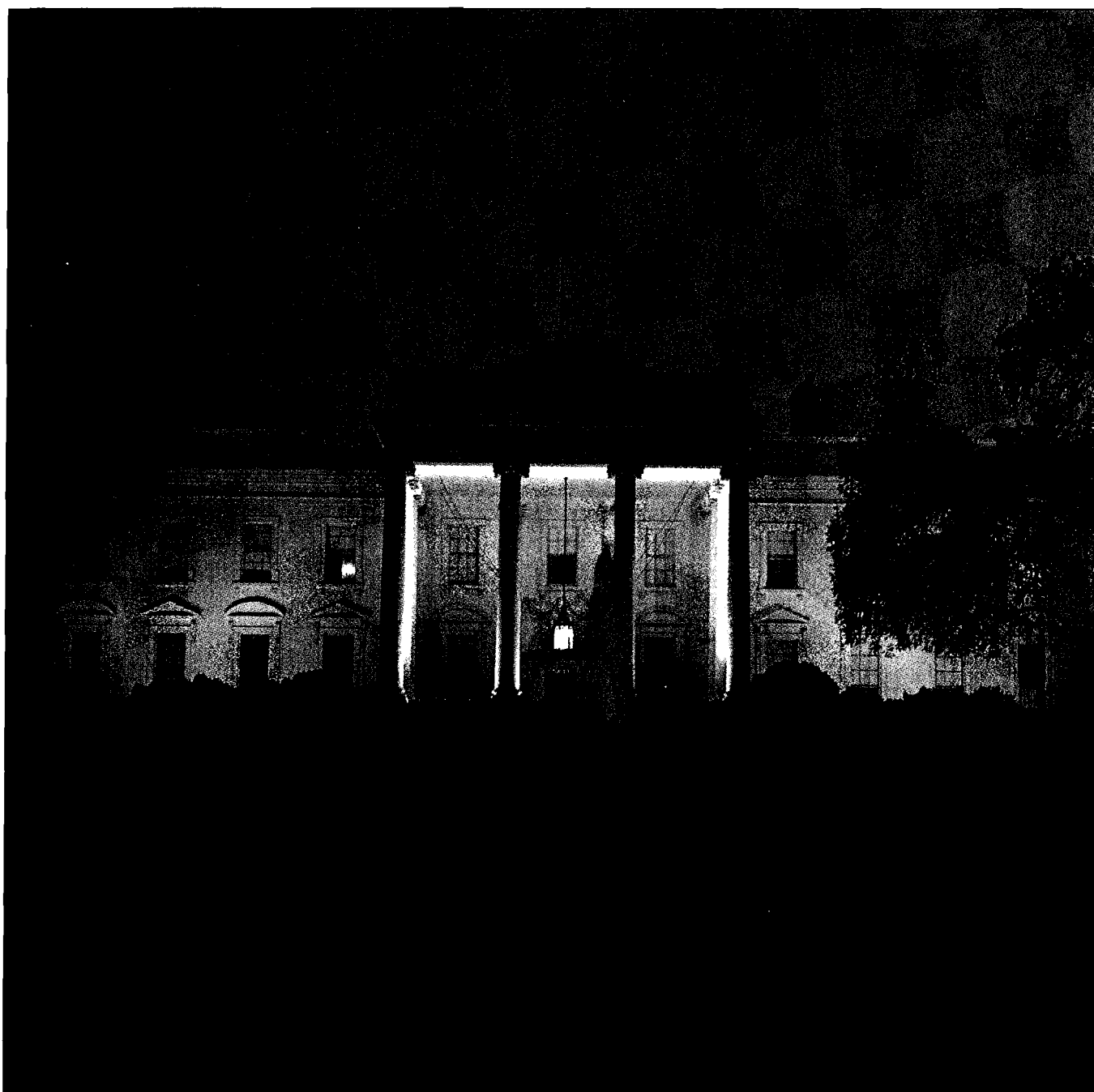


The Looking Glass War

*TO DEFINE THE CHARACTER OF SOVIET OR AMERICAN MILITARY ACTIONS, TRY A MIRROR.
BY S. PLOUS AND PHILIP G. ZIMBARDO*



They are the focus of evil in the modern world. [It is a mistake] to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil.

—President Ronald Reagan, March 8, 1983

If anyone today undertook to draw up tables of evil, I assure you that for the U. S. such a table would be very long.

—Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, April 2, 1983

In the next minute the nations of the world together will spend an average of more than \$1 million arming themselves—their military expenditures for 1984 will exceed the combined



incomes of the poorest half of all people on Earth.

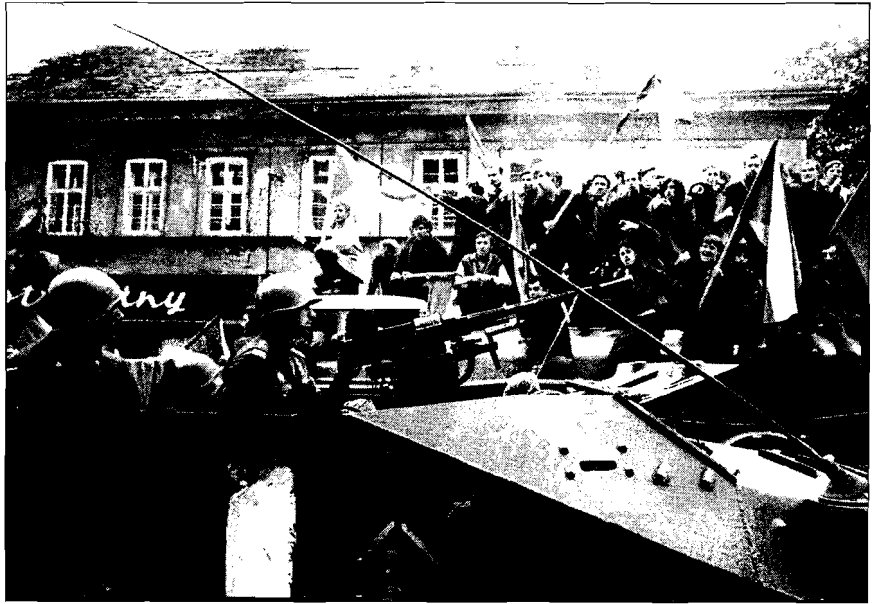
Why? What is the arms race all about?

Often we hear that the arms race is a struggle between capitalism and communism, between right and wrong, between good and evil. Shortly after the Soviets shot down a Korean passenger jet in September 1983, for example, Reagan said, "There are too many people who heretofore have seen the Soviets as a mirror image of ourselves. . . . Well, I believe that there must be many people today who now have a different view and who recognize that while you can't just break off and ignore them, you have to deal with them with the knowledge of how they think and what they are."

Fundamental to this position is the assumption that "how they think and what they are" is very different from how we think and what we are. Usually when we learn that a superpower has taken a military action, we know which country acted and use this fact to evaluate whether the act was justified. But if Soviet behavior is markedly different from American behavior, then we should be able to tell the difference between Soviet and American military actions by the quality of the actions themselves. If it is difficult or impossible to discriminate between unlabeled Soviet and American actions, it is unlikely that global conflict can accurately be described as a struggle between good and evil.

To test how well people can recognize Soviet and American actions we asked *Psychology Today* readers to complete the "Conquest Test," a 10-item quiz that appeared in the July issue. The 10 questions featured descriptions of major military events or conflicts, involving the United States or the Soviet Union, with all identifying labels removed. For each description, readers decided whether "Superpower A" was the United States or the Soviet Union, and indicated how confident they were of their answers.

The first four questions depicted well-known historical conflicts, selected and described by Barton J. Bernstein, a Stanford historian and expert on postwar Soviet-American relations. Bernstein had no knowledge of how the descriptions would be used. The last six items probed readers' knowledge of the arms race more generally, covering arms control, nuclear testing



Prague, 1968: 46 percent of respondents blamed the U. S. for invading.

**CAN WE
ACCURATELY
DESCRIBE THE ARMS RACE
AS A STRUGGLE BETWEEN
RIGHT AND WRONG,
BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL?**

and weapons stockpiles. (For the original questions, correct answers and the percentage of readers who answered each item correctly, see "A Key to Conquest.")

We received and analyzed 3,500 completed surveys within a one-month period from almost equal numbers of men and women. Their average age was 39, though the range varied from 10 years old to 94 years old. More than 90 percent of those who responded said that they were registered to vote: 44 percent as Democrats, 27 percent as Republicans, 29 percent as independents or members of another party. About 75 percent of the readers had completed college or graduate school; the remaining quarter had not continued beyond high school.

Overall, then, those who responded were not representative of most Amer-

icans. By their own reports, they were more politically involved and more educated than the general public—just the people we might expect to score highest on the Conquest Test.

"My answers have proved to be completely inconsistent," wrote a 26-year-old woman who answered four questions correctly. "Thank you for forcing me to realize that I have more knee-jerk reactions than I realized." In fact her test score was fairly typical. Out of 10 questions, readers averaged 4.9 correct answers. Theoretically, flipping a coin for each question would yield an average of five correct answers.

This is not to say that people answered randomly on each question. If they had, half of the readers would have answered each question correctly, half incorrectly. Instead, we see that readers tended to do better than chance on some questions and worse than chance on others. However, the real issue is not whether readers did better than chance on any one question, but how they did compared to chance on all 10 questions. We can find out by comparing the distribution of "successes" (that is, correct answers) on the Conquest Test to the distribution of successes (say, tossing heads) after flipping a coin 10 times. These two distributions are shown in the chart "Chance Encounters." The two distributions are so similar that if the 10 questions on the Conquest Test are representative of Soviet and American

<h1 style="text-align: center;">A KEY TO CONQUEST</h1> <p>QUESTION</p>	<p>SUPERPOWER A</p>	<p>PERCENTAGE OF READERS WHO ANSWERED CORRECTLY</p>	<p>NOTE</p>
<p>1) In the late 1950s, Superpower A decided to deploy a small number of intermediate-range nuclear weapons in a country near Superpower B. At the time, Superpower B publicly objected to the scheduled deployment, labeling it an aggressive act and calling for cancellation of the future deployment. A few years later, the missiles were deployed despite the protests by Superpower B.</p>	<p><i>United States</i></p>	<p>62</p>	<p>Deployment and removal of Jupiter missiles in Turkey, c. January 1962 to c. January 1963</p>
<p>2) The government of a country not far from Superpower A, after discussing certain changes in its party system, began broadening its trade with Superpower B. To reverse these changes in government and trade, Superpower A sent its troops into the country and militarily backed the original government.</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>54</p>	<p>Invasion of Czechoslovakia, August 1968</p>
<p>3) In the 1960s, Superpower A sponsored a surprise invasion of a small country near its border, with the purpose of overthrowing the regime in power at the time. The invasion failed, and most of the original invading forces were killed or imprisoned.</p>	<p><i>United States</i></p>	<p>75</p>	<p>Invasion, Bay of Pigs, Cuba, April 1961</p>
<p>4) During the 1950s, after the people of a small country took to the streets to protest the harshness of their government, Superpower A intervened militarily to prevent the incipient rebellion within the smaller country.</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>66</p>	<p>Invasion of Hungary, November 1956</p>
<p>5) Although Superpower A now has approximately 50 percent more nuclear warheads than Superpower B, the weapons Superpower B has are roughly twice as powerful in explosive yield.</p>	<p><i>United States</i></p>	<p>32</p>	<p>Recent, higher estimates of Soviet stockpiles had little effect on readers' answers to this question.</p>
<p>6) A former leader of Superpower A said about nuclear war, "The survivors would envy the dead."</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>30</p>	<p>Nikita S. Khrushchev, 1962</p>
<p>7) A study commissioned by the Pentagon revealed that Superpower A has used military force in foreign countries 115 times since 1945, whereas Superpower B has done so 215 times.</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>36</p>	<p>Source: Brookings Institution study, 1976</p>
<p>8) In the last decade, Superpower A has conducted more than 40 percent more nuclear tests than Superpower B.</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>52</p>	<p>Source: Herbert York, <i>Scientific American</i>, 1983</p>
<p>9) In 1980, Superpower A surpassed Superpower B in weapon contracts as well as in deliveries to the Third World, for the first time in history.</p>	<p><i>Soviet Union</i></p>	<p>56</p>	<p>Source: Center for Defense Information, 1984</p>
<p>10) After 25 years of negotiations, Superpower A withdrew from further talks on a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.</p>	<p><i>United States</i></p>	<p>29</p>	<p>Reagan Administration withdrawal, July 1982</p>

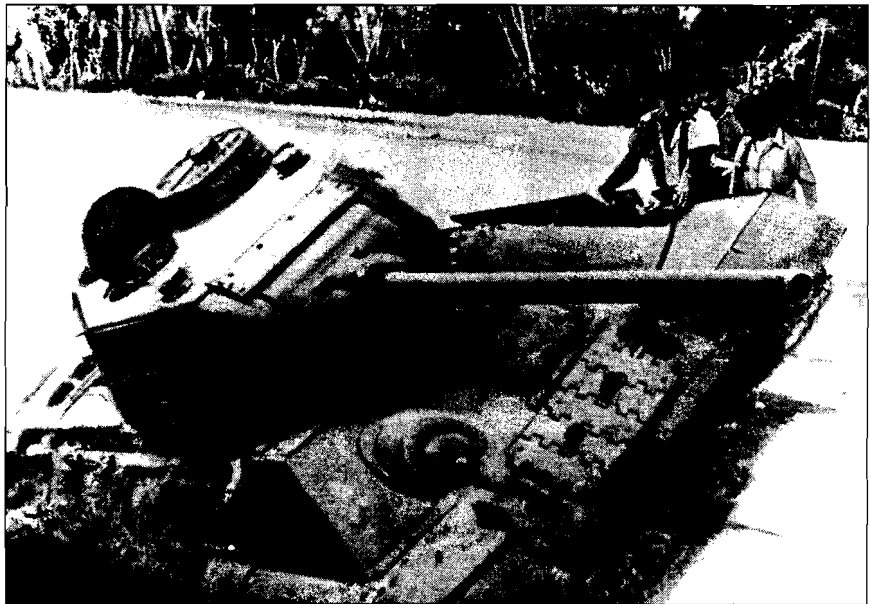
READERS'
CONFIDENCE
IN THEIR ANSWERS HAD
VIRTUALLY NOTHING
TO DO WITH THEIR
ACCURACY.

conduct, we can reasonably conclude that most readers did no better than chance at distinguishing between the two nations by their actions alone.

Did the questions accurately describe historical conflicts or were they written in a way that made identification impossible? Three self-identified professors of history and two high-ranking political aides returned the survey. With only two mistakes on the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the politicians and historians scored nearly perfect on the first four conflicts, which suggests that the descriptions contain enough information for readers to answer the questions correctly.

How did other readers do? Thirty-eight percent mistook the deployment of missiles in Turkey for a Soviet action, 46 percent pegged the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as an American act, 25 percent misidentified the Bay of Pigs invasion as Soviet and 34 percent incorrectly attributed the invasion of Hungary to the United States. This works out to an average error rate of 36 percent.

While this error rate is better than what we would expect from chance, it does not necessarily mean that readers overall were able to tell the difference between unlabeled Soviet and American actions. As in the responses from the politicians and historians, for some readers the conflicts were so well known that they could identify the countries involved, not by the quality of the actions described, but by the specific actions themselves. When we analyzed the responses from readers younger than 30, who were not adults when these conflicts took place, the error rate for the four historical items tops 46 percent. On the six nonhistorical questions, readers younger than 30



UPI/BETMANN ARCHIVE

Cuba, 1961: 75 percent of respondents correctly fingered the U. S.

did just as well as those older than 30.

For many readers, the first four questions described recurrent patterns of global conflict. Identifying the third country involved in these conflicts, readers named a variety of international hot spots, including Afghanistan, Poland, Lebanon, Iran, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Grenada, Chile, the Dominican Republic and Vietnam. Several commented to the effect that "There were a lot of these, on both sides. Most of these could be either country, anytime or neither." One reader even clipped an editorial from *The Detroit News* that read in part, "They invaded Afghanistan, but we invaded Grenada, which was regarded by the U. S. public as a rescue mission. The Russians shot down a Korean jetliner, but we mined Nicaraguan harbors. Their expansion threatens us, but what about our European warheads? We boycotted their Olympics, so why was it such a shock when they decided to boycott our Olympics? Why is it that we fail to see that they are humans?"

Though well-educated adults were unable to systematically identify Soviet and American actions, an important question remains: Were they aware of their inability or were they confident of their answers? After each question, readers rated their confidence on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 9 (completely confident). Taking all 10 questions into account, the average confidence rating for all readers was

6.4. Almost 90 percent of those who responded had average confidence ratings in the upper half of the scale, and fewer than 2 percent averaged less than 3 on the 9-point scale. On balance then, it appears that people were considerably more confident than they would have been had they flipped a coin for each answer, even though the range of scores would have been largely the same.

Still, we might wonder whether someone who was completely confident of one answer and not at all confident of another answer was more likely to answer the first question correctly than the second. To explore this possibility, we calculated the correlation between accuracy and confidence for each reader. Correlation, a statistical measure of how strongly two things are related, can range from +1.00, when one variable always increases as the other increases, to -1.00, when one variable increases as the other decreases. A correlation of 0.00 means that the variables are not related in either way.

The average correlation between confidence and accuracy on the Conquest Test was very close to zero, meaning that readers' confidence in their answers had virtually nothing to do with their accuracy. Moreover, the 56 people who got nine or more questions correct were no more confident on average than their less successful colleagues.

What about those readers who were



ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM



VAHNE MILLER/MAGNUM

Kennedy and Krushchev, 1963: "We do not want war."

highly confident readers wanted increases in defense spending as did less confident readers, and nearly twice as many said that the Soviet government cannot be trusted at all.

"No agreements with the U.S.S.R. can be trusted," wrote a 48-year-old man who was highly confident of his answers. "They will secretly produce arms to gain military superiority and advance communism in the world."

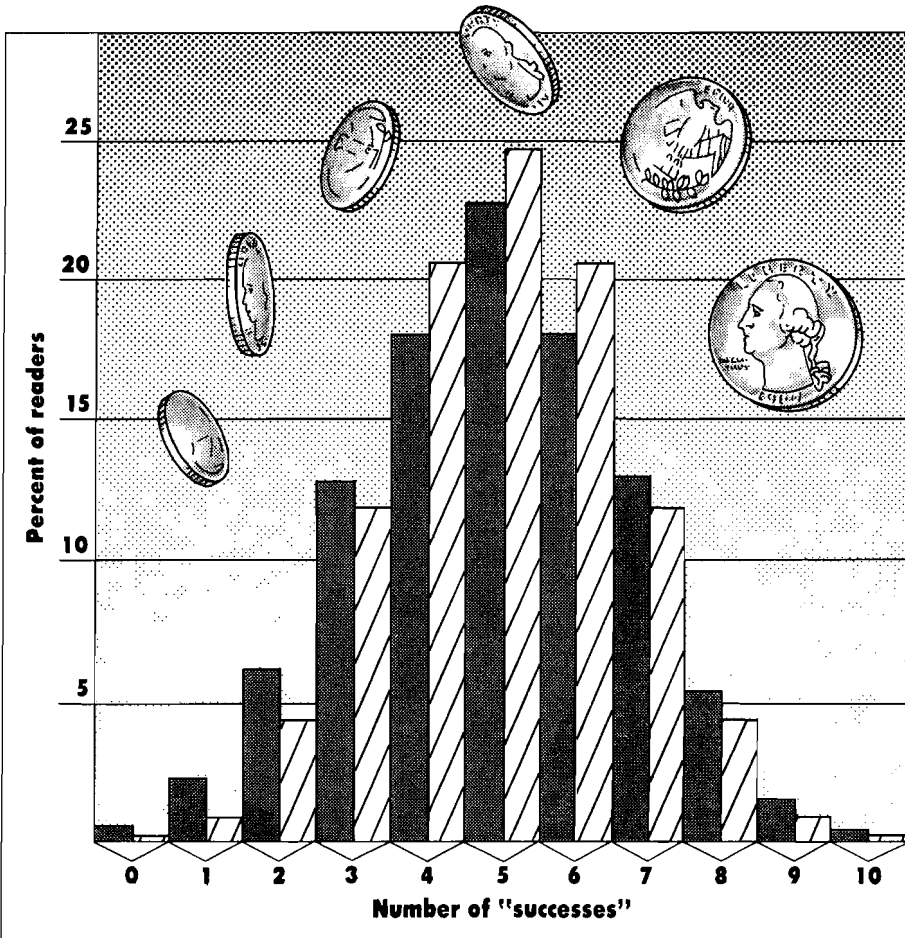
How did these highly confident readers do on the Conquest Test? They averaged 5.1 correct answers out of 10, almost identical to what we would expect by chance. Just as the readers who did best on the test were not unusually confident, the most-confident readers were not unusually accurate on the Conquest Test.

In general, men did slightly better on most questions and were more confident of their answers than were women. Consistent with many public-opinion polls, the proportion of men favoring increases in defense spending was more than the proportion of women favoring increased spending. When asked which superpower had been more aggressive militarily since the end of World War II, women more often responded that the United States

nearly certain they could tell Soviet and American actions apart? How did they differ from readers who were less confident of their answers?

Two hundred seventy-six people averaged more than 8 points on the confidence scale. Two-thirds were male, and 80 percent were more than 30

years old. They were not more educated than the rest and did not differ in reported voter registration or political-party affiliation. But their opinions on defense spending and their perceptions of the Soviet Union were markedly different from those of less confident readers. Twice as many of the



Chance Encounters

The chart suggests that, overall, readers could have done just as well on the Conquest Test if they had flipped a coin for each answer. Each gray bar shows the percentage of readers who got that number of answers correct, from 10 down to 0. Compare these to the striped bars, which illustrate what we'd expect to happen if each person flipped a coin 10 times. Each bar gives the percentage of readers who would get that number of heads, from 10 down to 0. The similarity between the two sets of bars means that readers did no better than chance in distinguishing between Soviet and American actions.

- Number of correct answers on conquest test
- Number of heads after flipping a coin 10 times



ERIC LESSING/MAGNUM

Hungary, 1956: 66 percent of respondents recognized the Soviets.

and the Soviet Union had been equally aggressive. And while *Psychology Today* readers are not representative of all Americans, it is interesting to note that for every man or woman who said that the Soviet Union had been more aggressive, four others pointed the finger at the United States. One 23-year-old man even declared, "With everything we hear now in the news, I trust our government less than the Soviets'."

In a section that followed the Conquest Test, we asked readers to evaluate four possible directions that the arms race could take: the United States and the Soviet Union significantly reduce their nuclear arsenals; only the United States makes significant reductions; only the Soviet Union makes significant reductions; both countries continue on their present courses. Readers estimated the consequences of these four scenarios, first for the United States, and then from the perspective of a Soviet citizen, for the Soviet Union.

Eighty percent of all respondents said that mutual disarmament would

FOR EVERY
READER WHO SAID
THE U.S.S.R. HAD
BEEN MORE AGGRESSIVE,
FOUR OTHERS BLAMED
THE U.S.

have even better consequences for the United States than if the Soviets unilaterally disarmed. Some readers cited the economic burden posed by maintaining nuclear stockpiles, others thought that superiority on either side would be destabilizing and still others said that without mutual disarmament, nuclear war was inevitable.

The Conquest Test was designed to test the common theory that the arms

race continues as a result of a struggle between one country with an international record of evil behavior and another country with an international record of noble behavior. Despite their high confidence, readers could not discriminate between unlabeled Soviet and American military actions. Even groups we might expect to do well, including members of the military and the academic communities, did not stray far from the five correct answers expected by chance.

We might be tempted to conclude that readers had trouble identifying American and Soviet actions because the test items were somehow biased or deliberately deceptive. A trick question, however, should be uniformly missed with high confidence, which was not the case with any of the items on the test. The first four conflicts were chosen by an expert who had no idea how the descriptions would be used, so it is unlikely that these questions were biased. The remaining items sampled a broad range of topics, but performance on these questions did not differ greatly from perfor-

THE DOPPELGANGER EFFECT

That *Psychology Today* readers could not systematically distinguish between Soviet and American conduct on the Conquest Test suggests that a "mirror image" exists between the two nations' military actions. The following quotations show that this phenomenon is present not only in their actions but in their words.

We do not want a war. We do not now expect a war. This generation of Americans has already had enough—more than enough—of war and hate and oppression. We shall be prepared if others wish it. We shall be alert to try to stop it.

—John F. Kennedy, June 1963

Potential enemies must know that we will respond to whatever degree is required to protect our interests. They must also know that they will only worsen their situation by escalating the level of violence.

—Richard M. Nixon, February 1971

The first use of atomic weapons might very well quickly lead to a rapid and uncontrolled escalation in the use of even more powerful weapons with possibly a worldwide holocaust resulting.

—Jimmy Carter, July 1977

There is no difference between the Soviets now and Hitler then, except that the Soviets are stronger.

—Eugene V. Rostow, former director, U. S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in the *Los Angeles Times*, September 1981

We do not want war. Nor, on the other hand, do we fear it. If war should be forced upon us, we shall know how to rebuff the aggressors in the most decisive fashion. Of this the aggressors are fully aware.

—Nikita S. Krushchev, January 1963

The potential aggressor should know: A crushing retaliatory strike will inevitably be in for him. Our might and vigilance will cool, I think, the hot heads of some imperialist politicians.

—Leonid I. Brezhnev, November 1982

The first time one of those things is fired in anger, everything is lost. The warring nations would never be able to put matters back together.

—Leonid I. Brezhnev, October 1978

While Hitler's policies led to World War II, Reagan's threaten to lead to a nuclear war in which all earthly life might be destroyed.

—Boris Ponomarev, secretary, Central Committee of the Soviet Union, November 1983

ACTIONS DUBBED
'DEFENSIVE' BY
US CAN APPEAR AGGRESSIVE
TO REASONABLE PEOPLE,
BE THEY SOVIET LEADERS OR
PSYCHOLOGY TODAY
READERS.

mance on the historical items once readers' ages had been taken into account.

The results of the Conquest Test support the conclusion that a "mirror image" exists between Soviet and American military conduct and posture (see "The Doppelganger Effect"). While there are major differences between how the United States and the Soviet Union conduct their domestic affairs, the results of this survey paint a different picture of the international arena: Policies and actions dubbed "defensive" by us can appear aggressive and expansionistic to reasonable people, whether they are Soviet leaders or *Psychology Today* readers. Presumably, the same is true for "defensive" actions taken by the Soviets. Not until each country recognizes its role in global conflict can we begin to understand the arms race completely. As Luke wrote long before the dawn of the nuclear age:

"How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye." □

S. Plous is completing a doctorate in psychology at Stanford University and directs the Nuclear Arms Education Service, a nonprofit research organization. Philip G. Zimbardo is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and a frequent contributor to Psychology Today. Alison Hardey, A. Cecilia Mamby, Wendy L. Plous, Katie Riggs, Jennifer Taylor and Bill Witte transcribed the survey data.