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**THE GREAT COLD WAR:  
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE HALL OF MIRRORS**

**By Gordon S. Barrass**  
(Publication March 2009)

Excerpt: *"One of the things that kept the Cold War scary," Robert Gates, a former director of Central Intelligence, recalled, "was the lack of understanding on each side of the mentality of the other." Milt Bearden, a key figure in the CIA's Soviet operations, responded more pithily when I asked him what he thought had been the West's greatest intelligence failure during the Cold War: "We didn't realize just how f\*\*king scared Soviet leaders were of us!"*

*....After the Moscow Summit Marshal Grechko invited Brezhnev and some of his colleagues to take part in a "war game," seemingly hoping to stiffen Brezhnev's resolve in dealing with the harsh realities of a nuclear war. The exercise began with generals describing the impact of a surprise attack by over a thousand American missiles. They grimly explained that 80 million people would be killed, the armed forces obliterated, 85% of industry destroyed and European Russia so irradiated as to be uninhabitable. General Danilevich recalled that "Brezhnev and Kosygin were visibly terrified by what they heard".*

*Marshal Grechko then asked Brezhnev to push a button that would launch a "retaliatory strike," which in reality involved the launch of just three missiles with dummy warheads along a test range. Brezhnev turned pale, began perspiring and trembled visibly. He repeatedly asked Grechko, "Is this definitely an exercise?" The leadership were traumatized by this experience. None of them ever again participated in such an exercise. Brezhnev immediately ordered yet tighter controls to ensure that there could never be unauthorized use of Soviet nuclear weapons."*

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*The Great Cold War* (published in March by Stanford University Press) is arguably the most fascinating account yet written about the Cold War and a timely enunciation of the lessons we need to learn from the Cold War years if we are to be successful in tackling the potential confrontations of the 21st century.

In looking back over the confrontation between the two erstwhile superpowers, Gordon Barrass, a former British diplomat, poses four big questions: "Why did it start, why did it last so long and why did it end the way it did – with the most important of all being: how did we survive without blowing ourselves to Hell? "

To answer them, Barrass travelled to Washington, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow to interview nearly 100 people, including top policy-makers, strategists, military commanders, and key figures in the world of intelligence. Their narratives reveal what was going on behind the scenes, providing valuable insights into the mixture of insecurity, ignorance, and ambition that drove the rivalry between the two sides.

No other book conveys so vividly how each side interpreted the other's intentions. Barrass shows that while there were times when each side did understand the other's intentions,

there were also times when they were wildly wrong, leading to the chilling revelation that the situation was far more serious than most people knew at the time - or imagine now.

*The Great Cold War* breaks new ground in several areas:

- How scared the Soviet leadership was of a nuclear confrontation
- The “intellectual revolution” that shaped Reagan’s policy to induce the Soviet Union to end the Cold War, and the importance of the rather secretive Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon in articulating that policy
- How the intense and dynamic rivalry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact helped wear down the Soviet Union
- The importance of intelligence (particularly *human* intelligence) in shaping the Cold War for both sides and in ending it

This is an astute, insider’s perspective that will dismantle pervasive myths about the Cold War, in particular the idea that Reagan played a far greater part than Gorbachev in ending the Cold War. Barrass remarks, “The danger with this one is that it leads people to concentrate on the application of pressure, rather than the resolution of problems and the ending of confrontation. What did become clear during Gorbachev’s relations with Reagan and Bush was that long-term hostility can only be overcome through the building up of trust – and that requires dialogue.”

Barrass concludes that bringing the Cold War to a peaceful end was a far greater challenge than just "being tough with the Soviets." In the end it depended on the Americans’ "getting inside the mind" of the Soviets to gain the leverage needed to achieve their goals. The book provides many lessons and insights for dealing with the issues we face in dealing with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea and Russia, to name just a few.

**Gordon Barrass** was Chief of the Assessments Staff in the Cabinet Office in London and a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee of the Cabinet during the last years of the Cold War. For several years beforehand he had worked on East-West relations, travelling to the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe. Gordon is a member of the Board of the Cold War Studies Centre at the London School of Economics.

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