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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BRIEFING MEMORANDUM

S/S JB

June 10, 1980

False alert

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To: The Secretary

From: PM - Reginald Bartholomew

RB

False Alarm on Soviet Missile Attack

A NORAD computer mistakenly indicated both on June 3 and June 6 that the Soviets had launched missiles against the US. In neither case did our warning sensors indicate any attack.

Each false alarm lasted about three minutes. No offensive US forces were launched either time, although bomber engines were started.

There is no serious risk that such false alarms would mistakenly cause us to launch an attack since the computer only performs a "burglar alarm" function and does not play any direct role in decisions to retaliate. Nevertheless, these incidents inevitably raise concerns -- here and abroad -- about the dangers of an accidental nuclear war. UK Defense Minister Pym already has responded to opposition questions about the incident in Parliament.

Brezhnev sent a letter to the President to protest a false alarm last November. We may hear from the Soviets directly about last week's incidents; Tass already has carried critical commentaries. In this post-Afghanistan environment, however, any official Soviet response could be at a lower level; but the tone might well be much sharper.

I will follow up with DOD to ensure that they are aware of our concern and get back to us on the improvements they are making. We also are asking DOD to inform us directly about such incidents in the future.

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: THEODORE SELLE
DATE/CASE ID: 23 DEC 2002 199804489

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