, in 1973 President Nixon gave an outdoor speech before a crowd of thousands in Huntsville, Alabama. Since I had a "Press-Pass" from the TV station where I worked at the time, I managed to get a seat only a couple of dozen feet from the podium. The Chief Executive gave an inspiring, un-scripted "motherhood-and-apple-pie" pep-talk about Americanism that was well-received. It wasn't long, however, before the Watergate net began to close around the beleaguered President and a year later, he resigned.

A long-running story that started in the mid-'fifties and continued throughout the Cold War

was a perceived (and endlessly proclaimed) so-called “missile-gap” that supposedly favored the Soviet Union. Almost daily, Americans read and heard how the Soviet military-oriented space program consistently launched huge manned spaceships and other satellites far larger and heavier than our U.S. rockets could lift, and that their nuclear missiles were bigger and more accurate than those we Americans deployed. Soviet nuclear bombers, testing U.S. defenses, regularly flew provocative missions up and down the coasts of the United States from bases in both the USSR and Cuba. North Korea captured a U.S. Navy surveillance ship in International waters and imprisoned its crew. Another such ship was sunk in the eastern Mediterranean. There were two wars involving Israel and its Arab neighbors, with the United States siding with and providing military assistance to the Israelis. Over time many Americans developed an almost fatalistic resignation that someday there would be a nuclear war that would end all civilization. It seemed as if we were always looking over our shoulders for the latest threat.

By the mid-‘sixties, such influences were doing their part to drive a steady re-structuring of social codes into a new, more permissive society.

A bright day for Americans came in July, 1969, when two fellow countrymen made the first manned landing on the moon, successfully culminating a decade-long race versus the Russians as to whose side would get there first. As articulated by President Kennedy in 1961, it had been a national objective that had caught everyone's imagination and enthusiasm and had harnessed a broad range of American industry and ingenuity. What made it even more satisfying was that the moon landing came after stumbling, frustrating beginnings, as along the way new American space hardware sometimes suffered calamitous malfunctions, even to blowing up in full view of the world. These and other setbacks, such as when three astronauts died in a spaceship fire on the launch pad in 1967, were overcome by strenuous and persistent efforts, even as Russian rockets kept up their relentless space spectacles as part of their own moon-landing program that ultimately was unable to achieve their purpose of landing Russians onto earth's evocative natural satellite.

Also in the summer of 1969, a gigantic and, as it turned out, iconic, "rock 'n roll" concert that lasted several days drew hundreds of thousands of pop-music enthusiasts to a farm-field near Woodstock, New York. There, open-air sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll were the norm while anti-war music filled the air in a non-stop orgy of anti-establishment entertainment mixed with politics.

Throughout those times, Americans had to contend with the continuous drumbeat of threats from abroad and the contentious splitting of the political and social fabric at home. Watching the ever-growing power and influence of the Soviet Union and "Red" China, along with paramilitary movements that sprang up in Central and South America, much of which was prodded by Cuba and their Soviet allies, left Americans wondering if there would ever be a respite. We were told that the Soviet Union would have to disappear before any such resolution could happen, a prospect that seemed impossible. How could the world's biggest country's strong (and aggressive-acting) military vanish, or at least, tone back the threats?

Then, in 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and the thick Communist political quest to dominate the world first began to thin, then it evaporated entirely by late-1991. The Soviet Union broke into several disparate countries and there was a marked lessening of tension. The Cold War, that had lasted for over four conflict-filled decades, was over.

