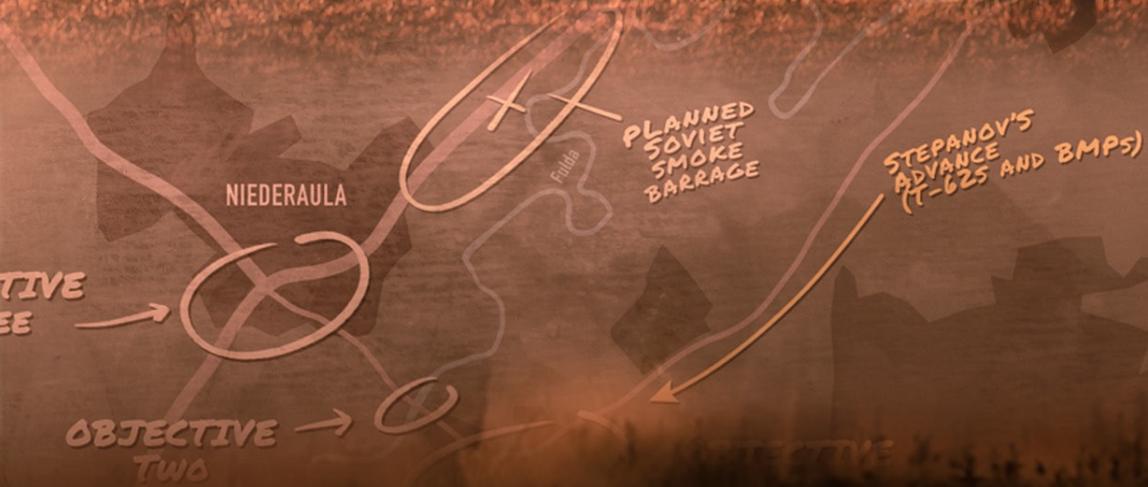


# STORMING THE GAP FIRST STRIKE

A WORLD AT WAR 85 NOVEL



BRAD SMITH



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This novel is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.



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# INTRODUCTION

First Strike is, at its heart, about the problems of command. The stories told herein are about imperfect people operating under pressure with incomplete information. Some of the decisions these people make are heroic while others are downright questionable. I have tried to paint a picture of human beings at war while at the same time writing with the spirit of the “World at War ‘85” game itself. If you read between the lines, you’ll see the fumbled to-hit rolls, the “End Turn” cards being pulled too early, and the problems of a bad scenario setup.

I have made a faithful effort to recreate the capabilities of weapons that were fielded at the time of the conflict’s setting. I also used online maps to gain an understanding of the terrain where these fictional battles were fought. To help gain a rough understanding of how the battles might go, I set up the forces in a computer simulation game called “Armored Brigade” and played things out.

Despite these efforts, the stories are not an attempt to faithfully depict every single aspect of combat and military operations and those who are looking for it may be disappointed with the contents of this book. For the sake of enjoyment and ease of reading, the story must sometimes trump realism.

The book is populated by a host of different characters. Some of them are based on characteristics real people while others were conjured from imagination alone. It almost goes without saying

that no offense is intended to anyone who finds their name herein. I have never met or interacted with most of you in any way that would warrant any assumptions about your personal character. For those I happen to know well, I think you'll agree that I was surprisingly gentle on you. You owe me a beer, by the way.

I have no doubt that some readers will find the structure of this book to be a little disjointed. There are no recurring characters and few obvious common threads that can be pulled through the stories. Taken as a whole, the stories serve as a kind of snapshot of what was happening in the Fulda Gap during the very early stages of World War III. These three battles served as the harsh lessons in modern warfare that determined how the war would proceed and ultimately, how it would end. No, that's not a spoiler.

It is my hope that the reaction to this book will be positive enough to warrant subsequent volumes that will build further upon these events to give an overall picture of the war's progress. In other words, this a marathon instead of a sprint. Thanks for running with me.

Sincerely,

**Brad Smith**

**April 2019**

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Keith Tracton and David Heath for their encouragement and faith in this book. The feedback was immensely helpful and made the final product much better than it otherwise would have been. I am also grateful to my wife, Maya, who gave me the time and space to sit down and get to work. Thanks to my son, Hiro. You were my source of energy and inspiration. I am so proud of who you are becoming. Thank you to Marc von Martial and his excellent illustrations that bring the book to life.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the people who bought the book and took a chance on a fledgling author with their time and money.

The terrain in this book was based on many resources and satellite imagery. There are certainly discrepancies between these recent depictions and what existed in 1985 although the salient geographical features are basically the same.

The battles in this book were modelled by from the many table top and computer wargames I have played over the years. One computer simulation called “Armored Brigade” from Veitikka Studios was extremely helpful. This added much to my understanding about the pace of modern warfare and the problems of clear communication and command.

Books that were immeasurably helpful in the writing and research phase included Michael Green’s “M1 Abrams Tank”, Mike Guardia’s “The Fires of Babylon: Eagle Troop and the Battle of 73 Easting”, Tom Clancy’s “Armored Cav”, and Russell Phillips’ excellent reference series, “Weapons and Equipment of the Warsaw Pact.”



# **FIRST STRIKE**

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A WORLD AT WAR 85 NOVEL

**BRAD SMITH**



# WARNING SHOTS

**January 1981**

**The Oval Office**

**Washington, D.C.**

“Jelly bean, Keith?”

“No thank you, Mr. President. I’m fine.”

“Dave?”

“Ah sure. Why not? Thank you, sir.”

“The licorice ones are the best.”

The three men settled down on the soft cream-colored couch that dominated the center of the room. The portraits of past presidents hung on the walls, their heavy gaze pressing upon them, silent witnesses to history.

Keith Tracton placed a pair of sweating palms on his lap and braced himself for what was to come next. It was not the high office that had him worried - this was not the first president he had met face-to-face. In fact, his service to the country had demanded three such meetings before. All of them had taken place right after the pomp and ceremony of Inauguration Day had died down. Each new president, swamped with the duties of having to steer the ship of state, had reacted differently to the desperate message that he had to deliver.

It was not a task he had relished, but as the deputy director of the NSA, he had no choice but to pass on his expert analysis of this

terrible situation and let the president decide what to do with it. Today, as usual, he had come here with David Heath, the Deputy Director of Operations for the CIA. Hopefully, the two allies could make their voices heard. But Tracton didn't hold his breath.

Nixon hadn't listened. At the time, he was focused too tightly on Vietnam to see the bigger picture. Ford had shrugged and asked what to do. The man had been handled a fumbled ball and didn't expect to be in office long enough to worry about what he considered to be some grand conspiracy theory. Carter was fascinated and made some early efforts to deal with the Russians, but then the gas shortages and Iran happened. By the time the Soviets were in Afghanistan, there wasn't much to do about it except express the country's outrage. The elections came upon them, and Jimmy Carter's fate was sealed.

If there was one word that could sum up the last three presidents, it was this one – distracted.

The pace of the modern world seemed to increase each year. The demands placed on elected officials had outgrown their ability to deal effectively with crises.

This new president seemed to recognize that and had gotten into office on promises of reducing government involvement in ordinary citizen's lives. At the same time, he had vowed to deal with the growing threat posed by the Soviet Union. Maybe this time, the president would listen and act. There was always hope the world could be saved if the right people just stopped for a minute and absorbed what he was trying to say.

"So I understand you're here to bring me up to speed with what's happening in the world?" said Reagan.

The words slid out in that smooth actor's voice. Although Tracton hadn't voted for the man, he could see why others had. The new president had a relaxed and agreeable manner. As he spoke, it was impossible not to feel that everything was going to turn out all right. It wasn't just that you liked the guy. You wanted to like him.

Heath set down the coffee cup and adjusted his tie before clearing his throat. This was part of the ritual, and this is how it always began.

“Mr. President, it’s more than just that. The reason we’ve come here today is to urge you to focus the administration’s efforts against a grave and ongoing global crisis. We’re here to discuss what’s been happening with the Soviets.”

At the drop of the final word, Reagan leaned forward. Tracton tried not to get his hopes up too much, but it appeared that he was at least interested in what Heath was about to say.

“The situation, Mr. President, is much worse than it seems. More dangerous than it looks. For thirty-five years now, we’ve been at war.”

Reagan nodded. “I understand we’re in a conflict right now... but isn’t it overselling it a bit to say ‘war,’ Mr. Heath?”

“I mean exactly that, Mr. President. The Soviet Union has not only funded but orchestrated and participated in acts of war against this nation and its allies for nearly four decades. Although most of our citizens and politicians are well aware of our mutual enmity, what they don’t know is the true extent of the conflict. The fact is that many hostile acts have been committed against the United States and its allies.”

The senior statesman put his palms up. “I think I understand what you’re saying. I even campaigned on it. But you’re right - I’m sure I don’t know the full extent of what’s happening out there. So can you tell me the history, as you understand it?”

Heath gestured at Tracton, who reached into his briefcase and extracted a thick manila folder. Crammed between its frayed covers were photos, documents, and dossiers. It was a lifetime of work from a thousand different sources - deep cover agents, electronic intercepts, satellite reconnaissance, just to name a few.

“I’ve got all those documents lined up for your review,” said Heath. “But I’ll touch on a few details. It started in ‘46 with the Russians stealing the elections in Romania. The next year, they did it again in Poland.”

Tracton jumped in next. “We then pulled off a coup of our own in June ‘47 with Werner von Braun and the other German rocket scientists. We helped them escape from right out under their noses. Excellent work by our agents.”

Reagan nodded along with each beat of the briefing. Heath spoke up next.

“We also sent in a strike team against a small Soviet force. It’s uh...neutralization...allowed us to take the German scientists to the States. This, in turn, helped us to advance both our space and nuclear arms programs.

“In February 1948 in the middle of these events, the Soviet sent agents into Czechoslovakia pulling off a coup d’état allowing the Communist Party to take full control. This should never have been allowed to happen, and it was totally the failure of our own agencies. Of course, instead of pushing our advantage, our operations were discouraged and restricted.”

With our hands tied domestically, the Soviets were able to insert spies into our nuclear program. They stole many details of our atomic secrets and proved just how much of a worthy opponent they were. By 1949, the Soviet Union detonates its first nuclear weapon.”

Reagan clasped his hands together. “I understand completely. I also knew about communist subversion going on back in Hollywood. People called it a ‘witch hunt’ back then, but some of those people were getting paid a lot of money from foreign governments. Go on, then.”

Heath swung back into the early Cold War history lesson. “In May 1948, the Middle East was officially put into play with the birth of Israel. With a few simple words, David Ben-Gurion declared ‘the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel.’ This turned the whole region into an ongoing conflict.”

“Hard to believe how they managed to hold on in those early years,” said Reagan.

Heath chuckled. “Well, during the battle for control of Jerusalem, many Arab soldiers claimed that Israel had fighting men falling from the sky. Some said they looked like angels. So we don’t know what to make of that, but if God is fighting for them, I guess they got very little to worry about.”

On and on the briefing went, touching on the back-and-forth covert conflict that had been the hallmark of the last thirty-five years. Reagan showed minimal surprise. He already knew most of

it. By the time they reached the early 1960s, the president looked as if he were ready for a nap. The coffee had been filled and refilled. Tea had been offered and rejected. More than once, the spry septuagenarian had glanced at the clock. By this time, all the other presidents had excused themselves with a polite word or two. The two advisors had never gotten this far before.

Tracton braced himself for what was about to come.

“Sir, there’s something you need to know about what happened to Kennedy,” he said.

Tracton laid a grainy black and white photograph that showed a man in a dark suit and sunglasses in a shooter’s stance with a raised long rifle. In front of him was a grassy knoll.

“This was taken November 22nd, 1963. The day Kennedy died. Many of us think the man in the photo is Andrei Petrinska. A Bulgarian national who is confirmed to have worked for the Bulgarian security services at the time of the assassination. We can’t find any direct proof, but three years ago he was contracted by the KGB. He disappeared a week later.”

Reagan froze. The temperature in the Oval Office seemed to drop twenty degrees. A hard unmoving silence draped the room as the allegation hit full force.

“You mean to tell me the Soviets shot Kennedy?”

It was Heath’s turn to talk. “Not everyone is convinced of that,” he said. “But what we do know is they’ve murdered countless others, Mr. President. They’ve even killed our servicemen.”

Tracton plucked four photographs from the folder and slid them toward the president.

“What am I looking at here?” asked the president. His energy had returned now. Instead of the sluggish silence of the last ten minutes, his eyes brimmed with fiery indignation.

“The first two are ours – the USS Thresher and Scorpion. The next one is Israeli. That’s the Dakar. And this final one is the Minerve. It’s a French sub. All of them were sunk.”

Reagan studied each photograph and set them down gently on the table.

“Sunk? By the Russians?”

Tracton nodded. “The public was never informed of the real reasons, but radio logs and reliable human intelligence have confirmed that hostile action took them down.”

By the time they had brought Reagan up to date on the latest events - Afghanistan, Iran, and Nicaragua, the old man looked nearly apoplectic. Clearly, the briefing had had its intended effect. The man wasn't just focused - he was downright angry. Heath pressed on.

“There does seem to be a pattern to this as a whole. The Soviets have not been able to catch us on the technology front but not from the lack of trying. As the tech gap widens, they seem to get more and more brazen. They fall back on their existing strengths - the biggest one being massive numbers. Our guess is the buffer makes them feel safe or at least comfortable. We are working on new weapon designs, and it could very well tip the balance in a way that is uncomfortable for the Soviets to accept. Most recently, they've deployed intermediate missiles into Eastern Europe to counter our cruise missile advantage. These missiles can reach their targets within six minutes.”

Reagan turned bright red. He was clearly uncomfortable with the way the initiative had shifted over the recent years.

“Are you suggesting we pull back? I'm not okay with sitting on our keesters and hoping this all goes away.”

Heath jumped on the grenade.

“Some of your predecessors have talked about “acceptable levels” of state-sponsored terror. Others have talked about hitting back. But not nearly at the right level required to deter it. And, in my opinion, not in the right ways or places. At the covert level, we advise a much more aggressive approach. Keith and I call it ‘low-intensity warfare.’ These are militarized covert operations designed to achieve political objectives. They take longer and they can get... messy...but we'll avoid situations like we had in Vietnam. We also recommend accelerating the time frame for the overhaul of our military into a professional volunteer force.”

Reagan stood up and wandered over to the large window that looked out onto the White House rose garden. He hovered there for a long moment with his back to them and without turning, spoke in a solemn tone.

“Some of the things I say in my speeches about them – I know they’re a bit oversimplified. Good versus evil. Things like that. But I want to know - why? What is this strange human compulsion we have to interfere with the natural way of things? To deny other human beings their basic rights?”

Tracton tucked the folder back into his briefcase. Would it be here again in another four years or would the world be gone by then? It all depended on this one man standing at the window. His next words were solemn and slow, just like truth always came out.

“As far as we can figure out, sir...a lot of it has to do with internal politics. This system they’ve built. It’s on pretty shaky ground. So why not destabilize other countries too? The other part of it is the desire to push things as far as they can go. Break enough rules so that rule-breaking seems normal and acceptable. Establish a new pattern of what’s considered ‘normal’ when really, it’s just all part of a messed-up system that works in your favor. The wheels are coming off though. They can’t hold on much longer.”

Reagan stood up and paced over to his desk. His eyes wandered up to the large oil-painting of Lincoln.

“So things are worse than I thought. Much worse, I suppose. The question is what to do about it. I’ll work as hard as I can to counter everything they’re doing. Every step of the way, they’ll meet resistance. This country’s not gonna be pushed around anymore.”

Tracton smiled. Finally, someone was getting it. “Sir, I think that’s the best news we’ve heard for quite some time. Please remember this when you’re appointing your cabinet.”

“What’s the danger of this all blowing up in our faces?” asked Reagan. “Can this thing really turn into a war?”

Heath folded his arms and looked at the carpeted floor. “Their economy is a wreck, sir. They’ve been pumping every last ruble into defense in the last five or six years. Right now, they’re putting out weapons at a rate that we’d need at least half-a-decade to match. Things are...not good. The longer this goes on, the greater the danger of something awful happening.”

Reagan grabbed some jelly beans and walked around his desk, “You know fellows, Brezhnev is an old time, hard-line Communist I don’t see anything changing anytime soon.

On the other hand, maybe we get lucky, and someone else will come along, and we can work with him.”

Tracton wasn't so sure. It was good to be optimistic, but it was hard to imagine things getting better. History had shown that systems built on shaky foundations tended to collapse in catastrophic and unpredictable ways. He doubted that Reagan could totally influence the way the Soviet empire ended and he suspected that the Soviets couldn't control it either. The whole country had grown into a machine with a life of its own, spiraling out of control and lurching forward on momentum alone.

Soon, the Russian economy would give out, and the bill would come due. Whether it was paid in blood or riches, no one could say. Doing nothing was not a solution, but the effects of the collapse might be contained with a robust American foreign policy and a lot of luck.

A few minutes later, both Tracton and Heath walked down the long tunnels that led to the Capitol building. The rest of the day would be spent dealing in mundane meetings with Congressmen and Senators about budget allocations, mandates, and oversights. The life of a Washington bureaucrat never stopped or slowed down --- even with the danger of a Third World War looming.

“Do you think he got the message?” asked Tracton.

“Time will tell,” shrugged Heath. “I'll say this though – we got a lot further with this one than the others. There's still a glimmer of hope left.”

“Let me ask you something,” said Tracton. “I know you know things. How long do you really think we've got until this thing explodes into something beyond our control?”

“I'd give us four --- maybe, five years tops.”