Fail Safe Study Guide

Fail Safe by Eugene Burdick

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In Fail-Safe, a well-known thriller from the 1960s, coauthors Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler fashion an exciting but cautionary tale of what can happen when two countries amass nuclear weapons in a continuous contest to become the mightiest military force on Earth. The novel was written in the midst of just such an astonishing situation, known as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The story begins placidly enough, when Russian language expert Peter Buck goes to his office at the White House and begins reading Soviet newspapers. His red phone, a direct line from the President, rings for the first time in his experience, and the plot begins to accelerate. Buck is called to the White House's underground bomb shelter with the President and a few other aides to deal with a possible crisis. At the Air Force's War Room in Omaha, American bombers and fighter planes are in pursuit of an unidentified flying object over Alaska. It turns out to be merely an off-course commercial passenger aircraft, but one group of six bombers flies past the so-called Fail-Safe point, a predetermined point in the sky beyond which they are not allowed to go without direct orders. As War Room officials watch on a large radar screen, the bombers head toward Russia with a full load of nuclear weapons. Unbeknownst to military personnel, an electronic malfunction in the high-technology equipment that monitors fail-safe operations has caused attack orders to be mistakenly sent to the bomber group's commander, Lt. Col. Grady.

Top American military and political leaders are assembled at the Pentagon, where they watch the bombers' progress on a large screen similar to those in Omaha and in the White House bomb shelter. Attempts to contact the bombers by radio fail. Nobody is sure what happened, and much debate ensues over whether it could be mechanical failure or if someone has gone berserk. Both options are widely thought to be unlikely, although General Warren Black, who has been a friend of the President since their college days, holds the minority opinion that mechanical failure is quite possible.

The President orders fighter planes to try to shoot down the bombers, but they cannot catch them before the fighters run out of fuel and crash into the sea. The President then quickly engages in telephone discussions with Premier Khrushchev that are translated by Buck. With the Americans' help, the Russians destroy four of the six bombers, but two nonetheless get through to Moscow, including the one piloted by Lt. Col. Grady. The Russians have scrambled the bombers' radio signals, but now the President contacts Grady and tells him to turn around. Grady's orders at this stage of a fail-safe mission are to ignore voice commands, and he shuts off the radio. The President tells Khrushchev that he realizes the Russians will have to retaliate if Moscow is destroyed. He says to avoid all-out nuclear war, he will order New York City to be destroyed if Moscow is bombed. The President tells General Black to fly over New York. When Col. Grady avoids the last Russian defenses and bombs Moscow instead, General Black follows his orders to drop nuclear bombs on New York, even though his own family is there. He immediately takes poison from his suicide kit. When the President receives word of this act of bravery by Black's copilot, he says that he will recommend the Congressional Medal of Honor for Black.

Preface and Chapter 1

Preface and Chapter 1 Summary

Fail-Safe, by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, is a best-selling thriller first published in 1962, followed two years later by a popular film starring Henry Fonda and Walter Matthau. Set during the Cold War, it explores what could happen if one of the two superpowers were to accidentally launch a nuclear strike against the other. A brief Preface by the co-authors indicates they had no access to classified information in preparing the novel, and they embellished the weapons described in declassified documents by making them more powerful and effective. They envision the novel's action as taking place in 1967. They warn that the laws of probability suggest an accident will occur if the nuclear weapons buildup by the two countries continues.

Chapter 1, "The Translator," introduces Peter Buck as he walks through Washington, D.C. on a spring morning, headed for his office in the White House. He greets a guard known to him only by his nickname, The Pot, because of his pot belly. The guard tries to guess what Buck has brought for lunch that day, as he does every day. He loses, but he keeps a tally of his guesses and has been right an amazing 501 of 932 times. Buck enters his office in the East Wing and begins to very rapidly read Russian newspapers and magazines. This gives him pleasure, as he knows he is one of the nation's top three American-born translators of Russian. He has an average IQ but an extraordinary facility with languages, which was discovered only when he was called up for military duty at age 22, at the start of the Korean War in the 1950s. With intensive training, he learned Russian in a year, and went to work in the Pentagon. After his army discharge, he married and began studying law on the G.I. Bill., which he is still doing at a gradual pace while he works on the White House staff. He has met the President, and was impressed by him. This morning, Buck's special, red telephone rings for the first time since he has been at the White House. The President is on the other end. He asks Buck to go to the White House bomb shelter as soon as possible, and hangs up.

Preface and Chapter 1 Analysis

In October of 1962, the year Fail-Safe first was published, an event that became known as the Cuban missile crisis took place, in which America and Russia barely avoided a nuclear war over missile bases the USSR was establishing in Cuba. This was during the so-called Cold War, in which the two superpowers continued to amass nuclear armaments up to and beyond a point dubbed mutually assured destruction (MAD). Fail-Safe was written amid a general atmosphere of concern in America that nuclear war was the likeliest result of an unceasing weapons build-up, as the co-authors warn in their Preface. In dramatizing how that feared war could eventuate, their novel makes a strong case against the madness in MAD.

In Chapter 1, the co-authors elect to begin their story with the man who eventually will translate the critical conversations between the President and the Soviet Premier when war is imminent. There is an advantage in focusing early on a character who might be considered marginal in this story, which is it places emphasis on good communication, thus suggesting that the first step toward alleviating the mutual doubts and suspicions that can lead nations to war is open, honest talk. The guessing game Buck and the Pot play symbolizes and perhaps subtly parodies the absence of solid information America and Russia often have in trying to interpret what the other country is doing, despite all the technology at their disposal, because technology cannot read minds. Buck's background story shows his pride in his language skills, which derive from an extraordinary gift that has landed him in the White House. His mini-portrait is of an average fellow with one exceptional ability. The call from the President on the special phone that has never before rung in Buck's experience is an effective way to launch the plot.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2, "The War Room, Omaha," takes places in a room about the size of a small theater, within a building of the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command (SAC) in Nebraska. The room's main feature is the Big Board, a plastic screen covering one wall, which at the moment glows with an annotated map of the world. Among the six men in the room are Congressman Raskob, visiting from New York, Air Force Lieutenant General Bogan, his assistant Colonel Cascio, and Gordon Knapp, the president of Universal Electronics, whose company produced much of the technological equipment used by the War Room staff. Knapp, a renowned inventor and scientist, is on his first visit to the War Room, and General Bogan can see that he is excited. Raskob, in conversation with Colonel Cascio, becomes interested when he learns the young officer is from New York City, but Bogan feels protective of his assistant. He recalls a visit to New York with Cascio, who went to see his parents, both of whom were alcoholics. General Bogan is from a Tennessee family with a strong military background, which is why his given names are Grant Lee, after the two famous Civil War generals. Knapp mentions that the subterranean War Room is like being in a submarine, which makes Bogan think nostalgically of his years as a pilot. He had won the Distinguished Flying Cross in World War II, shooting down six enemy Focke-Wulfs from his P-38 in one engagement. Initially, he had trouble adjusting to the War Room command, but he gradually began to appreciate its value and the professionalism of his men.

The Big Board shows a display of Russian submarines around the world, some of them quite close to the United States. Raskob is surprised, but Bogan explains that the limit of international waters is only three miles from shore. A blip on the screen shows an unidentified flying object near Greenland. American aircraft are sent to investigate, and Bogan tells the visitors that the planes will fly to a Fail-Safe point, beyond which they will not go unless by direct order, which is transmitted by a coded radio signal to a Fail-Safe box on each plane. This transmission can only be activated by the President's order. Raskob asks about the danger of someone going insane, and Bogan reassures him that psychological screenings are intense. Raskob asks how often UFOs appear, and Bogan says about six times per month. Colonel Cascio says the Fail-Safe system is infallible, but in an italicized section, the authors sketch a scene in which, even as Cascio speaks, two soldiers are monitoring computers deep within the complex that houses the War Room. One man stands to get a cigarette from the other man, and just then, a small condenser blows out soundlessly. No instruments register the malfunction, which the men do not notice. Back in the War Room, Bogan says the UFO is probably a commercial airliner blown off course by high winds. The Big Board shows six Vindicator Bombers heading toward it, which Bogan says can fly at 1500 miles per hour. When the UFO loses altitude and drops from the screen, Bogan orders an upgrade to Condition Yellow, which he says is routine. As the planes approach Fail-Safe point, Bogan tensely orders Condition Green, which is the last stage before Condition Red, a preparation for war. The bombers then identify the UFO as a commercial airliner, and Bogan relaxes,

explaining that the passenger plane probably lost an engine but regained power after its descent. Raskob then notices that one of the six bombers has gone past Fail-Safe and is headed toward Russia. Bogan immediately orders Cascio to call the President on the red phone.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In the style of a thriller, characters are introduced quickly and a bit of background is provided to help etch each character in the reader's mind. In particular, the war hero credentials of General Bogan and the alcoholic family background of his assistant, Colonel Cascio, establish a strong sense of these two characters, who will play key roles in the novel. Another important aspect of the story is the War Room itself, which is portrayed with as much attention to detail as the people in it. This is because it is the repository of military high technology, which is central to the conduct of the Cold War and which would be relied upon in the event of real war. After the omnipresence of the enemy is established on the Big Board, followed by the description of the Fail-Safe method, the claim that the technology is virtually infallible is immediately shown to be false when a condenser malfunctions and nobody notices. This quickly leads to the failure of the six bombers to turn back from the Fail-Safe point, and within a matter of a few pages, the authors have set up the conditions for a nuclear confrontation between the superpowers. The most important aspect of this rapidly sketched scenario is the confidence among the military men that nothing can go wrong with the technology, because it is too finely tuned to allow errors or malfunctions to persist. The ease with which a malfunction occurs and escapes detection is remarkable, particularly because it seems to have an immediate effect on the pilots of bombers that already in the air. Without a shot being fired as yet, the authors have managed to ratchet up the excitement.

Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter 3, "Descent with Pomp and Authority," Buck leaves his office only to encounter a Marine Corps major who checks his identification and escorts him through corridors to a military elevator he had never seen. Outside it, they meet the President and his secretary, a white-haired woman named Mrs. Johnson, who used to work for the President's famous father. Her nickname is "Johnnie" and her demeanor toward the President is neither frightened nor too familiar. The President greets Buck, remembering that they meet several years ago. They all enter the elevator, go deep underground, and step into a large room that contains about six desks and a screen covering one wall. Buck recognizes White House staff members in the room. The President enters a small office, gives Johnnie instructions for the press secretary about how to handle the media, and asks her to give a Pentagon list to Buck. It is a card on which are printed the names of top military officers and department leaders. While the President answers a ringing phone, which he knows is General Bogan in Omaha, Johnnie tells Buck that at least the President has advisers, unlike President Truman during the Korean War, who had to make decisions all alone. She says that was one of the first things she changed, and Buck realizes for the first time that they could be in the midst of a momentous situation.

In Chapter 4, "The Blue Skies, the Black Holes," Bogan hangs up the phone after speaking to the President and picks up a phone that will transmit to all SAC command posts his confirmation of Condition Red, but only as preparation, not yet as a "go" or call to action. At an air force base in Louisiana, an officer puts down the phone and sounds an alarm throughout the base. Within five minutes, the first wave of Vindicator bombers is in the air, and the second series is preparing for takeoff. Across the country, thousands of fighter planes are readied, although only a few are sent into the air. Nobody knows whether it is a real drill or practice, and everyone is calm and efficient. General Bogan also activates the Gold System of missiles, including preparations to launch the giant missiles stored underground in Colorado. Again, the men doing the work deep under the earth's surface have no idea if it is a drill or a real emergency. A favorite story among them is the Greek myth of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder uphill, watch it roll back downhill, and roll it up again, endlessly. The most well-educated among the men are fans of Albert Camus, the Frenchman who wrote about meaningless and the absurdity of existence. These soldiers all realize that their enemies and allies elsewhere in the world are doing similar work. They are well-trained and disciplined, but they never discuss what will happen if the missiles are launched.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The introduction in Chapter 3 of Mrs. Johnson shows that the President places importance on personal relationships that go back a long way, a fact that will prove to be pivotal when the crisis reaches fever pitch. Johnnie's comment about her influence on

President Truman provides both comic relief and the wise recognition that minor players in a drama of international significance sometimes can have major roles. As such, Johnnie's situation suggests the potential importance of Buck's role as translator. Another hint that he will be important is given when the President gives Buck the card with the names of the Pentagon leaders on it. In Chapter 4, General Bogan's dissemination of the Condition Red command and the preparations it sets in motion are another way the authors escalate tension without any actual confrontation yet taking place. The myth of Sisyphus and the nihilistic philosophy of Albert Camus are symbolic ways of showing that the repetitive and generally useless preparations for a potential war are driven by the absurd situation of two countries continually building up and exercising their military strength, all for the supposed goal of preserving peace. No wonder the soldiers do not discuss the potential end result of all this saber rattling. By showing them going about their duties with total, unquestioning obedience, the authors pose the unspoken question of who, then, is thinking logically about this essentially ridiculous and dangerous behavior.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5, "Flayed Bull," opens with Brig. Gen. Warren A. Black jerked awake by a variation of the same dream he has been having for six months. He knows what he calls the Dream will vanish if he resigns, but he cannot do that. The Dream occurs in a bullring, although he has never been to a bullfight. An invisible matador tears strips of flesh from the bull. General Black, in the crowd, notices with satisfaction that the other audience members are people with whom he works. As the bull comes close to him, it is almost has been stripped bare of skin, and he realizes that he has become the bull, which is when he always wakes. He gets up, careful not to awaken his wife, Betty. He goes into the bedroom of their two teenaged sons, twelve and fourteen, arranges their bedclothes, and goes into the bathroom. As he shaves, he thinks about Betty and the family of rich San Franciscans from which he comes. He thinks about how he went into the Air Force, which subsequently sent him to an Ivy League college to study with the famous Professor Tolliver. There he met Betty, who took one of Tolliver's seminars on international relations. Tolliver was a liberal who turned conservative, surprising everyone. Betty was one of the only students brave enough to confront Tolliver. Also in the seminar was a young Ph.D. candidate named Walter Groteschele, who impressed Black, although Groteschele sided with Professor Tolliver. Black supported Betty's point of view, which bothered her, because he was in the military, but she quickly grew to love him and they soon married. Back in the present, Black drives to an Air Force base on Long Island, from which he flies a Cessna to Washington. He thinks about the previous night's cocktail party, at which Groteschele got into a debate with a liberal journalist named Emmett Foster about what would happen in the event of a full-scale nuclear war. Groteschele had argued that the winner would be the country that was less ruined, which infuriated Betty, who had drunk too much. She said the arms buildup was madness, and Black defended her position. His thoughts return to the present, and he lands the Cessna a short drive from the Pentagon.

In Chapter 6, "Bomb Shelter, the White House," the President is preoccupied as he sits in the small office with Buck in the White House bomb shelter. He asks Buck what he thinks of the list of Pentagon officials on the card, and Buck says he does not know the people except by reputation. The President seems to like this answer. He says Bogan told him there is no standard operating procedure for the current situation. He says General Black, whom he calls Blackie, is a friend from college and a trustworthy man. He asks who should be added to the advisory group from outside the Pentagon. Buck can think of no one, but Johnnie suggests Walter Groteschele. The President remarks that Groteschele's book has almost made him a Pentagon member, but he gives the order to invite Groteschele to the meeting.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

General Black's dream in Chapter 5 is clearly symbolic of his problems on the job at the Pentagon. The chapter depicts two situations in which Black took Betty's side in arguments about nuclear arms build-ups. In the first case, he was already in the military but was in a college class, which perhaps was not quite as dangerous as the second instance, when Betty called the escalation madness and Black agreed in public. Such views are heretical in the military, which is why in his dream he is a bull being flayed by an invisible matador as his coworkers look on. The matador could be the system, the set of beliefs and allegiances to ideology that accompany a high military position, or perhaps it is Black himself, who could escape his predicament by resigning if he chose to do so. It is significant in Chapter 6 that the President is glad to hear that Buck does not know the Pentagon leaders personally. This shows the President is aware of the tunnel vision that can be an occupational hazard in the military. He knows that he needs to have people around him who do not carry inflexible prejudices into delicate international negotiations. Also, the President's comment about Blackie being a trusted friend from school hearkens back to his attachment to Johnnie. It is not simply old friendships that the President cherishes, but the fact that these people are known quantities, which means he can trust them to react in predictable ways, which is essential during a crisis. The President again demonstrates his desire to avoid being overwhelmed by military thinking when he asks for a recommendation of someone outside the Pentagon to join the talks.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7, "The Organized Man," describes Walter Groteschele awakening at exactly 5:30 a.m., even though he does not use an alarm. This morning, he will go to the airport and fly to Washington. On the bathroom scales, he sees that he weighs 20 pounds more than in his college days, but he has no time in his life to exercise. Sitting in the taxi to the airport, his mind wanders to his father, a Jewish doctor in Germany who in the early 1930s had foreseen the troubles to come and brought his family to America. He was required to do his residency again in the U.S. but had no money and ended up working as a butcher, but was not embittered. He thought German Jews should have armed themselves and fought Hitler. Groteschele became a dedicated student in school, who majored in mathematics, but just after he graduated, Pearl Harbor was attacked. In the service, he interviewed German prisoners of war, and then former SS troopers, and later, he got a Ph.D. in political science funded by the G.I. bill. He decided to advance his career by becoming a protégé of Professor Tolliver. When a book by Tolliver received poor reviews, Groteschele published a defense of it in a magazine. Tolliver made Groteschele his research assistant. Groteschele wrote a thesis about preemptive strikes in war. He was invited to the Pentagon to give a talk, which pleased a general. Groteschele's thesis became a book that was reviewed and made his reputation. He became a celebrity and chose a professorial job at a distinguished Washington university. He married and the couple had a teenaged daughter. A beautiful woman named Evelyn Wolfe became infatuated with him. They had a brief affair, but Groteschele, who had always feared the entrapment of a woman's love, foresaw that Evelyn would be a demanding lover. He ended their relationship by startling her when he slapped her in the face. Back in the present, Groteschele enters the Pentagon, looking forward to an exciting day.

In Chapter 8, "The President and the Translator," as the President ponders the situation, Buck watches him and realizes that he could never be a leader of this man's caliber. The President remarks that the crisis might be over any minute, but Buck suggests that it is unlikely, because the military leaders would not have contacted the President if they could solve the problem themselves. The President agrees, and warns Buck that he might have to translate a telephone conversation between the President and the Kremlin. He says the translation must include tone and nuance as well as specific words. The President remarks that Gen. Bogan is a good man, but the new Secretary of the Army, Wilcox, talks too tough. The one whose opinion counts most to the President is Swenson, the Secretary of Defense. When Swenson calls, the President reiterates to him that Gen. Black is important to the President as an old classmate and trusted friend. After the phone conversation, Buck considers Swenson, who he has seen distantly. His reputation is that of a nondescript, calm man with a powerful intellect and penetrating style of questioning. The President picks up the red phone and then tells Buck to call Omaha on the other phone.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The background given to Walter Groteschele's personal story in Chapter 7 explains why he has taken a hawkish stance on war, in the aftermath of World War II and its devastating effects on the Jewish people. It therefore is not intellectually dishonest of him to support Professor Tolliver's positions, but he shows himself to be a calculating man in the way he shapes his own career, and the authors clearly intend this to be an unsavory characteristic. This harshness in Groteschele's emotional makeup is symbolized by the way he avoids a long-term entanglement with his beautiful mistress. He slaps her in the face, a preemptive strike, like dropping the first bombs in a war that has not even been officially declared. In contrast, the President as seen through Buck's eyes in Chapter 8 looks increasingly like a strong, intelligent, and morally upright leader. He has thought ahead to a possible conversation with the Soviet Premier, and has specific instructions for Buck's potential translation work. The President's analyses of principal players in the Pentagon are short and to the point. When he repeats to Swenson over the phone that Blackie is a trusted old friend from school, the authors are foreshadowing an order from the President to Black that will be so difficult to give and to carry out, it is best entrusted only to an old friend. Swenson has now been described by the President as his most important adviser, which the authors underline by having Buck think about Swenson's reputation.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9, "The Vindicators," goes back to earlier that morning, when Lt. Col. Grady, the Group 6 leader, admired his Vindicator bomber before takeoff, musing that this highly-automated machine, which could be operated aloft by three men, would be replaced before long by an unmanned aircraft. Within three hours, the group is at 60,000 feet over Alaska. Following SAC protocol, Grady has been teamed with two men he does not know. His bombardier's name is Captain Thomas and his weapons operator is Lieutenant Sullivan. The three fly mostly in silence, each wrapped in his own tasks, within a tight formation of six aircraft. Grady hears a tone and sees a red light flashing on his Fail-Safe box. He and Thomas both open red Fail-Safe envelopes, which show an identical code: CAP-811. The same code has appeared in white lettering on the Fail-Safe box. Thomas tries to verify the order by radio on an alternate channel of the Fail-Safe box, and the same code appears again. They open their operational orders, which say that the target is Moscow. Grady hesitates a moment, and then addresses the other planes over a very low-powered radio system, giving them the attack orders.

In Chapter 10, "The Briefing," A sergeant tells General Black that the conference has been moved to the Big Board room in the Pentagon. General Stark overhears this comment, and as he walks with Black, he suggests that Swenson will be out to roast Wilcox, which General Black privately does not believe. Black thinks that General Stark, a young man like himself, is bright but is best as managing others rather than doing things himself. He made his reputation by bringing Groteschele to prominence. The Big Board room looks like the War Room at Omaha, but without the desks. It is the SAC strategy center. It receives satellite signals relayed from a Colorado station. A picture comes into view of forests and rocket silos in Russia, and Black daydreams of when such surveillance will show details of objects in the hands of people on the ground. The Big Board room gradually fills with 20 men, half of them in uniform. Black reflects that such briefings have an air of unreality about them, because they are divorced from the everyday world. He traces this sense of unreality to Groteschele's ideas concerning accidental war, which will be the topic of this briefing. Groteschele dismisses as unlikely the idea that a madman could cause a nuclear war, and he says the odds of machine error are 50 to 1. Black disagrees with both these analyses, and he reflects that the chance for error exists in all the other countries around the world that have long-range missiles. The problem with the equipment is that it cannot be tested in real conditions until its first use, he thinks. As Groteschele talks, the audience's attention turns to the Big Board, where an unidentified blip is being chased by six groups of aircraft. Five groups turn away, but one continues past the Fail-Safe point. Black, Stark, and Groteschele are the only three men in the room who understand what has happened. The board goes black, and the President calls, wanting to speak to the senior person present, who is Wilcox. The Big Board lights up again, showing the blips of Group 6 headed toward Russia.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Having rather elaborately set the stage for the crisis, the authors turn in Chapter 9 to the airmen whose fate it is to carry out the mistaken bombing orders. Surprisingly, this is the first point in the thriller when the scene shifts to the characters that most thrillers would be likely to depict as the central ones. Instead, Lt. Col. Grady and his fellow fliers are given a much more realistic role in the novel, because they are merely obeying orders. The authors have recognized that the true drama in the situation lies with the people whose role it is to decide whether to go to war. Two observations made in Chapter 10, both of which apparently are drawn from the authors' research, add emotional interest to the narrative. The first is that Air Force regulations discourage friends from flying together on missions. The three-man crew, who momentarily will embark on a deadly mission, are virtual strangers. This situation is the reverse image of the President's attempts to ensure that people he knows well will participate in the difficult decisions he must make. The second important aspect of the chapter is the description of how the Fail-Safe code is transmitted and double-checked. It does seem to be fail-safe, yet the authors already have revealed that the command is in error, which undermines the validity of the entire process. Against this backdrop, the unwitting Groteschele makes his case in Chapter 10 for the system's virtual infallibility. Stark is positioned by the authors as a general whose career is tied to Groteschele's star, but Black's failure to be swayed by Groteschele's argument demonstrates the strength of his analytical mind. The authors once again indicate where they stand, by showing Group 6 on the screen as they continue past the Fail-Safe point even while Groteschele insists that the system prevents mistakes.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

In Chapter 11, "The Urgent Minutes," General Bogan in the Omaha War Room tells the President over the phone that it remains unknown why the Group 6 aircraft have flown past the Fail-Safe point. Also, radio contact cannot be made, perhaps because of Russians jamming the system. If they cannot be contacted within five minutes, the pilots will not turn back even if contacted later by the President's order, because a Russian agent might be imitating the President's voice. Bogan says the next standard step is to order the Skyscrapper fighter planes, which were escorting the bombers but are now heading back to base, to turn and chase the Vindicators. The President complies. Meanwhile, Swenson has entered the Big Board room at the Pentagon. On the red phone, the President tells Swenson that General Bogan has recommended shooting down the Vindicators. This is not true, but he wants to goad the Pentagon team into making their own recommendation. The team confers while the President holds. Wilcox is against the idea and Groteschele wants to wait for a while, but Black says it must be done immediately to appease the Russians and avert war. Swenson reports to the President that the team is unanimously in favor of shooting down the bombers. In the White House bomb shelter, Buck has heard everything. The President calmly tells him to call Omaha. He orders the attack. Col. Cascio, Bogan's aide, explains that this means the fighters will have to use their afterburner fuel and will then crash into the sea before making it back to base. The President repeats the order. In Omaha, the radio operators reach the fighters and Colonel Cascio very reluctantly orders the attack. On another radio frequency, the fighter pilots discuss the improbability of this order, because the bombers are too far ahead to be caught before the fighters run out of fuel. Even so, they turn and accelerate. Meanwhile, Colonel Grady and the other Vindicator pilots continue impassively flying. The President calls Swenson and tells him the Pentagon team should think about what to do if the fighters cannot catch the bombers.

In Chapter 12, "Words, Statistics, and Opinions," the men at the Pentagon and in Omaha discuss over the phone what to do next. Black points out that the only two things that could have caused this situation are someone going berserk in Group 6 or a compound mechanical failure. General Bogan says that Colonel Cascio believes the Russians have figured out how to make it look like Group 6 is heading toward Russia, although it actually has turned back. Swenson rejects this idea. Black says he thinks the Russians are not too worried yet, but they will know something is wrong when they see the Skyscrappers try to shoot down the Vindicators. Groteschele argues that the Russians will react in accordance with their Marxist ideology. Nuclear war would disrupt their progress toward the world domination predicted by their ideology, which means the Russians would not retaliate against an American first strike. He advises doing nothing. Black disagrees, and as he speaks, the Big Board shows the pursuing fighters firing their missiles, which will fall short, even as the planes run out of fuel and crash. Knapp, the businessman, says the multiple electronic systems almost guarantee a mechanical breakdown, which very easily could be missed by the human operators. Congressman

Raskob says he doesn't believe Premier Khrushchev will not retaliate. The red phone rings, and Swenson tells the President that mechanical error is probably the cause of the situation. Based on Black's estimate, he says the Vindicators fly so fast that two of them will probably get through Russian defenses. Swenson hangs up and says the President will talk to Khrushchev.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The most impressive aspect of Chapter 11 is how convincingly the authors portray the sequence of events involved in deciding what to do about the bombers. The President's ability to stay calm and analytical under intense pressure and to make quick, firm decisions is breathtaking. The authors present a commander-in-chief of heroic qualities, who seems capable of putting aside qualms about sacrificing the lives of his airmen when he is in pursuit of a greater good. General Black, who has played the role of the dove in the story until now, is the one who recognizes the need to carry out this sad plan, while the hawkish Wilcox and Groteschele do not have the stomach for it. Swenson recognizes the need to give the President full psychological support from the group, which is why he says they concur unanimously with the attack plan. Colonel Cascio is obviously having much trouble with this concept, and his hesitation in carrying out the attack orders foreshadows the attempt he will make to thwart the mission. The obedience of the Skyscrapper pilots is meant to be disturbing, because they know they cannot reach the bombers. The point the authors are making is that this crisis, which arose from a situation of absurdity, is now forcing people into making further unreasonable decisions. In Chapter 12, the Pentagon team shows that despite all the technology at its command, they do not know how the problem occurred or what to do about it. Colonel Cascio's theory that it is a ruse seems as ridiculous as Groteschele's notion that the Russians will not respond if Moscow is destroyed. Knapp's assertion that mechanical failure is almost inevitable in such a complex maze of electronic gear is in direct contradiction to the fundamental tenet of the entire Fail-Safe system. It seems that straightforward talk between the two nations' distrustful leaders is the sole, slim hope of averting disaster.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

In Chapter 13, "The Conference Line," as the connection is made to speak with Khrushchev, Buck notes that the President looks impressively relaxed under the tension, almost sleepy. Khrushchev also sounds relaxed on the phone. The President asks that Buck be allowed to translate, and the Premier agrees. When they discuss the rogue aircraft, Khrushchev's voice becomes flat, but it becomes harsh when he voices his doubts that the attack is an honest mistake. The President mentions the pursuing fighters, three of which have now crashed, but Khrushchev says his analysts are not sure that missiles were fired or that the planes crashed rather than merely flying low to avoid radar detection. On the Premier's end of the line, Buck hears others trying to convince Khrushchev it is a trick and to attack immediately, which Buck relays in writing to the President. The Premier tells the President he will wait. The President offers technical assistance to shoot down the Vindicators, but Khrushchev brusquely dismisses the offer as unnecessary. He asks for the target, and the President tells him it is Moscow. They hang up. Buck and the President go into the next room, where the board shows that the last fighter has crashed and the bombers have passed over the border into Siberia, which signals an invasion.

In Chapter 14, "The Calculation and the Wait," the world at large is described as going about its usual business while the covert world frantically prepares for war. Missiles are aligned, planes launched, and radar sets tuned. In the Omaha War Room, the board shows that Group 6 has spread its formation to help evade attack. In front is the Number 6 plane, which carries no bombs, only defensive equipment. As General Bogan and the others watch, the Soviets begin firing missiles. The Vindicators have sophisticated radar-jamming devices, decoys and anti-missile weapons that make it very hard for the Soviet planes to locate and destroy them. General Bogan feels both proud and guilty of that pride under the current conditions. The Soviets lose three planes, but manage to destroy one American plane. The War Room experts realize that the Soviets have a very slow but extra-long-range missile. Raskob asks Bogan whether anyone has figured out yet what caused this dire situation, and Knapp interjects that someone should have warned Washington about the potential for mechanical failure. Raskob says that would not help, because Washington needs the illusion of perfection to make big military appropriations. Someone should have recognized that constant arms escalation was silly, he sighs. When word comes that the other five U.S. planes are faring well, the War Room erupts in cheers, but Bogan commands silence. One Vindicator looks endangered, and Colonel Cascio cannot help rooting aloud for it, but the plane is destroyed.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Both leaders seem calm under pressure during their first talk in Chapter 13, but their long history of mistrust is evident in the way they verbally circle around one another. The chapter is largely concerned with establishing the difficulty they have in making progress on the problem at hand when both are encumbered by such intense distrust. Their sense of competition is so strong that the Premier will not even accept the President's offer of technological help in shooting down the Vindicators. In Chapter 14, the mixture of pride and guilt that Bogan feels as he watches the Vindicators elude their attackers indicates how this same sense of competitiveness plays out in the battlefield, making it difficult for even an insightful leader like Bogan to see the big picture. Knapp's comment about a failure to warn Washington of the potential for the equipment to fail seems like self-criticism, considering that his company built much of the equipment. Raskob's comments about Washington's illusions and the silliness of arms escalation suggest that such wisdom has come too late. Colonel Cascio's inability to prevent himself from urging the Vindicator to elude the enemy is another foreshadowing of the trouble he soon will cause.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

In Chapter 15, "The Conference Line," as Buck translates another conversation between Khrushchev and the President, he detects a pattern of grunting and sighing in the Premier's tone that he recognizes as typical of a Russian peasant's expression of great sorrow. He writes a note to the President that Khrushchev is sad. The Premier comments that little can be done at the moment. He says 860 supersonic fighters went sent into the air, but only 70 could find the Vindicators, and only two of the bombers have been destroyed. Of those 75, all but five were destroyed by the Vindicators. Khrushchev now agrees to set up a tactical line between his people and the Americans, which the President immediately orders. The President asks if the Russians jammed the Vindicator radio frequencies, and he says they did, to try to prevent the bombers from receiving confirmation by radio to attack Russia. The two men do not know what to do next, other than cling to the faint hope that they can stop all four bombers. Khrushchev says he is leaving Moscow, and will call later. He hangs up. The President calls General Black at the Pentagon and tells him to keep in mind the story of Abraham from the Bible. He sends Black to Andrews Field to await further orders. After hanging up, Black immediately wants to call his family, but knows he cannot do it. The President tells Buck to get the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow and the Soviet delegate to the United Nations on the phone, and put them on a conference call with him as soon as Khrushchev is available. Buck complies, feeling like he wants to cry for the first time since he was a young teenager.

In Chapter 16, "The Last Effort," General Bogan turns with a sense of foreboding to what the authors call the "touch phone," which does not require lifting the receiver. He gets on a conference call with the Moscow military analysts. The red phone rings, and the President addresses the War Room over the intercom, ordering everyone to do whatever the Russians ask, in an attempt to avoid nuclear holocaust. He hangs up, and a Russian analyst asks over the touch phone if the Vindicators have missiles that can home in on radar emissions. Bogan tells Colonel Cascio to answer, but his aide freezes up, and cannot make himself reply. Bogan calls a Sergeant Collins into the room, who explains to the Russians how the Vindicator homing devices work and how they can be evaded. Immediately, they destroy another Vindicator. Cascio tells Bogan he suspects the Soviets of trickery, but the general tells him to follow orders. Marshal Nevsky comes on the touch phone and asks the precise location of the other three Vindicators. Bogan is about to reply when he feels a sharp pain in his head and collapses. Looking up, he sees Cascio talking on the War Room intercom, still holding the heavy glass ashtray with which he struck the general.

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Buck's expertise with language plays an important role in Chapter 15, when he is able to detect sorrow in Khrushchev's tone. This is an important breakthrough, because of the guardedness in the two leaders' interactions. It tells the President that the Premier is experiencing an honest, human response to the situation, which might decrease his suspicion. In fact, the Premier agrees to let the Americans assist in shooting down the bombers. The President's advice to Black to keep in mind the story of Abraham is a frightening omen, given that Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his own son. In this case, it is not hard to deduce that the President is God and Black is Abraham. The President's desire to speak to the Ambassador to Russia and the Soviet U.N. delegate is an unexplained plot development meant to further heighten interest in this already exciting tale. In Chapter 16, Colonel Cascio's physical inability to give information to the enemy is the final foreshadowing of his revolt, which nevertheless comes as a surprise, because of its sudden violence. Its symbolic significance is that the Fail-Safe system was predicated on the two assumptions that compound mechanical failure is statistically almost impossible and that the humans involved have been psychologically screened too thoroughly for any of them to break down under pressure. With Cascio's mutiny, both the mechanical and human errors have now occurred.

Chapters 17-19

Chapters 17-19 Summary

In Chapter 17, "The Vindicators," Colonel Grady is flying his bomber in darkness, with the aid of stereoscopic radar. Out the window, he can see the lights of Russian villages and vehicles. The only thing on his mind is to reach the target. The planes are approaching "lob point," at which they can elevate their noses, increase acceleration, and lob the bombs onto the target. As he talks to the other two pilots, he suddenly hears the President's voice on the radio, telling him the mission is the result of a mechanical failure, and the planes must turn back. Grady is shocked. He looks at his two crewmen and ponders, realizing it may be a ruse. He says into the speaker that he is not authorized to obey voice commands at this point, and shuts off the radio.

In Chapter 18, "Cascio's Command," the War Room workers stand stunned as Cascio tells everyone he is assuming command, because the President has been aware for some time that General Bogan is psychologically unstable. Bogan slowly rises to his feet, dazed. By their expressions, the other men appear to be divided into two groups of allegiance and one group of uncertainty. Two Air Force enlisted men appear from a dark corner where Bogan knows they have been for months, although he has forgotten about them. They quickly subdue Cascio and march him out of the room. On the touch phone, Marshal Nevsky tells Bogan he has overheard the problem and understands. Bogan orders his men to provide the location of the other three Vindicators. The Number 6 plane dives to avoid Soviet pursuit. Bogan explains that it carries no weapons and is making a diversionary run, but Nevsky does not believe him. The Soviet pursuit of Number 6 allows the other two bombers to escape. Marshal Nevsky physically collapses under the strain, and is replaced by General Koniev. He tells Bogan the only strategy left is to fire all remaining rockets in the path of the bombers, in hopes of creating a thermonuclear barrier. The two opposing generals agree it is a sad and terrible day.

In Chapter 19, "The Last Mile," Grady's concentration is interrupted by the defense operator's announcement of the belt of Soviet rockets ahead of them. Grady knows from briefings that this is a thermonuclear screen, and it will be at a high elevation. He points the Vindicator's nose upward and fires its last two rockets straight up, boosting their speed to get above the Soviet rocket screen. The Soviet missiles track the Vindicator rockets, and Grady flies underneath them. He is now too low for the Vindicator to withstand the blast from the nuclear bombs it will drop. He informs his two crewmen, who agree to permit their own extermination in the blast.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

Colonel Grady's refusal to the listen to the President in Chapter 17 indicates a flaw in the standard operating procedure. No way has been provided to halt an attack that

stems from a mechanical error, because the system was based on the belief that no such error could occur. Grady's refusal to consider any option other than attack also demonstrates the limitations of unquestioning obedience in the military. This insistence on obedience is necessary for discipline, but it also has turned the airmen into virtual automatons, incapable of thinking for themselves, which the authors are suggesting is not advisable in the fluctuating conditions of war. Marshal Nevsky's commiseration with the Americans' problem with Colonel Cascio in Chapter 18 shows that stress-related human malfunctions happen in his forces, as well. Indeed, Nevsky himself collapses from the stress of realizing the consequences of his error in not believing the Americans when they told him the Number 6 plane was acting as a decoy. By the time General Koniev describes his thermonuclear barrier plan to General Bogan, the two men are in accord that their countries' mutual blindnesses have brought them to this sad pass. Chapter 19 is all about Grady's bravery and cool thinking in the heat of battle, but underlying his heroism is the terrible irony that his actions are in ignorance of the fact that his leaders do not want him to do it.

Chapters 20-23

Chapters 20-23 Summary

In Chapter 20, "The Conference Line," the President speaks to the American Ambassador in Moscow and to Lentov, the Soviet U.N. delegate, who is in New York. He tells both of them to stay where they are. Lentov begins to talk about American baseball, which stuns Buck, but the President joins in, as does the American Ambassador, despite his knowledge that he will soon die. They discuss the power and grace under pressure of fine athletes. Premier Khrushchev comes on the line, and asks the President why the other two men are on the call. The President asks how the other Vindicators are faring, and Khrushchev confirms that two of them will probably reach Moscow. The President says the planes will drop a total of 80 megatons of bombs on Moscow, which will incinerate the American Ambassador. Khrushchev becomes outraged that the President considers this a fair trade-off, but the President says when the Ambassador's telephone melts, a sound will emit in confirmation that Moscow has been bombed. At that moment, he will order that the same amount of tonnage to be dropped by American bombers over New York City. The two leaders thank the other two men, and the President hangs up to contact his people about his decision.

In Chapter 21, "No Other Way," the President relays his orders to the Pentagon. Raskob, whose family and political constituency are in New York, is disbelieving. He then realizes it is the only way to avoid a nuclear holocaust. Swenson asks if any essential documents can be retrieved from New York, but General Stark says there is not enough time. Groteschele thinks about how he could turn the post-bombing devastation to good business ends by advising companies on how to rebuild. Wilcox argues that people could be saved if they were notified, but the others assure him that at such short notice, it would only cause panic. Swenson privately hopes the Vindicators will still be destroyed, but knows he must think ahead of what to do after the bombing.

In Chapter 22, "The Conference Line," the President and Khrushchev are again on the line with the American Ambassador and Lentov. The two leaders agree to engage in serious disarmament talks. They discuss with sadness the disappearance of human responsibility and common sense from the current scenario. The Ambassador says he can hear explosions, and then his phone makes a distinct sound, and the President says Moscow has been destroyed. He says he will contact General Black, who is flying over New York City.

In Chapter 23, "The Sacrifice of Abraham," Black is in a holding pattern 46,000 feet above Manhattan, with support aircraft. He radios the other pilots, telling them his family is in New York, and his final order is that none of the others should drop a bomb. He will do it himself. The President radios in the order to proceed. Black reflects that his recurring Dream is finished. He drops the bombs, and then reaches for a small object in his pocket. His copilot is startled to see Black slump forward. He radios to the President that the bombs have been dropped, and Black has used his suicide kit. The President

says he expected as much. He orders that Black be considered for the Congressional Medal of Honor for the highest act of courage and duty to his country and mankind.

Chapters 20-23 Analysis

The discussion about baseball in Chapter 20 is not only a way for the men to cope with the news that the Ambassador soon will die in the bombing of Moscow, but is also an indirect way of talking about courage and sacrifice, which are seen on athletic fields in smaller forms than they take in wartime. The President's revelation that he will make amends for the Moscow bombing by wreaking the same havoc on New York City is probably the most dramatic moment in the book, and in this novel about difficult decision-making it is appropriate that the key moment consists of nothing more action-packed than a conversation. It is almost incidental that this information means the Soviet delegate to the U.N. also will die, and he accepts his fate with grace, as the U.S. Ambassador has done. In Chapter 21, Raskob likewise manages to overcome the shock of learning that his family will soon die, and is able to accept this fate as the lesser evil. People are behaving honorably and well in this terrible situation, with the exception of Groteschele, who cannot help pondering how he could benefit from the ruination of New York, yet even he is simply thinking about doing his job, as the others are. It is all that is left for any of them to do. In Chapter 22, the agreement between the President and Premier to pursue disarmament talks is heartfelt but seems almost annoying, given their participation in the foolish thinking that has led to this crisis. Nevertheless, it is an expression of hope by the authors that clear heads eventually will prevail in the Cold War. In Chapter 23, Black is forced to carry out his version of God's command to Abraham. Black and his wife were the voices of reason in this novel on the topic of nuclear arms escalation, yet he now must destroy Betty and their children along with millions of other innocent people. The President must have chosen his old friend for this most onerous of duties because he was the only one whom he could trust to complete it. Black does not disappoint, but there is no way he can continue living after the commission of such a horrible deed. The authors have made their novel depict the folly of nuclear arms escalation, and Black's action is the last and saddest outcome of this policy.

Characters

Peter Buck

Peter Buck is the White House translator who witnesses much of the drama concerning the breakdown of the fail-safe system, and who translates for the President in his negotiations with Premier Khrushchev. Buck is in his early-30s and married. He was called up to military service during the Korean conflict in the 1950s, where his extraordinary facility for foreign languages was discovered. Buck has average intelligence, yet within one year of intensive training, he could speak, read, and write Russian fluently. One of the top three American-born Russian language experts in the nation, he is proud of his achievement, yet continues to study law part-time, which indicates he does not intend to remain a language expert all his life. In his interactions with the President during the crisis, Buck is respectful, somewhat awed by the intelligence and personal skills of his superior, and at times feels overwhelmed by the realization that bombs might be dropped and millions of lives lost. Even so, he concentrates well on his work, and makes several insightful observations concerning the mood or frame of mind that Khrushchev's tone of voice implies, which Buck relays by writing to the President during the negotiations. His role in the novel appears to be that of an average fellow who finds himself in the midst of one of the most dramatic crises in the history of the world. He is an "everyman" figure, yet he displays good sense and professionalism to a degree matching that of the more seasoned people around him.

The President

The President is never named, but he is described as tall, slender, and in his late-forties. He has a famous father, and his wealthy family comes from New England. He is married to a stylish, beautiful woman. This reads very much like a thumbnail sketch of John F. Kennedy, who was President when the book was being written. Kennedy was assassinated the year after the publication of Fail-Safe. In the novel, the President is remarkably cool under pressure. He drifts into moments of abstraction, such as staring at his pencil, while he apparently thinks through problems. He has an excellent memory, can make quick decisions, and speaks with authority. At times, the President seems so relaxed to Buck that he looks almost sleepy, even when tensions are high. He has a straightforward manner of assessing people and of offering his ideas to Buck, which often surprises the younger man. The President values long and close friendships, such as with his personal secretary, Johnnie, and with his old school friend, General Black. In negotiations with Khrushchev, the President is candid but knows when to withhold and when to divulge information. During the course of the novel, he must make several extremely difficult decisions. In each case, he first gathers all the information and advice available in the allotted time, and then makes a decision from which he will not be swayed. He sends fighter planes in pursuit of his own bombers with orders to shoot them down. He cooperates with the Russians in trying to destroy the bombers. He

explains to the American Ambassador and the Soviet delegate to the U.N. that they both will die in bomb attacks, and he orders his good friend, General Black, to drop nuclear bombs on New York City, even though the families of both Black and the President are in New York. This President is as staunch as they come.

Brigadier General Warren A. Black

Brigadier General Warren A. Black is married with two children, twelve and fourteen. Born into a very wealthy San Francisco family, he went to college with the man who later became the current President. Black made the unusual choice of avoiding business and politics in favor of the military. He met his wife when he was a young colonel sent by the Air Force to take a university course in international relations. Intelligent and well-informed, Black long has been an opponent of such hawk-like notions as preemptive strikes and the arms escalation race of the Cold War, which makes him something of a pariah in Pentagon circles. He has a recurring dream of being a bull in a ring, his hide being flayed off in strips by an invisible matador, which Black knows is linked to the pressure of his job. He also knows he should resign but cannot bring himself to leave the Air Force. A devoted family man and a trusted friend of the President, he is the one who receives the terrible assignment of dropping nuclear bombs on New York City to prevent all-out war with Russia. Black's family and the President's wife are in New York at the time he carries out the order, knowing that the sacrifice of them and millions of others is the only way to avoid mutual assured destruction. Immediately after the bombing, Black takes a fatal dose of poison from his suicide kit, and the President recommends that he be posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Lieutenant General Bogan

Lieutenant General Bogan is the commander of the subterranean War Room in Omaha. A pilot who won the Distinguished Flying Cross in World War II, he eventually became too old to fly and was given the underground command, which at first was a very difficult adjustment for him. Eventually, he grew to appreciate the efficiency and professionalism of his team, which he thinks is equal to that of his former fellow airmen. General Bogan is a dyed-in-the-wool military man, to whom orders and the chain of command are of paramount importance. When he is commanded to cooperate with the Russians in shooting down the American bombers, it grates on his nerves, but he obeys without hesitation. He very briefly loses command when Colonel Cascio hits him on the head with an ash tray, but Bogan quickly recovers, and in his conversations with the Russian military leaders, he proves to be a strong and sensitive commander.

Colonel Cascio

Colonel Cascio is the aide to General Bogan. He is a young, hot-tempered soldier with fierce loyalty to America and deep suspicion of Russia. His parents, who live in New

York City, are both alcoholics, which is a source of embarrassment to Cascio. Disbelieving that the American bombers have advanced on Russia, he puts forth a theory that the Soviets have used a new radar masking device, which makes it look like the bombers are advancing when they actually have turned around and are heading back to base. This theory is rejected by the top brass. Even after Bogan orders cooperation with the Russians, Colonel Cascio cannot make himself give them information. He seems to almost have a seizure, and cannot speak. Later, he cannot keep himself from urging on the American bombers as he watches the action on the big radar screen. He then goes out of control, hitting Bogan with an ash tray and unsuccessfully attempting to take command of the War Room. In the book, Cascio represents the worst sort of human error that can occur in a military crisis, when a leader becomes mentally unhinged.

Walter Groteschele

Walter Groteschele is an academician who becomes a trusted advisor to the Pentagon. He first meets Black and Black's future wife, Betty, when he attends a university class in international relations with them. Groteschele, who originally studied mathematics, distinguishes himself by his intelligence, but it is his strategic maneuvering with the class professor that begins his rise to prominence in the military world. Through the hawkish professor, Groteschele becomes involved with Pentagon officials and quickly develops a reputation as an interesting thinker on war theory. After his marriage, he shows his true colors by ending an affair with a beautiful admirer simply by slapping her in the face. During the central crisis in the novel, Groteschele argues that the Russians will not retaliate if the bombs fall on Moscow, although the President's later discussions with Khrushchev prove this thinking to be quite wrong. No sooner does the bombing of New York become inevitable than Groteschele begins planning how he can benefit financially by advising ruined businesses on how to rebuild. He is an opportunist who sadly lacks the moral sensitivity to the full tragedy of the situation.

Congressman Raskob

Congressman Raskob is a New York City politician who happens to be visiting the War Room in Omaha when the fail-safe crisis occurs. His role is to observe, stay out of the way of the military men, ask pertinent questions, and offer insights from a political perspective on the drama as it unfolds. Raskob is a tough-minded and smart man, who has a good grasp of the Washington realities of nuclear arms proliferation, military appropriations, and public opinion. When it becomes clear that New York will be bombed by the Americans, destroying not only his constituency but his family, Raskob's initial disbelief and grief turn to stoical acceptance of what he realizes is the lesser evil.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson, familiarly known to the President as Johnnie, is his white-haired personal secretary, who formerly was personal secretary to the President's famous father. She has played an active supporting role in White House governments going back to Harry Truman. She has a steel-trap mind and is not a woman to be crossed. Her relationship with the President is relaxed, efficient, and friendly, but not too familiar. She is one of his most trusted allies.

Lieutenant Colonel Grady

Lieutenant Colonel Grady is a pilot and the commander of the Group 6 Vindicator bombers that receive the inaccurate order to attack Russia. He loves flying and is a disciplined, dutiful serviceman. When the order is received to attack, he goes through all the required protocols to verify it, and proceeds without hesitation. Even when the President reaches him by radio and commands him to turn back, he follows previous orders to ignore all voice communication at that stage, and turns off the radio. By the time he is about to drop the bombs, his entire being is focused only on the single goal of evading the enemy long enough to reach his target. He shows extraordinary flying skills in avoiding the final Soviet attack, and he drops the bombs knowing their explosion will also mean his death and that of his crewmen. In the novel, his uncanny devotion to duty is portrayed as heroic but also is meant to represent the way the fail-safe system leaves no room for human reason to reconsider what might be faulty protocol.

Gordon Knapp

Gordon Knapp is an engineer, inventor, and businessman who is visiting the War Room in Omaha along with Congressman Raskob. Knapp's company made much of the equipment in the War Room, and it is he who eventually informs the others that the idea of the systems being mechanically fail-safe is wrong. He explains that the opposite is true, because such complex machinery almost inevitably will break down, and the chances are good that such a malfunction would not be noticed. Knapp represents the enthusiast who understands high technology very well but does not always look deeply enough into possible implications of its use or misuse.

Premier Khrushchev

Premier Khrushchev is the leader of the Soviet Union, just as the real man was at the time this novel was written. He is apparently the only character in the book who is both drawn from a living person and is given that person's name. He describes himself as a peasant, but proves himself to be shrewd, capable of great strength of character, and deeply attuned to the tragedy of the situation in which he and the President are embroiled. Khrushchev is portrayed as a soulful, wise, and accomplished leader, although as mistrustful of America as the President is of the Soviet Union.

Betty Black

Betty Black is General Black's wife. A very bright woman with leftist or pacifist leanings, she initially rejects his interest in her when the two of them meet in college, because he already is in the military. In one memorable scene, she becomes tipsy at a Washington party and makes an angry speech about the foolishness of nuclear arms escalation, with which Black agrees. Betty and her two sons presumably die at the end, when Black is forced to drop bombs on New York.

Swenson

Swenson is the Secretary of Defense, and the man in the government whose opinion about military matters is of the highest importance to the President. Swenson is small in stature and unremarkable in appearance, but he has the ability to cut straight to the heart of an issue, and ask penetrating questions. He keeps his emotions in check, assimilates information quickly, and exercises precise logic. The President trusts his judgment implicitly.

Marshal Nevsky

Marshal Nevsky is the Soviet military leader who liaises with General Bogan in trying to shoot down the American bombers. When Marshal Nevsky disbelieves that one of the planes is a decoy and sends his fighters after it, two American bombers slip through the defense. Nevsky physically collapses from the strain of realizing his mistake, which shows that both mechanical and human malfunctions are possible in such situations.

General Koniev

General Koniev is the Russian leader who takes command after Marshal Nevsky's collapse. He works well with General Bogan and the two leaders share sad insights into their predicament, but at that point, neither is able to save the day.

General Stark

General Stark is one of the Pentagon's hawkish leaders. He is a young officer whose star rose through promotion of the skills of Groteschele. Stark is a consummate manager of people.

The American Ambassador

The American Ambassador to Russia, who is unnamed, is in Moscow when the bombs are dropped. He speaks with the President on a conference line, and shows good grace in the face of imminent death.

Lentov

Lentov is the Soviet delegate to the United Nations, who is in New York City when it is bombed. Like the American Ambassador, he accepts his fate with grace and courage.

Wilcox

Wilcox is the new Secretary of the Army. He has hawkish views, but has not yet earned the President's trust.

Objects/Places

White House Bomb Shelter

The White House bomb shelter, deep underground, is where the President, Peter Buck and other White House staff are sequestered during almost the entire novel.

Omaha War Room

The Omaha War Room is an underground room in a Strategic Air Command facility where orders from the President concerning the fail-safe crisis are carried out.

Big Board Room

The Big Board Room is the war strategy area of the Pentagon. Like the White House bomb shelter and the Omaha War Room, it is dominated by a large screen on which military movements around the world are shown.

Alaskan Airspace

Alaskan airspace is where an intercontinental passenger airplane veers off course at the start of the crisis. Initially, it is tracked as an unidentified flying object, and the bombers and fighter planes are sent to investigate.

Barksdale Air Force Base

Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana is the base from which the Vindicator bombers take off when the President moves the fail-safe crisis to Condition Red.

Lowry Air Force Base

Lowry Air Force Base is an underground missile base occupying 70 square miles of Colorado prairie. Intercontinental ballistic missiles are readied here after the President declares Condition Red.

Ziev

Ziev is the Russian city where Marshal Nevsky, General Koniev and other Soviet personnel are stationed during their cooperation with the Americans in attempting to shoot down the bombers before they strike Moscow.

Moscow

Moscow is the capital city in the Soviet Union that is destroyed by the American nuclear bombs.

New York City

New York City is the American metropolis that is bombed by the President's order as the only way to avert an unrestrained nuclear war.

Vindicator Bombers

Vindicator bombers are the planes used in the attack on Moscow. Equipped with nuclear bombs, they are highly sophisticated and fast aircraft in which so much equipment has been miniaturized and automated that a crew of three can fly them.

Skyscrappers

Skyscrappers are the fighter planes that accompany the Vindicators on their missions. When the Group 6 Vindicators continue toward Russia, the Skyscrappers are ordered to turn around and chase them, in hopes of shooting down the bombers.

Fail-Safe Point

The Fail-Safe point is a fixed position in the sky around which bombers must orbit until they get an order to continue on toward a target. This point is called fail-safe because its establishment theoretically prevents any bomber from attacking without a direct order.

Themes

Technology Endangers Common Sense

Probably ever since humans started to invent and use complex machinery to perform tasks, and certainly since the advent of the computer, a warning has accompanied the praise that greets each new innovation. The warning is that even though technology is a wonderful thing, it also has the potential to make people stupid. They might become incapable of doing sums with paper and pencil, or of entertaining themselves without television, or of finding their way around a city without a global positioning system. Worst of all, this novel suggests, they could become so enamored of computerized systems and the protocols that arise from them that they might not even be able to imagine scenarios caused by the malfunctioning of the technology. There is something insidious about computerization and the systems it spawns, the authors insinuate in this book. Thrilled by the promises of power and intelligence that high technology makes, governments invest heavily in it, and eventually become so dependent upon it that all manner of policies and strategies are based upon a belief in the infallibility of the machinery. So much money, hope, and prestige are invested in computerized systems, and so many decisions derive from them, that when the technology lets down the leaders of government, they are lost. They do not even have an appropriate back-up plan, because the failure of this magnificent machine system was inconceivable to them. In effect, the technology has robbed these people of their common sense. In this novel, very few of the characters had any inkling that a compound mechanical failure could occur. Most of them thought the statistical chance of such an event occurring was so low that it was practically impossible, and yet, the truth proved to be the opposite. In such a complex system, mechanical failure was almost inevitable. The computer system is not the enemy. The problem begins when humans become so enamored of technology that they cannot even see or prepare for its shortcomings.

Arms Encourage War

The history of warfare shows that the escalation of weapons manufacturing and other preparations for battle almost always lead to an outbreak of conflict. Given this lesson, the Cold War was a strange anomaly. The United States and Russia engaged in what amounted to a race with no end, in which the goal was to compile the most weaponry, and yet each country argued that its build-up was purely for protection against feared aggression from the other. In other words, nobody was going to use these weapons. Both sides continued to arm themselves many times beyond the strength needed to annihilate each other, while stating that their goal was to preserve peace. The authors of Fail-Safe clearly regard this thinking as lunacy, but they take an interesting approach to demonstrating the logic's faultiness. Instead of depicting the leaders of one country or the other finally giving into the temptation of issuing an attack order, the authors show that the escalation of contemporary armaments is not the same as, say, making a great many swords and shields. The complex, computerized systems of warning, guidance,

and command are every bit as important to modern warfare as bombs and missiles. A buildup of contemporary weaponry must also include a proliferation of electronic communications technology, and if anything goes awry along the line, the result could be an order accidentally issued to start a war. In the book, this accident stems from the constant vigilance of both sides. The two countries are so frighteningly well-armed that they must monitor each other around the clock. The breakdown is mechanical, but what really leads the two countries to the brink of war in this book is the build-up of weaponry to a point that has both sides trembling in fear.

Human Values Are Universal

As the American decision-makers consider what to do about the six planes mistakenly headed toward Russia to drop nuclear bombs, one key question is how the Russians will react. Groteschele argues that the Russians are driven by Marxist ideology, which tells them they are destined to defeat capitalism and rule the world. This means they will not retaliate against the strike on Moscow, because when they take control of the world, they want it to be relatively intact. Others argue that the Russians will react as any American leader would do, by retaliating against a first strike in an attempt to avoid annihilation. Later, when the President and Premier Khrushchev speak on the telephone, their initial mutual suspicion gradually turns into awareness that they have the same emotional responses to the situation. The President understands the Premier's anger, fear, and mistrust, because he would feel the same way if their roles were reversed. In the end, they are left with a feeling of being trapped by the conditions, and deeply saddened by what they must do. A similar recognition dawns between General Bogan and General Koniev as they speak on the telephone. They come to realize that they share the same sorrow over the violence that will ensue. The point the authors are making is that enemies tend to demonize and stereotype one another. Perhaps it is easier to dehumanize than to identify with an opponent, but the more penetrating theme the authors are exploring is that mutual understanding between peoples will lead to appreciation of the values we hold in common. When we humanize each other in this way, disarmament and peace become easier goals to achieve.

Style

Point of View

This book takes the omniscient point of view, which traditionally is considered difficult to use effectively. The authors delve into the thoughts of many characters, often beginning a chapter with a new viewpoint as they tell a particular character's story. The effect, of course, is to deepen that individual's characterization, because the reader not only sees action but is given the internal motivation for it. One potential drawback to this technique is that the narrative can become fractured or diffuse. A related problem is that no character might become richly developed, as usually occurs when the point of view is more restricted. It could become difficult to pick out the hero or protagonist, and the novel might read like an ensemble piece, lacking a character-driven focus. This novel copes well with the first potential problem of a fractured narrative, because the characters play various important roles in the drama that is unfolding. What each person thinks about what should be done and how to do it is therefore relevant, and holds the reader's interest. The second potential problem of the story lacking a protagonist is not so easily overcome. Accordingly, the question of who the central character is in this book could be answered in at least three ways. It might be Buck, the translator, through whose eyes much of the action is seen. It might the President, whose every decision holds tremendous import. It also could be General Black, the hero of the story. Any of these three could have become much better-known to the reader if the authors had focused the point of view on that one character, but then it would have been a different book. This novel is, first and foremost, a thriller. It is unusual for a thriller to go very deeply into any character's mind, much less looking into the thoughts of numerous characters. The authors have aimed at a cerebral thriller, which is more about beliefs and ideas than about pure action. That is why they chose an omniscient point of view.

Setting

In this novel, the authors do not expend many words on descriptions of settings. The world they create is largely one of ideology, systems analysis, and decision-making. The President gets into an elevator and goes down to the White House bomb shelter, where he stays either in the planning room or a small adjoining office for the duration of the novel. Buck, Johnnie, and the other characters with whom the President works do not leave the bomb shelter, either. The War Room in Omaha and the Big Board room at the Pentagon are the other two locales where American leaders are located, and the descriptions of these two places are minimal. In fact, they are virtually interchangeable. The President also speaks to Khrushchev on the phone, while General Bogan speaks to Russian military men, but no indication is given of the Soviets' surroundings. Even when Colonel Grady is flying in a Vindicator bomber, heading for Russia, he sees nothing more than a few lights from villages and cars below him. In these scenes, the cockpit is the setting, a cramped space full of knobs, dials, and lights. Mostly, the movements of Grady and the other pilots are tracked as blips on the big screens in the rooms where

the American leaders discuss strategy. A couple of incidental settings in New York City are similarly devoid of a strong sense of place. It is as if the authors were principally focused on the drama of the mistaken bombing mission, and then put the rest of their effort into developing the background stories of various characters. Beyond that, they seem to have had no inclination to develop settings, almost as if such descriptions would detract from the action or velocity of the story. In a thriller that depends principally upon dialogue, perhaps their decision was to streamline the settings to help keep the plot moving quickly.

Language and Meaning

The language in this novel is used very much in service to the plot, which means that its main purpose is to drive the story forward rapidly. Most sentences are short. Use of adjectives and adverbs is kept to a minimum, action verbs are used when possible, and dialogue is frequently employed. The jargon is military, with acronyms and names for weaponry and surveillance systems. Terms such as the Omaha War Room, Skyscrappers, Samos III, Vindicator bombers, the Big Board, Group 6, and Titan all help to create an atmosphere of high-technology militarism. The tone that such language promotes is one of seriousness and urgency. The writing is not literary, in the sense of lyrical or poetic description. It is functional and rather stern, like a man in uniform. There is very little humor, and the prevailing emotion is worry, leavened with ambition, authoritativeness, patriotism, suspicion, anger, and sorrow. Much of the action takes place in dialogue. People argue about momentous decisions, which could affect the lives of millions of civilians. The conversations often are charged with the speakers' realization of how important they are. The language of these clipped and concerned exchanges is where the true drama in this story is found.

Structure

The novel begins with a short preface by the authors, followed by a Table of Contents and the title page. Each of the 23 chapters has a numerical heading and a title. One title, "The Conference Line," which refers to discussions between the President and the Soviet Premier, is used for four chapters. Another title, "The Vindicators," which depicts the bomber planes and their crews, is used twice. The story generally proceeds in a linear fashion, beginning before the start of the problem that is central to the plot and continuing until the problem is resolved. There are a number of flashbacks, sometimes going back several years in the life of one character or another, and sometimes backing up only to the previous day, or to the morning of the same day. These shifts in time are always employed to provide information that either explains how a character arrived at the current situation, or gives a motivation for why a character thinks or acts in a certain way. In several cases, the authors begin a chapter with a character who is traveling to a meeting or other event that is important to plot. On the way to his destination, the character thinks of his past, giving the authors the opportunity to go back in time and provide detail about that character's life. Such detours usually end after two or three pages, and the character continues on his journey or arrives at his destination. This

structuring technique, which is used frequently, is the main way the authors provide the characters' "back stories" even as they keep the action moving in the present.

Quotes

"To vomit here, in this impeccable GI elevator with the officer-operator and the President leaning comfortably against the wall and the secretary listening to his words, and the wooden major standing at an apparently easy attention, would be too much" (p. 60).

"Buck looked up at Mrs. Johnson and smiled thinly. Her memory was said to be limitless, her knowledge encyclopedic, her antagonism fatal" (p. 63).

"When one descended into the deeply buried command post and personnel quarters there was the sensation of entering an ingenious collective coffin" (p. 72).

"'To Swenson we listen and if he gives advice we take it all,'" the President said. "'Unless I tell you otherwise, whatever Swenson says is what I think'" (p. 130).

"'This thing of piling bombs on bombs and missiles on missiles when we both have a capacity to overkill after surviving a first strike is just silly'" (p. 147).

"Did men look this way because they were the power types, Black wondered, or were they chosen for power because they looked this way" (p. 151).

"First, would the ejection capsule and parachute really operate at 1600 miles an hour? Second, how long could a man live in arctic waters" (p. 174).

"'Don't kid yourself. There are going to be three or four Russian generals at crucial spots who will react exactly the way I do: the best defense is a good offense" (p. 183).

"Two seconds later the two Soviet fighters went up in a rolling green blip. But their four missiles continued to bore in" (p. 203).

"Then Buck identified it: the President's face reflected the ageless, often repeated, doomed look of utter tragedy' (p. 225).

"'Men cut off from power while they still had the grace and the desire to exercise it. they were somehow like puzzled old bulls'" (p. 259).

"'If Moscow is bombed by our bombers, I must order a group of Vindicator bombers now circling over New York to deliver four 20-megaton bombs on that city. That is all, gentlemen'" (p. 267).

"'It's as if human beings had evaporated, and their places were taken by computers. And all day you and I have sat here, fighting, not each other, but rather this big rebellious computerized system, struggling to keep it from blowing up the world'" (p. 277).

Topics for Discussion

The authors of Fail-Safe seem certain that sooner or later something within the complex human and mechanical systems that manage the Cold War will malfunction, with possibly dire consequences. In reality, the Cold War eventually ended without open warfare, because the Soviet Union collapsed financially. Do you think the authors make a believable case for the inevitability of a serious breakdown, or do you think it is simply a good premise for fiction? Explain your position.

Imagine you are Lieutenant Colonel Grady, flying the lead bomber when you receive the radio call from the President aborting the mission. Presumably, you are aware that your own fighter planes tried and failed to shoot you down, but your orders are to ignore voice commands at this stage of the mission. Does it make better sense in your mind to continue toward the target, or to turn around? Why?

No sooner does Walter Groteschele realize that New York will be destroyed by bombs than he starts thinking about how he might profit from the devastation. Earlier in the novel, the authors described how Groteschele's father escaped with the family from Germany before the World War II holocaust that destroyed many of their fellow Jews. Groteschele's father always said the Jews should have fought the Nazis, and later, Groteschele himself interviewed Nazi war criminals. Describe what connections might be drawn between this family history and Groteschele's tendency toward opportunism, particularly in regard to whether you think the portrayal of this character is anti-Semitic.

General Black is given the incredibly difficult task of destroying New York, killing millions of his fellow Americans including his own wife and their two boys. He then commits suicide. Do you think he is a hero or a victim? Is he a good solider or a bad husband and father? Is he a patriot or an unwitting villain? Defend your position.

What is Colonel Cascio thinking when he hits General Bogan and tries to take over command of the War Room? Obviously, he is out of control, but what is driving him to such irrational behavior, and what does it mean in the context of the novel's themes?

Peter Buck is not an important decision-maker, but he is the person physically closest to the President during the delicate negotiations with Khrushchev. Why do you think the authors chose to emphasize the translator's role in this story? What points to do you think they are trying to make in so doing?

The American and Russian leaders who have conversations in this novel agree about the tragedy of the situation and the human foolishness that led to it. Why do you think the two countries' leaders did not come to such conclusions before it was too late? What prevented them from working together earlier to protect the world from such senseless destruction?