commentary and analysis

Computer failure

Nukes in delicate position

Vance   Muskie

By Thomas Jessiman

NEW YORK—*It sounds like a scenario out of* On the Beach. *Soviet land-based missiles and submarine nuclear missiles are launched and head for key sites in the United States. American computers pick up the missiles from visual and audio receptors and alert the Defense Department.*

In minutes, strategic bomber crews are dispatched to planes and start the engines, battle-control aircraft are readied for take-off and one in Hawaii is ordered into the air. Silo-based missiles are brought closer to the stage of firing. Generals prepare to bring the forces up to the next alert level.

"Could it happen?" books make for entertaining summer reading, but either because we hate to think too much about it or because we simply forget, we seldom dwell on the idea of a nuclear holocaust. Perhaps we are numbed by figures in the media that compare the tens of times America and the Soviet Union can devastate the earth's surface. We grow accustomed to nuclear annihilation looming like a dark cloud high overhead.

But that distant threat became very vivid recently when the scenario described above nearly happened—and much more could have.

Due to two errors by the computers of the North Atlantic Air Defense Command, the conclusion was reached that the Soviets had launched nuclear missiles—some of which could have found their mark in just 15 minutes. It took three minutes for American generals to confirm the error and by that time our forces had been put on the higher stage of alert.

The Pentagon was quick to point out that numerous checks are incorporated into our defense system to prevent a computer from "pushing the button" itself. But the fact that this is the second time in seven months that a computer mix-up has caused an alert tends to undercut that confidence. In the first occurrence, a technician running a test tape through a computer accidentally funneled the information into live channels.

But beyond the issue of whether the Pentagon can control itself is the possibility that the Soviets might react to an American alert with one of their own. Fortunately, this time that did not happen.

Soviet warning systems and and computer technology are less well-developed than America's, and 75 percent of their nuclear strike force is based on land—much more vulnerable to attack than the better-balanced land-based, airborne and seaborne U.S. forces. For these reasons and others, the Soviets need to react fast to an American alert and have less time to confirm data. Under this pressure they would be more likely to make mistaken judgments with terrible consequences.

No matter how much they downplay the incident, the people at the Pentagon clearly were worried. At first, an effort was made to keep the incident secret and later, when asked if the computer mistake might have touched off escalating responses on both the American and Soviet sides, Assistant Secretary of Defense Tomas B. Ross said, "I'm going to duck that question."

All this comes at a time when the concept of nuclear control has been arrested with the shelving of SALT II by the president and Congress. Today such an action can only be deplored. And even more ridiculous than the reality that a computer mix-up could cause World War III is that we should be placed at the mercy of these nuclear warheads in the first place.

Of course, we must make the Soviets understand that their aggression in Afghanistan will never be condoned. We have done that at least symbolically with the Olympic boycott and the grain embargo. And perhaps it was necessary to break ties for a while after the invasion, but it is now time to separate Afghanistan from the issue of an arms pact and to talk.

No doubt the Senate will want to make changes in the SALT II treaty, but opponents of an arms pact of any kind show a dangerous myopia. Limits on further growth of Soviet strategic forces and number of warheads on a particular missile, as well as means of verification of nuclear strength, are integral to any hope of checking the madness of a nuclear arms race.

As Cyrus Vance, former secretary of state, pointed out in a recent speech, the failure to reach an accord over nuclear arms will have a serious effect on non-nuclear countries. These nations will have less reason for their own restraint. Vance asked congressmen and the president to look beyond re-election considerations: "I am aware of the political difficulties in acting at this time. But if we fail to act we will someday ask ourselves why we were blinded by considerations of the moment and lost a vital long-term opportunity."

Apparently someone in the White House listened to Vance, because the next day Secretary of State Edmund Muskie stressed the need for ratification of the treaty. "The two issues (Afghanistan and SALT II) are separable." Muskie rightly pointed out how the confrontation over Afghanistan ought to make us more eager to control arms and ensure our national security rather than abandon all the work that has been done before. It seems we always will live with nuclear warheads pointed at our homes, but perhaps before we rush headlong into the endless tunnel of an arms race we should reconsider for a moment.

These days most people worry about dying of heart disease or cancer. It seems remarkable that actually our fate may lie with a malfunction of a computer. The more missiles we build, the greater the chance for mistakes and foul-ups. Clearly, tough as it may be in election year, we should avoid pouring money into more nuclear warheads at all costs—else *On the Beach* will become much more than just pleasant summer reading.

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the week at a glance   by Elliott Warnock

Trial begins

The wheels of justice often turn slowly, and in Greensboro they are grinding slower than usual.

Supporters of the Communist Workers Party helped throw a wrench in the judicial machinery Monday at the opening of the trial of six Ku Klux Klansmen and members of the American Nazi Party. The six are charged with murdering five communist workers last Nov. 3.

Four communist supporters were arrested outside the Greensboro courtroom after they fought with police. The demonstrators had gathered in the hall outside the courtroom to denounce the trail after Superior Court Judge James Long ordered the courtroom cleared of "those persons that are disturbing the court."

Jury selection for the trial is expected to take five weeks.

Soweto still troubled

While some people in the United States are trying to prophesize where the "next Miami" will be, South Africa is still suffering through the same racial violence as years ago.

Four years after the riots in Soweto, at least 15 persons were killed and more than 50 wounded Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in clashes with South Africa police. The violence was widespread over South Africa, with riots sparked off in Soweto, Johannesburg and Cape Town, on the fourth anniversary of riots in Soweto in which hundreds of black and mixed-race South Africans were killed by police.

Soviets troubled in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan has gotten more costly for the Soviet Union recently. Soviet warplanes penetrated Pakistani airspace, according to a Pakistani official Monday, and Moslem rebels claim to have shot down another two Soviet helicopters this week.

Urban guerrillas in Kabul are daily assassinating an average of 10 members of the Soviet-backed ruling party, according to Western diplomatic sources.

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt will visit Moscow later this month. Schmidt told the West German Parliament Tuesday that he would try to "use every opportunity" to ease international tensions," and said he would follow a line "which we consulted with our friends and allies."

Schmidt will make the trip June 30, after a meeting in Venice with leaders from France, Great Britain, Japan, Italy, Canada and the United States.

President Carter leaves today for the Venice summit.

The meeting in Venice will be concerned mostly with economic issues, but will cover broad political and strategic problems. It is the sixth such economic meeting in six years, but it will be the first to encompass political issues.

Carter to go to summit

When President Carter arrives in Venice, he will be facing some of the members of the European Common Market, which voted Sunday to recognize "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" and called for a role for the PLO in Mideast peace talks.

The United States continually has opposed participation of the PLO as long as it refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist. Israel, still stalled in talks with Egypt over self-rule for Palestinians living on the West Bank, denounced the Common Market resolution.

Carter was host Tuesday to Jordan's King Hussein. It was Hussein's first visit to the United States in three years.

Hussein said Tuesday that he was committed to peace in the Middle East, but said he and Carter still have "differences . . . regarding the route we take. There are doubts about the prospects for peace."

Computer failure

The Pentagon announced Tuesday that recent computer problems leading to two recent false alarms about Soviet missile attacks (see Thomas Jessiman's column above) were caused by failure of a tiny circuit "about the size of a dime."

It brings to mind former astronaut John Glenn's comment years ago about what he thought about while waiting for launch in a space capsule. All he could think about, he said, was that every piece of equipment in his capsule was manufactured "by the cheapest bidder on a government contract."

Only $209 million

A government review stated Tuesday that the Social Security payments to retirees and survivors in 1978-79 were "better than 99.7 percent error-free."

If that margin of error is correct, then the Social Security office misspent $209 million in payments from October 1978 to September 1979.

A Social Security spokesman said about 50 percent of the incorrect payments went to college students who received money after leaving school without notifying the government.

Reagon leading race

Ronald Reagan is leading the race for the presidency, according to Gallup and Roper polls released this week.

The Gallup poll, released Monday, shows Reagan leading Carter 45 percent to 42 percent. If the race included independent John Anderson, then Reagan would get 36 percent.

The Roper poll, released Tuesday, shows that Reagan would beat Carter 40-to-36, with 24 percent of the voters undecided. With Anderson in the race, Reagan would get 34 percent, Carter 29 percent and Anderson 20 percent, with 17 percent undecided.

Anderson supporters in North Carolina have something to be happy about. The N.C. Board of Elections said Tuesday that Anderson virtually is assured of a spot on the N.C. ballot in November.

The board accepted petitions containing signatures of 19,400 registered voters, almost double the necessary number for approval.

Iran

And in Iran Wednesday, the U.S. hostages suffered through Day 228 of their captivity.