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RELEASE: January 27

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LETTER FROM LEONID

The State Department plunged to new depths of diplomatic failure when it leaked out that, since the Soviets steadfastly refuse to include their new Backfire bombers in the number of strategic delivery vehicles limited by SALT II, the Carter Administration will settle for a "letter" from Leonid I. Brezhnev promising not to use them against the United States.

Brezhnev is old and in ill health. He runs a tight dictatorship now, but after he is dead he may, like Stalin, become a non-person. It is risky to rely on a treaty with the Soviets; it makes no sense at all to rely on a letter from a dictator with a short life expectancy.

Ten years ago, one of the esoteric slogans put forth by the anti-defense lobby was "unilateral reciprocal initiative." This meant that the United States should indulge in unilateral disarmament initiatives, and then the Soviets would reciprocate in a sort of noblesse oblige.

It there is anyone still around who believes in such fairy tales, the strategic bomber story provides the classic refutation. In a dramatic act of unilateral initiative, the Carter Administration cancelled our B-1 bomber, the best in the world, without any quid pro quo. The Soviets responded by stepping up production of their own new strategic bomber, the Backfire.

Having thrown away its trumps, the Carter Administration pleaded with the Soviets to make some concession about the Backfire in the SALT II negotiations. The Soviets thumbed their noses at us.

Now the Carter Administration has made a cringing public appeal to Brezhnev asking him please to give us a letter saying he will never use the planes he is spending billions of rubles to manufacture. Nobody asks the question why Brezhnev would build the bombers if he has no plans to use them.

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Our State Department seems never to learn anything in dealing with the Russians. One of the most crucual issues in the SALT I negotiations was the Soviet Union's program of converting its older "light" land-based ICBM launchers into modern "heavy" missile launchers.

The Soviets had started a massive and tremendously expensive program of converting their older light SS-lls and SS-13s into new modern heavy SS-17s and SS-19s, and they had no intention of permitting a mere treaty to interfere with their plans to build weapons powerful enough to knock out U.S. missiles in their silos. They avoided any treaty restraints on their building program by refusing to agree to a definition of a "heavy missile."

Unable to get any agreement out of the Soviets, the U.S. SALT delegation expressed its solemn "regret" in "Noteworthy Unilateral Statement Θ": "The U.S. delegation regrets that the Soviet delegation has not been willing to agree on a common definition of a heavy missile. Under these circumstances, ... the United States would consider any ICBM having a volume significantly greater than that of the largest light ICBM now operational on either side to be a heavy ICBM. The U.S. proceeds on the premise that the Soviet side will give due account to this consideration."

A "unilateral statement," regardless of how "noteworthy" it might be called, is not legally binding. The Soviets did not give "due account" to our definition, but instead continued converting their older light SS-lls and SS-13s into new heavy SS-17s and SS-19s, as well as converting their heavy SS-9s into very heavy SS-18s.

When will the State Department learn that, when the Soviets refuse to bind themselves to an agreement, they have a strategic reason for that refusal? No unilateral statement or letter will restrain the Soviets from carrying out their plans.

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