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### Reagan and His "Nuclear Joke"

Several months ago there was a great to-do about nuclear war and "the day after." I got to wondering where I might be in the horrid event of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union at the moment of impact: at home with my family, at work, in my car, at a hotel in some other American city. Needless to say, the possibilities were endless. It never crossed my mind, however, that I might be in the center of Moscow, "their" ground zero or point of direct impact.

Yet, this past week I came to feel, while sitting in my room in the Hotel Leningradskaya, that it could have happened. Of course I would never have known what happened or why. Of all the possible reasons that a nuclear war might take place, never did I think that it might be because of a presidential joke.

Although I had heard "Reagana" mentioned in conversation frequently in the following two days, at that time I had not known what happened. At an informal meeting with a high-ranking Soviet scientist, he asked me point-blank what I had thought about the "nuclear joke." I professed ignorance and he went on to explain to me what the news report had said. I was amazed and confused at the same time. I thought Reagan too astute a politician to let his guard down, even for a moment.

I decided to take the offensive by asking the many Russians that I had met what they thought of the Reagan nuclear joke.

To a person, everyone I spoke with said they were greatly surprised by the comments and had become fearful of what Reagan might do with all his powers as President. They, to a person, used the word "stupid" to describe the many who had made the comments. They were fearful for a few reasons. First of all, many true feelings have been uncovered in jest. Secondly, they feel that the actions of a stupid man are neither predictable or controllable.

They, too, had thought about where they might be when Reagan launched his nuclear joke: a home with their families, at work, in

the Metro, and so forth. Suddenly this hypothetical, unthinkable scenario had taken on an all-too-real aura. It was now a real, ever-present concern.

I could offer little in the way of comfort to those I spoke to. In fact, I had gone through the same agonizing process, some months ago watching "The Day After" with my wife and teenaged daughter. I could offer no excuse for Reagan's "sick humor." All I could honestly say was that Americans take the threat of nuclear war very seriously, even if President Reagan seemingly does not.

I did tell them that many government officials had been removed from office as a result of verbal indiscretions, recalling Ann Gorsuch Burford, James Watt, Earl Butz, and, of course, Richard Nixon.

I could not blame Reagan's nuclear joke on American politics, because he had in fact exceeded all limits to political rationality for any person in the midst of running a re-election campaign. I could only wonder aloud if the President was subconsciously telling America that he is tired of being Commander-in-Chief and that he wants the electorate to tell him to go home.

When I return to the States soon, I will run, not walk, to the nearest library to read about the reaction in America and elsewhere to Reagan's nuclear joke.

Meanwhile, on the long plane ride home I shall have a lot of time to wonder what came over the usually astute President to make such a foolish and potentially dangerous error--one that not only affected his credibility as our leader, but in a way tarnishes all of us. After all, we elect our presidents. I will also have time to speculate now, the day after, what our high-ranking government leaders and what other people like myself would have thought had Soviet President Chernenko made such a statement in a similar way. It boggles the mind.

I do not know what the political aftermath, either domestic or international will be, but it seems clear to me from the history of the past ten years that Republican leaders ought to stay away from tape recorders.