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Kansas and the Cold War

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Kansas and the Cold War

This article was written by
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Because of its part in the nation's nuclear arsenal, in a movie depicting nuclear war, and in providing an American President, Kansas's Cold War role was among the nation's most important.

To counter the Soviet Union's Cold War nuclear threat in the 1950s, the United States government began creating an offensive nuclear capability that included intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, capable of reaching the Soviet Union. The first American ICBM was the Atlas Missile. Schilling Air Force Base & Forbes Air Force Base played a crucial role in the nation's nuclear arsenal from 1960 through 1965 by building several missile launch sites and housing Atlas E & Atlas F intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Topeka learned in October 1958 that Forbes AFB would operate the Atlas E missile and that 9 launch sites would be built in nearby locations. These launch sites were located in the vicinity of Bushong, Delia, Dover, Holton, Osage City, Overbrook, Valley Falls, Waverly and Wamego. Site construction

began on June 9, 1959. The 548th Strategic Missile Squadron at Forbes AFB stood up on July 1, 1960, and all 9 missiles had arrived by October 1961. All 9 Atlas E missiles were housed in horizontal underground "coffins" with retractable roofs above ground that would expose the missile during launch.

During flight, the missile reached a speed of 16,000 miles per hour and could travel more than 6,700 miles in 43 minutes. An Atlas Missile fired from Kansas could reach the Soviet Union in less than an hour—with a 4-megaton nuclear warhead (equivalent to 4 million tons of TNT) that was 200 times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

The most sophisticated among the Atlas missiles, the Atlas F was created to be housed in deep, "hardened" underground silos to protect them against possible Soviet nuclear attack. Constructed of the strongest concrete possible poured over rebar, each silo was 174 feet deep with a diameter of 52 feet, and each was entirely below ground. Each silo housed

a missile along with an extensive steel structure, the "crib"—which was attached to the silo walls by four extremely large springs—that allowed for routine missile maintenance. Connected to the silo by a 50-foot long, 8-foot wide tunnel was the launch control center, or LCC. Also built of reinforced concrete and steel, its 2 floors housed the launching equipment and was where a 5-man Air Force



crew lived 24 hours a day, ready to launch the missile if necessary.

The 12 Atlas F missile sites near Salina and Schilling Air Force Base were located at Bennington, Abilene, Chapman, —cont., p. 2→

—cont. from p. 1 →

Carlton, McPherson, Mitchell, Kanopolis, Wilson, Beverly, Tescott, Glasco and Minneapolis.

Building ICBM launch sites was dangerous; nationally, more than 50 people died in silo accidents. Two men died during Atlas E site construction near Topeka, and 5 men died during Atlas F site construction near Salina.

In mid-October 1962, only one month after Kansas's 12 Atlas F missile sites became the property of the United States Air Force, the nation—and the world—entered into the most dangerous two weeks of the Cold War. The Kennedy administration learned that the Soviet Union was building sites in Cuba capable of launching nuclear missiles against the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis began.

President Kennedy addressed the nation about the Cuban crisis on the evening of October 22, 1962. In his address, he said, "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

That "full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union" would have included firing the 12 missiles surrounding Schilling Air Force Base and the 9 missiles surrounding Forbes Air Force Base.

Fortunately, the Cuban crisis ended peacefully, and none of Kansas's ICBMs were fired toward a Communist enemy, nor would they

ever be. In November 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced that all first-generation American ICBMs, including the Atlas E and F, would be retired the following year.

Eighteen Titan II ICBMs were attached to McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita. The nation's largest ICBM, the Titan II was 108 feet long and 10 feet wide. Its 9-megaton nuclear warhead was the most powerful warhead of any American missile. Each Titan II warhead contained 3 times the explosive power of all bombs used during



World War II, including both atomic bombs. The air force assumed control of the final McConnell-area Titan II silo on January 31, 1963. All McConnell sites were deactivated by August 8, 1986.

The Kansas missile sites provided jobs for more than 3,000 people and an economic boost for Kansas. Most importantly, the Kansas missiles kept all Americans safe during the most dangerous period in the history of the world.

The Day After aired on ABC the evening of Sunday, November 20, 1983, to an audience exceeding 100 million viewers. The made-

for-TV movie depicted the impact of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union by showing the destruction of Kansas City and how the people in Lawrence, Kansas, and western Missouri coped with the aftermath.

Director Nicholas Meyer intended to forego using any known stars, but he relented to ABC who needed some known actors to sell the movie overseas, so Jason Robards played Dr. Oakes who, shortly after the nuclear attack, makes his way back to the University of Kansas to tend to the living wounded. Broadway actor and future Northern Exposure star John Cullum also landed a role, and he was chosen to appear on ABC just prior to the movie's airing to warn viewers that they would see some "unusually disturbing" things in the next 2 hours.

The post-attack scenes center on Lawrence, Kansas, and northwestern Missouri, where dying survivors cling to life amid the destruction and the resulting chaos that included martial law following the elimination of most civil government.

Much of the movie's cast—including University of Kansas faculty and students—were locals. The 100 million viewers represented about 2/3 of that night's television audience, and the broadcast still ranks as one of the most-viewed televised programs in history.

The attack on Kansas City includes bright flashes as mushroom clouds ascending after explosions, which is when the government footage of actual missile tests

supplements the Hollywood nuclear simulations, and viewers see a “rapid-fire series of ‘skeletonized’ people instantly killed in the midst of everyday activities.”

The Day After had a profound impact on United States President Ronald Reagan, who, after viewing the movie the month before it aired, recorded in his personal diary that watching the movie “left me greatly depressed... My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & see there is never a nuclear war.” In fact, after Reagan signed the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons, the president sent Meyer a message: “Don’t think your movie didn’t have any part of this, because it did.”

Following a relaxation of Cold War tensions in the post-Cuban Missile Crisis 1960s through the Détente years of the 1970s, *The Day After* aired during a time of renewed Cold War fears in the early 1980s.

The INF Treaty eliminating intermediate range missiles was move toward ending decades-long conflict between the world’s two superpowers. Gorbachev recognized the significance of the INF Treaty. He wrote in his memoir that the “INF Treaty represented the first well-prepared step on our way out of the Cold War...”

By his own admission, *The Day After* encouraged President Ronald Reagan to sign the historic 1987 INF Treaty that, according to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, helped bring about the end of the Cold War.

Kansas’s Cold War efforts were among the nation’s most important. With 3 of the state’s 5 military installations serving as hubs for intercontinental ballistic missiles, Kansas hosted more air force bases that operated ICBMs than any other state. Kansas missiles were part of the nation’s awesome nuclear deterrent that moved Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to plead with President Kennedy during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to pull back from the brink and avoid civilization-ending nuclear war.

In Abilene native Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kansas provided 1 of only 2 Cold-War United States Presidents to serve 2 full terms. Although his presidency witnessed repeated nuclear war scares, this soldier who succeeded like no other in waging war during

World War II succeeded equally well in maintaining the peace during his 8 years in the White House.

Kansans were also featured in a movie filmed and set in Kansas that motivated President Reagan to sign the 1987 INF Treaty and move the world toward peace as the Cold War’s end began.

For the duration of the 45-year conflict, Kansas’s efforts were significant. Kansas’s Cold War role was, arguably, the nation’s most important.

Landry Brewer is Bernhardt Assistant Professor of History at Southwestern Oklahoma State University and teaches at the Sayre campus, and he is the author of *Cold War Kansas*.

A more in depth discussion on this subject can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsvGq8_aSRY



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In this newsletter (p. 7), there is a form you can fill out and return. In addition, if there are people you think would be interested in joining our group, please pass on the form for them to fill out and send back to us. If you have any questions, please call at **785 234 6097** or email us at: shawneecountyhistory@gmail.com

Thank you!