"The Secret History of a Cold War Mastermind: Gus Weiss, a shrewd intelligence insider, pulled off an audacious tech hack against the Soviets in the last century. Or did he?"

by Alex French

Wired, 8.3.2020 (http://archive.is/0asXW#selection-397.0-540.0)

I. Obituary

The legend of Gus Weiss, hero of the Cold War, ends 11 stories below the balcony of his condo at the Watergate complex in Washington, DC, on November 25, 2003. A broken corpse on the sidewalk.

In life, Weiss had liquidy blue eyes and an aristocratic air. He stood 5'7″ and in later years developed a slight hunch. He spoke with a breezy Southern accent and wore J. Press suits. The autoimmune disease alopecia, which he developed as a teenager, left him hairless from head to toe. He wore a chestnut-colored wig and smelled vaguely of toupee adhesive. He drifted off into daydreams at inopportune moments. He laughed with a high-pitched giggle. "A wonderful storyteller," recalls one lifelong friend. "He'd talk to you in tales." Yet Weiss kept almost everybody at a distance. Only a handful of people ever truly got to know him. Richard V. Allen, his onetime boss on Richard Nixon's National Security Council, calls him "one of the most discreet men I ever knew."

Around Washington, insiders vaguely understood Weiss as a mysterious but brilliant eccentric with a thinly veiled penchant for insubordination. Obituaries remembered him as an adviser to four presidents, executive director of the White House Council on International Economic Policy, assistant for space policy to the secretary of defense. According to his obit in *The Washington Post*, "Much of his government work centered on national security, intelligence organizations and concerns over technology transfers to communist countries. As an adviser to the Central Intelligence Agency, he served on the Pentagon's Defense Science Board and the Signals Intelligence Committee of the US Intelligence Board … His honors included the CIA's Medal for Merit and the National Security Agency's Cipher Medal." France awarded him a Légion d'Honneur and NASA recognized him with an Exceptional Service Medal. The *Post* noted that the medical examiner ruled his death a suicide.

A Washington, DC, attorney named Wayne Keup identified a picture of Weiss' body at the morgue. They'd met years earlier at the health club in the Watergate, where they'd go for early morning soaks. Keup once worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency and Naval Intelligence Command, and their navigation of secret worlds served as the glue to their friendship. "He felt he could talk to me because at one time I had clearances at the highest level as well," Keup says. Weiss told Keup about his role as a National Security Council economist, manipulating export controls over the transfer of high tech hardware and intellectual property to communist countries.

Weiss could expound on subjects from Soviet ICBM accuracy to year-over-year wheat production in Bulgaria. A shrewd operator, Weiss navigated and manipulated government bureaucracy, floating seamlessly between agencies and departments. He dealt with America's most precious secrets and schemes every day. Eventually, Weiss told Keup how his expertise in the realms of computer technology and export policy and his affinity for mischief led him to mastermind a monumental case of industrial sabotage that cost the Soviets untold millions.

Despite years of friendship, Keup knew little about Weiss' personal life. Days after identifying the body, Keup ventured for the first time into Weiss' apartment, to set the departed's affairs in order. Weiss had a quirky sensibility—modern furniture juxtaposed with Herend porcelain and American craft pottery. He possessed a prodigious collection of music—classical and opera and college fight songs and Soviet military marches—and his bookshelves were so overwhelmed that he had taken to stacking volumes on the floor. A toupee lying on the unmade bed resembled a sleeping cat. Keup had entered the home of a man who had projected his inner life onto his physical surroundings.

Soon after Weiss' obituary appeared in the *Post*, Keup received a call from the wife of one of Weiss' old intelligence community colleagues: "After what he and my husband did to the Soviets," she said stiffly, "there's no way they would let that pass. If you think Gus committed suicide, then you believe in fairy tales."

In March 2004, months after Weiss' death, former Air Force secretary and Reagan adviser Thomas C. Reed published a memoir entitled *At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War*. In one passage Reed describes Weiss' role as the architect of an unprecedented program of Cold War tech sabotages that culminated with the destruction of a gas pipeline deep in the wilds of Siberia. According to Reed's book, the blast, classified by NORAD as the largest non-nuclear explosion in recorded history, had gone unreported for 20 years.

A handful of news outlets, including Reuters and WIRED, immediately picked up the remarkable tale, though not without a note of skepticism. The story of the pipeline operation gathered momentum. William Safire, Weiss' old Nixon administration colleague, wrote a column in *The New York Times* describing his friend Gus' genius. A Canadian filmmaker made a documentary about the caper. Tim Weiner, *New York Times* correspondent, wrote about the operation in his national book award winning CIA history *A Legacy of Ashes* and then again, years later, for Reuters.

Conspiracy theorists and historians alike paid keen attention to this previously unknown bureaucrat—his clandestine exploits and his mysterious demise. Following Stuxnet, the devastating 2010 cyberattack that temporarily hobbled the Iranian nuclear program, Bret Stephens, in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece, held up Weiss' strategic problem-solving work against the Soviets as the gold standard of ingenuity. Gus Weiss became a cult hero.

II. Gus Weiss' Brain

"Gus possessed the most exquisitely folded brain," says Suzanne Patrick, a retired naval reserve officer and Weiss' close friend and protégé. "He had an uncanny ability to think around corners and make connections across vast complicated disciplines. What made him positively gleeful about the work he did in intelligence was that feeling of being the little boy putting together that puzzle with disparate pieces, and how he could achieve truly dramatic effect."

Weiss grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, a precocious only child in a prominent Jewish family. As a young boy, his aunt Dede doted on him, giving him grown-up atlases and the definitive Jane's series of aircraft reference books. Weiss studied those texts cover to cover, over and over again, developing an obsession with airplanes. His future had been mapped out: He would attend Vanderbilt University and one day take over the family business, a chain of popular women's clothing stores called Gus Mayer. Weiss had other ideas. In the early 1950s, he enrolled at Harvard Business School. His classmate Dick Eskind recalls not being at all surprised when Weiss barely pulled a passing grade in his retailing course. Weiss' driving ambition became to not spend his life at Gus Mayer chatting up the ladies, fitting them for blouses and girdles. Instead, he took classes in the new computer sciences, the emerging field of game theory, operational science, and strategy.

He eventually made his way to New York City to pursue a PhD in economics at New York University. He fixed his gaze on game theory, focusing on geopolitical antagonisms. Weiss came of age as the Cold War escalated: the Bay of Pigs, construction of the Berlin Wall, strategic weapons in Cuba, conflagrations in Africa, coups and political assassinations in South America, China going nuclear, a conflict in Vietnam intensifying every day. A new realm of strategic analysis took form, and young intellectuals like Weiss energetically set about inventing a field that was intellectually thrilling and deadly serious.

The core of nuclear policy at the time, the Madman theory, held that irrationality and volatility could be wielded by American leaders to keep the peace; fearing an irrational response, our adversaries would avoid provocation. Weiss believed that approaching nuclear theory in this way was reckless. An inevitable miscalculation or miscommunication between rivals could lead to apocalypse. Weiss' 1966 dissertation analyzed geopolitical strife through an economic lens, arguing for limited, strategically applied force. Economic warfare (arms races, embargoes, sanctions) and even limited military strikes could be a potent method for "expressing conflict" while avoiding "excessively costly" fights.

Weiss eventually captured the attention of Herman Kahn, the Cold War intellectual who had thought up the Madman theory and other ideas Weiss rebelled against. Kahn ran the Hudson Institute, a defense think tank headquartered on the campus of a defunct psychiatric hospital in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. Kahn, who weighed 300 pounds and suffered from narcolepsy, had gained renown with his book *On Thermonuclear War*, in which he considered every facet of nuclear disaster: how to avoid it, how to win, and how to rebuild civilization afterward. He later served as an inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. During the Nixon administration, Kahn had easy, frequent access to the likes of Alexander Haig, Nixon's chief of staff. Weiss occupied the opposite end of the Cold War philosophical spectrum. He wanted to defeat the Soviets without firing a shot; when a forceful message needed sending, it ought to be strongly worded and written on elegant stationery. Weiss, nonetheless, went to work at the Hudson Institute as Kahn's executive assistant.

III. Bellhops in the Watch Factory

In 1972, Gus Weiss, then in his early forties, accepted a position on Richard Nixon's National Security Council as director of research on the White House Council on International Economic Policy (CIEP). Though an economist by

training, Weiss quickly discovered he was a spy by inclination. While creating reports for CIEP on international trade, he worked with the CIA to determine how foreign governments invested in technology. The task was straightforward but the information hard to come by. Weiss caught the intelligence bug.

One day a year into his tenure, the phone rang as Weiss toiled away in his third-floor nook in the Old Executive Office Building. When he answered, the voice on the other end of the handset said, "My name is Helene Boatner. If management knew I called, I'd be fired. Do you know what's going on with the computer delegation?" Weiss realized instantly that Boatner worked for the CIA. He knew all about the delegation: A few dozen of the USSR's top computer scientists, dressed in gray wool slacks and navy blazers—"suggestive of a convention of bellhops," according to Weiss—were en route to tour the Uranus Liquid Crystal Watch Company in Mineola, on Long Island.

Both Weiss and Boatner found the choice of destination suspicious. Uranus was a relatively inconspicuous company that neither qualified for the Fortune 500 nor possessed a reputation as a landing spot for Nobel laureates, as Weiss wrote in his unpublished monograph, *The Farewell Dossier: Strategic Deception and Economic Warfare in the Cold War (An Insider's Untold Secret Story)*.

Boatner called Weiss because he was known to spend his days on the security council worrying over something called "technology transfer"—the transfer of technology from one country to another. Weiss' mantra: "As computers go, so goes the Cold War." The integrated circuit gave the US a fast advantage over the Soviet Union, not just in miniaturization and high-speed computations but also in "the design of successful ICBMs, manned rockets, airplanes, and satellites," writes Giles Slade in his 2006 book, *Made to Break*. And yet the Soviets, cash-strapped, possessed weapons on par with the United States while maintaining an R&D budget a fraction of the size. Weiss suspected a massive KGB effort to covertly purchase or steal Western technology made this possible, a conviction hardened by the 1971 expulsion of Soviet spies from the United Kingdom for tech espionage. Nixon's policy of détente, a program of thawing relations with the Soviets that included trade, created the possibility of thievery as Soviet working groups came to tour American agricultural and technological companies. Weiss later wrote in his unpublished monograph that the Kremlin, while "overtly caressing" détente ideals, had "embroidered the concept with fulsome trickery."

From the other end of the phone, Helene Boatner quietly informed Weiss that, three days earlier, the Soviet delegation's senior official had used an administrative loophole in American visa regulations to gain approval for an extended itinerary beyond the watch company. The navy-blazered group would be visiting top American computer and semiconductor firms. Days later an old Harvard chum phoned Weiss to report that a delegation of Russian computer scientists had just toured his super-computer manufacturing facility, Amdahl Corporation, in Sunnyvale, California. "They asked tons of technical questions."

From that day on, Weiss dutifully collected anecdotal evidence of the Soviet's sinister embrace of détente. To acquire the latest aircraft technology, the Soviets proposed purchasing 50 Lockheed transport planes if the then-struggling American firm would also construct and equip a modern aircraft city in the heart of the USSR. Russian working group representatives used sticky strips on their shoe soles to collect material samples during tours of semiconductor and aircraft factories. A spy posing as a Cosmonaut gathered intelligence on the American space shuttle while training for the Apollo-Soyuz Test Program mission.

In Weiss' telling, he alone was not blind to Soviet theft. He attempted to alert the higher-ups in the Soviet-East Europe Division about his suspicions. They "received my theory of Kremlin barn burning with yawns of conspicuous boredom, oozing wispy blank stares," he wrote to himself. "One gentleman accoutered in a becoming dove gray suit" dozed off, "emitting the occasional confidence-building snort." The agency's "senior Matron" said that the service had "no problems, no sources, and no interest in technology espionage."

IV. Tradecraft

Frustrated by the CIA's refusal to take his warnings of technology theft by the Russians seriously, Weiss became determined to carry out his own covert war, a concentrated, two-front insurgency.

The Cold War involved two monolithic forces, operating at peak efficiency, neither willing to back down. We build a missile. They build a missile. Forever and ever. But if the superpower race became about technology, the Soviets couldn't win. As the Nixon administration explored trade with the USSR, Weiss argued against selling the Soviets any advanced computing technology that could be used for nuclear weapons or cryptography.

In 1974, President Nixon signed National Security Decision Memorandum 247, which placed controls on the export of American computer hardware and software, manufacturing processes, design, and programming know-how. Denying the Soviets the ability to purchase or build a supercomputer became Weiss' raison d'être.

In the early 1970s, as the Soviets persisted in violating the spirit of détente, Weiss, with assistance from Boatner, formed a cabal of roughly 30 technologists, scientists, and intelligence analysts—from the CIA, NSA, Office of Naval Intelligence, Air Force, FBI, Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense, and Rand Corporation. Weiss called this secret group the American Tradecraft Society. The ATS had no charter or budget or personnel rules. As Weiss writes in his unpublished memoir, "It would be generous to describe the Society as 'out of channels,' and charitable to deem our methods 'irregular' … Our records and files reeked with transparency and were always open to examination—of course, there were no records and files." Weiss gave himself a codename: the Marquis.

In the society's early days, Weiss used his easy access to White House stationery, "an instrument so potent that it could be used in only the most direful circumstances," to wage "letterhead coups" with stunning effectiveness on more than one occasion, securing $10,000 for an NSA auto-programmable minicomputer here and a million bucks to fund a Civil Technologies program there. The American Tradecraft Society convened when a handful of members showed up to a pub in McLean, Virginia. Or a restaurant in Crystal City. The Watergate had a quiet restaurant in the basement where they'd congregate.

Most of their operations remain secret, but they were significant. In 1975, ATS caught wind of a successful KGB plot to illegally purchase the machinery necessary to create computer chips. According to Weiss' unvetted musings, in 1982, when ATS members learned of a second, identical effort to smuggle equipment, they contacted some friends from Customs, who intercepted the shipping container and confiscated the computing equipment, replacing it with the equivalent weight in sand—about 6,000 pounds—and a nasty note. (A former intelligence official and a retired defense official both corroborated this anecdote.)

One of Weiss' colleagues in the ATS, a high-ranking former CIA science and technology officer who had the ATS code name Galahad, told me that when Weiss made visits to CIA headquarters at Langley, word of his presence swept through the hallways like a breeze. He'd meet with the director, then take a briefing on Soviet ICBM accuracy or the health of the Russian agriculture sector. Then he'd swing by and chat with the folks on the operations side. Planting seeds. Hatching plans. Galahad told me, "Gus was like a little bee—he would go from one intelligence agency to the next, take up a little information, and then pollinate it over there."

Weiss became known within Washington's halls of power as a go-to tackler of complex problems. He headed up steering committees. Delivered keynotes at symposiums. During the Gerald Ford administration, Weiss served as executive director of the Council of International Economic Policy. Under President Jimmy Carter, he was the assistant to the secretary of defense for space policy. He had a seat on the Defense Science Board. After Ronald Reagan's election, Gus Weiss returned to the Old Executive Office Building and the National Security Council. There, he fell in with a group of economists who believed the Soviets could be pulled down by the purse strings.

V. A Bitter KGB Spy

Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Ippolitovich Vetrov had once been a promising young KGB officer with a luminous wife and the admiration of his peers. In 1965, Vetrov took a five-year assignment in Paris, working a cover job in the Ministry of Foreign Trade. He gathered intelligence during visits to research labs and engineering firms and recruited French scientists and technology executives to spill secrets.

But once back in Russia, his fortunes changed. He became infuriated by his lack of promotion within the KGB and was tortured by his wife's many affairs, especially an enduring tryst with a handsome helicopter pilot. As he approached the winter of his career, he was marooned in a Moscow office with old men unfit for field work. His bitterness hardened.

Vetrov worked for the head of Line X, the KGB outfit created to steal Western military, strategic, and industrial secrets. He evaluated intelligence gathered by the unit's 400 spies, who stole technological secrets in dozens of countries.

Vetrov wanted to hurt the people who'd underestimated him. In the winter of 1981, he reached out to an old friend from France with links to a French intelligence agency. Vetrov had access to the latest secrets the Kremlin wanted to lay its hands on, and details on how the KGB sought to satisfy those needs. "You must understand that this is for me a matter of life or death," he wrote. And so for 11 months, beginning in March 1981, Vetrov passed thousands of

documents containing vital state secrets to the French. He met with his handlers up to six times a month, in grocery stores and parks. Sometimes they confabbed in Vetrov's blue Lada, driving around Moscow with no destination in mind. The French kept the operation small, to avoid leaks, and gave Vetrov an English code name: Farewell.

VI. The Great Game Is Afoot

On Reagan's National Security Council, Weiss had an office in the Old Executive Office Building. Over the fireplace he hung a portrait of himself dressed in full polo outfit. One lifelong friend told me, "I don't think that SOB ever sat on a horse." Eccentricities and bad toupee aside, Weiss fulfilled the most important requirement of Reagan's NSC: He was a true believer in taking down the Soviets.

Many of the young staffers found Weiss, then in his sixties, enchanting. "Gus was an oasis," says Roger Robinson, an international banker who'd joined the NSC as senior director of international economic affairs in his early thirties. "We called each other 'old bean.' We had a contest to see who could bow the lowest as a show of respect. Inevitably I would lay down on the ground because he was so superior. I needed him because I was in my thirties and I didn't know if I could pull off the things I advertised. He needed me because he was so cataclysmically underappreciated. I made him feel lionized."

In July 1981, at the Ottawa Economic Summit, French President François Mitterrand told Reagan about Vetrov. He revealed that the French ran a highly placed KGB asset they called Farewell, who'd leaked more Soviet intelligence documents than anybody since the 1960s. Mitterrand offered the Farewell materials to Reagan, who then passed them to Vice President Bush and William Casey, his CIA director. Casey made the papers available to a select few, including Weiss.

Weiss and Casey had been simpatico for a decade. "The Director had an allotment of quirks, one of which was phoning without prior arrangement or indicating where he was," Weiss later wrote of Casey. "When booming forth he could have been in his office, fly fishing the Zambezi, body surfing Molokai. To get a brief on the stealth fighter, Casey once descended on the [nuclear] test site north of Las Vegas. He stayed in Caesar's Palace, and to keep his presence quiet security fitted him out with an enormous cowboy hat. Casey may have been the last of the Great Game's Great Gamers." Casey had an affinity for Weiss too. Casey, who'd worked as a spy for "Wild" Bill Donovan's OSS during World War II, knew all about the Tradecraft Society.

Herb Meyer, a special assistant to Casey and vice chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council, remembered the Reagan administration as a time when attitudes toward the Soviet Union radically shifted. "From the time the Cold War started, after World War II, everyone in the West had the same objective—not losing," he told me. "In other words, we were playing defense. You just try to hold them off. Well, when you play defense, you lose—you just lose slowly." President Reagan didn't just want to contain the Soviet Union, he wanted to pull the Iron Curtain down. "Everyone thought the big secret was this missile, that missile, the launch codes for the nuclear bomb," Meyer said. "But the biggest secret of the Cold War was that their economy was collapsing beneath their feet." The empire, which stretched from Hanoi to Havana, had become a burden.

Reagan tasked the NSC with constructing plans to attack Soviet economic and political pressure points. That job fell to Roger Robinson, an expert on Eastern markets. According to Robinson, the Soviets spent $16 billion more than they made. They had hard currency income of only $32 billion, which was roughly one-third of Exxon's annual revenues at the time. Two-thirds of every dollar came from energy exports and every one dollar decline in the price of oil would cost the Russians between $500 million and $1 billion in revenue. What's more, their oil fields were in decline. They possessed gas reserves that were massive but inaccessible using old drilling methods. They needed specialized rotary drills and exploration and offshore technology, and the US had a near monopoly on the licenses for that gear.

The Soviets had a critical venture in the works: a nearly 3,000-mile-long oil and natural gas pipeline running from northern Siberia to the Soviet-Czech border, where it would link up to a western European gas grid. The pipeline would provide the Soviets with roughly $30 billion in hard currency annually, Robinson estimated, and would free West Germany, France, and Italy from a dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Herb Meyer told me, "Once you understood how much trouble the Soviet economy was in, you understood how crucial the pipeline was to their survival. It became the target. Shutting it down became the focus in every way."

Reagan signed two National Security Decision Directive memorandums outlining an offensive against the Soviets, ranging from imposing licensing restrictions on drilling and pipeline technology to convincing the Saudis to drop the price of oil to foment anticommunist insurgencies in Poland, Africa, and Afghanistan.

VII. "We fed them a whole lot"

While Reagan's NSC conspired to further weaken the Soviet economy, intelligence analysts spent months trying to develop a strategic approach to the intelligence provided by Vetrov, the disgruntled KGB official. A bureaucracy formed around tackling the problem. The CIA created a Technology Transfer Intelligence Center, where Galahad, Weiss' collaborator, had a hand. Analysis of the intelligence provided by Vetrov found that, over a four-year period, the Soviets had stolen or illegally purchased 30,000 pieces of hardware and some 400,000 technical documents in the West. The Soviets had also gathered valuable intelligence on Western space war defenses and plans for a wide variety of military hardware. It wasn't just military secrets, either. They pilfered machine tools, a high-accuracy 3D coordinate measuring machine, semiconductors, manufacturing techniques.

Weiss pored over the package of raw intelligence provided by Vetrov, known as the Farewell dossier. Weiss described the intelligence as "a dreary recital that droned on and on." But the droning confirmed Weiss' long-held suspicions of a Soviet infrastructure dedicated to stealing Western technology. For decades, the arms race had been a war of forced obsolescences, with each new weapons system rendering the previous iteration useless. The country that lagged behind became vulnerable to a first strike. The Americans believed they could spend the Soviets into submission. But all along the US had been in an arms race against itself.

The Farewell intelligence provided incredible detail about how a concerted Soviet effort, employing some 20,000 people, targeted, acquired, analyzed, and adapted Western technology. There were lists of agents in foreign countries and names and locations of Line X's agents and their assets. According to an intelligence analysis, the Soviets consistently satisfied two-thirds to three-fourths of their annual collection goals, saving billions of dollars.

David Miller, a former intelligence analyst working for the Defense Intelligence Agency who studied Weiss' work as part of an intellectual history of the National Security Council, told me that Weiss transformed this quandary into an economic problem, one that brought him back to his graduate studies. In Econ 101 terms, the Soviets were "fast followers," disadvantaged competitors eager to replicate American innovation just to remain in the game. In the vernacular of Weiss' doctoral thesis, the intelligence provided by Vetrov provided Weiss an opportunity to engage in a limited conflict, an avenue to change tactics and subtly escalate hostilities.

In January 1982, Casey summoned Weiss to CIA headquarters for a meeting. The director's office was a mess of papers, strewn about at random. "No James Bond crystal decanters either, just coffee out of Styrofoam," Weiss observed in his memoir. Weiss proposed using the Farewell shopping lists to supply the Soviets with the products they sought.

But Weiss wanted the gadgets altered, pre-improved so that they would eventually fail. "The scheme was so goober-pea simple that nobody had come upon it," Weiss wrote of his solution. Even if the Soviets sniffed out the American trickery, Weiss wrote, "the stratagem would still work as the Agency's Red Star clientele would be forced to test and retest each recalcitrant unit, provoking delays and finger pointing in the Center, its puffed up potentates sniffing a Gulag behind their next performance appraisal … Real fake devices, false fake devices … The Soviets had set themselves up in exquisite fashion."

This plan to feed defective technology, which Weiss says carried the operation designation "Kudo," existed as part of a larger government mobilization in response to the Farewell intelligence across the national security community. "It was multilayered operation," Galahad told me. According to Galahad, Weiss didn't hold any formal leadership role in this effort; instead, "Gus did his work through his own contacts. He was a White House guy. He could get people to pay attention to his ideas. He had friends in the computer business. He had Casey's ear."

Galahad told me that Weiss zeroed in on the Soviet industrial sector; he wanted to gut punch the Soviet economy. Galahad recalled that Weiss was friendly with the analysts in the CIA's Office of Soviet Research. "Let's say the Italians were building a tractor factory for the Russians in the Ukraine—the guys in OSR would have had access to those blueprints. Gus shared his ideas and recommendations based on that intelligence to his friends at the DoD."

Meanwhile, the government worked with private sector software companies to create doctored industrial products. They were then made available to the patent clerks and engineers in American technology and arms companies who'd been recruited by the KGB.

Weiss' NSC compatriots attempted to sway leaders of Western European countries away from cheap Soviet fuel to divert the flow of cash away from the enemy. NSC energy economist Bill Martin was part of the effort to find other energy sources for European countries. "I remember seeing Gus in the hallway, kind of a mysterious guy, right? He

smiled, almost giggled to himself. Sometimes smart people, they're in their own world and they laugh because they're thinking of something funny that the rest of the world doesn't get. That's Gus. He said to me, 'Oh, Bill. Don't worry if you can't negotiate this thing, we've got an alternative plan.'"

That alternative plan is at the core of the legend of Gus Weiss. The best-known version of the tale goes like this: High up on the Soviet tech shopping list was software to regulate the pressure gauges and valves for the critical Siberian gas pipeline. According to Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes*, the Soviets sought the software on the open market. American export controls prohibited its sale from the US. However, a small industrial software company located in Calgary called Cov-Can produced what the Soviets wanted. As Weiner writes, "The Soviets sent a Line X officer to steal the software. The CIA and the Canadians conspired to let them have it."

The faulty software "weaved" its way through Soviet quality control. The pipeline software ran swimmingly for months, but then pressure in the pipeline gradually mounted. And one day—the date remains unclear, though most put it in June 1982—the software went haywire, the pressure soaring out of control. The pipeline ruptured, igniting a blast in the wilds of Siberia so massive that, according to Thomas C. Reed's *At the Abyss*, "at the White House, we received warning from our infrared satellites of some bizarre event out in the middle of Soviet nowhere. NORAD feared a missile liftoff from a place where no rockets were known to be based. Or perhaps it was the detonation of a nuclear device. The Air Force chief of intelligence rated it at three kilotons."

The pipeline explosion is said to have cost Moscow tens millions of dollars it could ill-afford to waste.

Kudo seems to have continued undetected for more than a year. During a 2002 interview for the Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Richard V. Allen, Reagan's first national security adviser, recounted: "It was a brilliant plan. We started in motion feeding the Soviets bad technology, bad computer technology, bad oil drilling technology. We fed them a whole lot, let them steal stuff that they were happy to get." The Pentagon let slip misleading information about the stealth aircraft, space lasers, and combat aircraft.

Kudo was just a small part of a much broader American reaction to the Farewell intelligence turned over by the French. Throughout the mid-'80s, roughly 200 Soviet intelligence officers and their sources were expelled from countries across Europe. In 1986 the FBI rounded up 55 Soviet operatives living in the United States as diplomats. Suddenly, the Soviets were not only forced to create their own technology, they were also blind to Reagan's massive defense buildup. In *Legacy of Ashes*, Tim Weiner writes, "The operation used almost every weapon at the CIA's command—psychological warfare, sabotage, economic warfare, strategic deception, counterintelligence, cyberwarfare—all in collaboration with the National Security Council, the Pentagon, and the FBI … It was a smashing success. Had the tables been turned, it could have been seen as an act of terror."

VIII. Bodyguard of Lies

One Sunday in 1997, Gus Weiss met a British journalist named Anthony Cave Brown for lunch in the buffet restaurant in the basement of the Watergate. Over his long career, Cave Brown wrote about the murky intersection of spycraft, politics, and war. Having finished his ninth book, he needed a new story to tell. His years of reporting provided him with deep connections in the intelligence community, and one of those suggested he meet Weiss, who showed up for the appointment wearing a Ghost Squadron bomber jacket, Bermuda shorts, and tennis shoes.

No longer a government employee, Weiss was then teaching at George Washington University and doing the occasional intelligence consulting job, and otherwise spending his time reading and "studying advanced computers." According to Cave Brown's notes, he and Weiss bonded over Cave Brown's 1975 book, *Bodyguard of Lies*, an account of the intelligence and deception operations launched by the British leading up to the D-Day invasion of 1944.

Cave Brown made his name in the mid-1950s as a buccaneering reporter for London's *Daily Mail*. He followed Sir Vivian Fuchs to Antarctica and impersonated a Special Branch officer while pursuing a scoop about KGB embeds in a tiny seaside town where the Royal Navy tested equipment for undersea warfare. Cave Brown won infamy for his marathon benders, chartering speed boats and private planes on the company's dime and scurrying down hotel fire escapes before sunrise to avoid the bill. His methods would not pass ethical muster today. He had a reputation for being an "occasionally underhanded reporter who … repeated barroom confidences if it would help him get a story," according to his 2006 obituary in *The Washington Post*. Critics frequently noted his propensity for crafting dramatic tales without regard for the facts.

I spent days combing through Cave Brown's personal papers in the special collections library at Georgetown University. I first became familiar with Gus Weiss after a friend, a movie producer, lent me a small collection of

Weiss' writings. Soon afterward I started talking to the people who knew him, worked with him, and studied his exploits.

As I learned more about Weiss, I developed a fascination with the character beginning to form in my imagination. His published writings revealed his approach to problem-solving and strategic deception. His doctoral dissertation seemed to offer some insight into that pipeline explosion. I reveled in the descriptions conjured by David Miller—who studied Weiss' work closely—of Weiss as a sort of anti–James Bond, a subtle, under-the-radar bureaucrat who fought his country's adversaries with red tape and a headful of contrarian ideas. I understood him as a man whose entire life was secrets. The country's, his own.

Cave Brown's personal papers were another chance to get closer to Weiss. I knew that, over the years, Weiss had been eager to share what little he could about his government service. While so much of what he'd done remained secret, Weiss had chronicled some of his work in trade journals published by the CIA, the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, and the French Legion of Honor. He wrote a long essay about his efforts to kneecap the Evil Empire, entitled "The Farewell Dossier: Duping the Soviets," in the CIA publication *Studies in Intelligence*. He expanded that essay into a monograph he called *The Farewell Dossier: Strategic Deception and Economic Warfare in the Cold War (An Insider's Untold Secret Story)*. Weiss revised those pages obsessively. The prose is baroque and rich with rhyme schemes and word play. He distributed the monograph to friends and colleagues. I have collected at least nine different drafts. Galahad told me he reviewed at least five different drafts of Weiss' writing on the Soviets, to help fact check them. "If it's in there," Galahad told me reassuringly, "then it happened." Unmentioned in the published monograph: exploding pipelines.

Cave Brown also possessed multiple versions. He described the tone of Weiss' writing as "charming, malevolent, dangerous" and imagined he possessed the basis of a best-seller. Weiss, the grade-A schemer, and Cave Brown, the unreliable narrator, became fast friends. Weiss provided Cave Brown with introductions to other American Tradecraft Society members and occasional access to declassified documents.

Cave Brown described Weiss as the mastermind of hyping Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (a k a Star Wars), a phenomenally expensive proposal aimed at intercepting and destroying ballistic missiles for the purpose of wringing the Soviets dry. He quoted Weiss: "I knew something about Soviet psychology. The key was that they believed that whatever the United States said it would do technologically it would do, no matter how expensive it was and no matter how technologically difficult. That was their weakness; what impelled them in large part was the belief that Marxist science must triumph, whatever the cost." The Soviets would have to find some way to respond and the brittle Soviet economy might finally crumble.

Cave Brown breathlessly outlined Weiss and the Tradecraft Society's method of mayhem: a "capacity for creating illusions in order to lend reality to phantasmagoria—exhibitions and displays of optical effects and illusions, the constantly shifting succession of things seen or imagined, a bazaar of fantastic combinations, collections, and assemblages." Cave Brown believed that Weiss was the intellectual engine fueling bluffs and deceptions that cost Moscow untold billions and ultimately led to the fall of the Soviet Union. "I can see Gus Weiss' fingerprints all over it," he wrote in his notebook.

Cave Brown wrapped Weiss in an armor of hyperbole: six feet tall, dashing, occasionally flirtatious with First Lady Nancy Reagan, the richest and most interesting Washingtonian, "a man with the sort of mind that could break the bank of Monte Carlo." Cave Brown couldn't allow Gus Weiss to be understated. Or odd. Or lonely.

Weiss' longtime friend Suzanne Patrick told me that Weiss "was the guy at the cocktail reception, immaculately turned out, but hanging on the outskirts, silently observing. You never quite knew how to place him." Gus' friendships were all binary—based on one-on-one interactions. He'd never gather his acquaintances and friends together because it would be easy to figure out what he did or who he really was. It could have been the nature of the job. More likely, though, it was the nature of the man. Gus Weiss had his own secrets.

Anthony Cave Brown worked on his book about Gus Weiss and the American Tradecraft Society's tech war against the Soviets for almost a decade. In 2004 he submitted a proposal for the book to his agents. In the proposal, Cave Brown describes Weiss as a visionary "who coupled high-tech warfare and strategic deception to the arts and crafts of economic warfare and forged a war winning weapon." Portions of Cave Brown's manuscript are fascinating, deeply researched, and thoroughly reported. More common, though, are false starts and wayward digressions. Weiss had Cave Brown tied up in knots. Cave Brown's literary agents weren't quite sure what to make of the pages. The rejection email ended with Cave Brown's agents saying they no longer wanted to represent him. Two years later, in 2006, Cave Brown passed away.

IX. Down the Rabbit Hole Boldly

In the version of the Gus Weiss legend told by Weiss' friend and colleague Roger Robinson, the Trojan horse software that was sold to the Soviets by Cov-Can and then integrated into the pipeline's computer systems caused the compressors to work too hard, overpressurizing the pipeline and causing an explosion and fire at a compressor station. That massive blast generated a second explosion, hundreds of miles away, that vaporized a passenger train. (In some versions of the legend, that train is carrying Vladimir Putin's beloved aunt.) Robinson says he got the details directly from Gus Weiss. Wayne Keup tells a nearly identical story.

I dwell on the pipeline because it has narrative. It is dramatic. But even Weiss is stingy with the details. In one version of his musings, he writes, "Contrived computer chips wove their way into military equipment, flawed turbines were installed on a found their way into gas pipeline, and defective plans disrupted the output of chemical plants and a tractor factory."

The fullest form of this yarn about the Trojan horse and the explosion so big it was seen from space comes from Thomas C. Reed's *At the Abyss*. In 2018, I talked to Reed, who told me that Ronald Reagan's national security adviser, William Clark, connected him to Weiss sometime around 2000. "I called him and he began to talk. He really gave away the souvenirs from his nuclear experiences. I think he was really depressed." He told me that Weiss was his only source.

There was something about Weiss—figurehead of a secret society of intelligence officials, "White House master of deception in everything but title," according to Anthony Cave Brown—as the sole source of information that just didn't feel right to me. Corroborating the story proved difficult. I made a Freedom of Information Act request to the CIA about Weiss and the pipeline explosion and "Operation Kudo"; the CIA wrote back saying it could "neither confirm nor deny the existence or nonexistence of records responsive to your request." The website for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library answers a search for Weiss' name by displaying the folders in his portfolio: Microwave Weapons, Artificial Intelligence, Ballistic Missile Defense, Computer Database Security, Outer Space Arms Control, Subsonic Long Range Aircraft, Special Metals, Stealth, Yamal Gas Pipeline. With any luck, I should be able to access the papers in 2024. I couldn't find anybody who knew the actual date of the pipeline explosion. NORAD said it didn't have any records of a massive blast in Siberia in the two years surrounding best estimates. There are no newspaper accounts of the explosion or reports of interruptions to natural gas service in western Europe.

I spent so long immersed in this problem that I had a hard time sorting facts from legend. What if this was all one never-ending public disinformation operation—some psychological warfare scheme to make the Soviets look like dupes? What if it was just a fabulous red herring? Weiss wrote about his exploits in the CIA's internal publication. But if his claims had been bogus, wouldn't some spook with knowledge of actual events have spoken up and exposed Weiss as a fraud? This story is a tangle of knots.

After the 2004 release of Reed's book, as Weiss' reputation as the author of the Siberian pipeline sabotage grew, a former KGB station chief came forward and called the mammoth explosion a fiction. He claimed human error had caused an explosion so minor that repairs were completed in a single day. Shortly afterward, a second Russian agent came forward in an effort to debunk the explosion narrative. Reed defended his work by pointing out that KGB employees are typically not renowned for honesty; the Russians would never admit such a humiliation.

I eventually tracked down a French pipeline consultant named Gilbert de Montricher. From 1982 until 1985, according to his LinkedIn profile, Montricher served as a vice president at Cov-Can. When I told him about my interest in the pipeline explosion, Montricher responded with a four-page memo addressing the viability of the legend.

Montricher rates the likelihood of the story, as it's presented in Reed's book, as low. He says that Cov-Can was in charge of the software for the Russians, but only at the very beginning. It failed to develop the software, and the contract was awarded to a different software company. That company, Montricher asserted, delivered the software in 1986, several years after the year the explosion was supposed to have occurred. (I could not reach anyone at that company.)

When I talked to Thomas C. Reed about my problems confirming the account in his book, he reached for the broader context. Weiss told Reed about a pipeline caper in Siberia; Reed recalled hearing about a nuclear-sized blast out there in the wilderness that people from the Air Force found curious. Reed put one and one together. "It's not clear that the explosion that I remember and the pipeline explosion Gus described are connected. It is very clear that all the Farewell stuff happened. It's very clear that we've put tech junk in their technology systems. It's very clear that

we did sell 'em software that was garbled. We did do stuff and it's pretty clear to me from other sources that it really disrupted the pipeline."

I reached out to Tim Weiner, author of *Legacy of Ashes*. I explained my reservations about the tale. Weiner faced a similar dilemma while reporting on the incident: The absence of hard evidence—thermal images or satellite pictures—of the blast or damage gave him pause. Weiner had good sources on the scheme to feed defective information to Line X, and the pipeline was a priority target. Weiner pulled down a copy of *Legacy of Ashes* from his bookshelf and scanned the relevant pages. He told me he'd had no reason to doubt the account provided by Reed. "I had three high-level people saying, 'Yes, that happened.' Weiner told me. "No one saying, 'No, that never happened.' It seemed solid enough, but it's not proof of a Hiroshima in Siberia. *Something* happened. The question is: How big was it? A monkey wrench or a major event?"

I spoke for a final time with Roger Robinson, Gus' beloved National Security Council colleague. "I know it happened because I was there. Because one afternoon Gus came in my office upset. Innocent people had died in the explosion. Gus would never lie about that." I told Robinson about the root of my doubt: If your mother says she loves you, ask for a second source; everything has to be verified. "I understand," he said. "But so much of what we did felt like a fantasy."

After our conversation I turned to Weiss' monograph for answers. "Devotees of 007 are fiercely skeptical of Farewell's authenticity, dismissing the adventure as a preposterous lot of overripe nonsense." Then Weiss urges skeptics to ponder the maxim that "in matters clandestine, the more absurd an adventure appears the more likely it is to be true."

The mystery suits the man.

X. CODA

Some versions of the legend of Gus Weiss end with him being dumped over the balcony railing of his Watergate apartment by a Russian assassin. This version of the story is perhaps one that Anthony Cave Brown may have favored, and that even I have entertained. Weiss died as Vladimir Putin's rise to power was beginning, and as old foes of the Soviet Union started showing up dead. Weiss being pushed is an ending ripe with the intrigue of a Cold War spy thriller, but those closest to Weiss know a more painful truth. His decline was sad and rapid: The Cold War ended, the communists had been defeated, and there were no more battles left to fight.

For the first time, Gus Weiss had no purpose. He was lonely, desperate for connection. He spent more and more time in New York with Dede, the beloved aunt who bought him atlases and airplane texts when he was a boy. He'd fly out to Los Angeles to visit Maury Eisenstein, a Rand Corporation engineer and onetime Tradecraft Society member, and Eisenstein's wife, who recalled for me how on Sunday mornings he watched cartoons with the couple's grandchildren.

An untidy restlessness marked those years. He showed up to his 50th college reunion in Nashville with nothing but the clothes on his back and a gift for his host. He stayed with an old friend, Eric Chazen, and his wife, and brought her an expensive silk scarf decorated with escape routes from Baghdad. That first night at the Chazen home, Weiss never made it to bed. Instead he stayed up until dawn, polishing off a bottle of single malt Scotch while devouring the first two volumes of the complete works of Isaiah Berlin. When we met over dinner, Chazen told me that a few days into the visit, he brought Gus to J. C. Penney to purchase fresh clothing.

The need to pass on his stories seems to have been Weiss' most urgent need. He wrote long, involved emails to the attention of the Chazens' dog. He uploaded his experiences and accomplishments working on the space program to an old friend's 11-year-old grandson, stuffing the envelopes with NASA mission patches and accounts of sitting in the cockpit of the space shuttle shortly before a launch.

Weiss kept trying with his old NSC mates too. "We failed him at some level," Robinson confessed, his voice heavy with regret. "It's easy to see that now. I knew he was insecure, troubled, repressed. I didn't reach out adequately. I thought he was more durable. I thought he had a fuller dance card than he did. Others did too. We did talk about the fact that he had taken unsung to a ludicrous level."

Robinson explained further: "Gus wasn't big on recognition. He lived by Reagan's maxim about there being no limits to the amount of good you can do when you don't care who gets credit. He was clever and not a saint. He felt like nobody knew where he'd been or what he'd done. It happens with geniuses who self-immolate all of the time. They can't take the put-down so they end the show on their own terms, by their own hand. I don't know what Gus' parting

feelings were—sadness or bitterness or fuck-you disdain. I would bet it was disdain. The brighter you are the more intensely you feel it. He jumped for a reason.”

This story ends as it begins: On the cold sidewalk outside the Watergate, a November night, a body on the ground. Gus Weiss did not leave behind a suicide note. What he did leave is an unsolvable Cold War puzzle—one protected by layers of impenetrable government classification, cagey colleagues, aging friends with deteriorating memories and failing health. I’ve reported on Weiss’ life and exploits for more than two years, and his death feels to me not just like an act of abject despair but a mischievous taunt. I understand now that I could chase this story for decades, following a trail of clues from one rabbit hole to the next, each new, verifiable fact inevitably yielding three new questions requiring investigation. I understand that this story is made infinitely more complicated by Weiss’ affinity for misinformation, his tendency toward an asymmetrical grand strategy, his love of mischief. Gus Weiss—his life, his career—is an imperfect puzzle. One that I will never be able to solve.

I felt this pang most acutely one day in January, two years into this inquiry, when I found myself on the phone with Bill Barry, NASA’s chief historian. I was trying to find an August 1989 technical analysis of the similarities between the American shuttle and the Soviet Buran. The analysis was alluded to in a 1997 NBC News story about how the Soviets stole shuttle designs rejected by NASA and built a flawed spacecraft, which hinted at Operation Kudo’s success. As Barry delivered the news that he and his staff, after an intensive search, had been unable to locate the document, I vented my frustrations. “In the realm of strategic deception, the breadcrumbs always lead you to what the deceiver wants you to know,” Barry replied. He wished me luck and ended the call.

Alex French (@MisterAlexFren1) is a writer living in New Jersey.