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Real Men of Genius

By JACOB HEILBRUNN

In 1960, Herman Kahn, a fellow at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica and a model for the character Dr. Strangelove, published a book, "On Thermonuclear War," in which he made the case for limited nuclear war by way of

championing civil defense. The effects of radioactive fallout, he argued, were grossly exaggerated.

Americans could hide in backyard shelters, deep caverns and fortified mine shafts. Kahn further suggested that food might be labeled according to its contamination level, with the degree expressed in five different grades; grade D food would thus be restricted to people over 40 or 50, and E would be for animals.

Kahn's colleagues weren't amused. "Burn it" was the lapidary verdict of his chum and rival Albert Wohlstetter, when he saw the tome in manuscript form. Perhaps Wohlstetter, a gourmand and oenophile, was most enraged by the suggestion that grade D would be acceptable fare. Other aggrieved RAND scholars felt the book trivialized their sophisticated theories about nuclear warfare. But as Alex Abella suggests in "Soldiers of Reason," an entertaining and fast-paced account of the RAND Corporation, Kahn ended up inadvertently capturing something essential about the madcap think-tank world of the defense intellectuals, which was permeated with jargon like "N + 1" and "counterforce first strike."

RAND, which Pravda called "the academy of science and death," was the brainchild of the Army Air Forces. It was established in 1946, at the start of the postwar era, when American social scientists believed economics could solve political and strategic problems by reducing them to their essence through mathematical constructs based on game theory. RAND analysts tended to forget, however, that they were discussing the actions of human beings. Such hubris would eventually help land America in Vietnam, where the Vietcong refused to behave according to the tidy models of warfare and nation-building that RAND scholars had constructed and that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had employed, as he pointed to his charts and rattled off statistics about body counts and the efficacy of strategic bombing. Still, some RAND analysts soured on the war: [Daniel Ellsberg](#) leaked the Pentagon Papers and resigned soon thereafter.

And in the sphere of nuclear strategy, RAND did score significant early successes. Abella correctly focuses on the role of Wohlstetter, who made his name in the early 1950s with a study diagnosing the vulnerability of the Strategic Air Command's nuclear bombers to a Soviet pre-emptive strike. As the decades went by, Wohlstetter never stopped emphasizing the importance of being prepared for a surprise attack (his wife,

SOLDIERS OF REASON

The RAND Corporation and the Rise of the American Empire

By Alex Abella

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Roberta, had brilliantly chronicled one in a study of Pearl Harbor). His contribution was to argue for a version of deterrence that relied on what became known as a second-strike capability — the ability to absorb a first blow and retaliate. According to Abella, Wohlstetter believed that “it behooved someone with his knowledge to anticipate the worst eventuality, so that once ready for it, it might not happen at all.”

As Abella reminds us, Wohlstetter was at the forefront of the intellectual battle, in the 1970s, to knock the struts out from [Richard Nixon](#) and [Henry Kissinger](#)'s (and later Gerald Ford's) support for détente with the Soviet Union. Wohlstetter warned that both Democrats and liberal Republicans were underestimating the size of the Soviet arsenal.

One result was the government's creation of “Team B,” made up of hawks who challenged the [C.I.A.](#)'s estimates of the Kremlin's nuclear force. How influential Team B really was is questionable. But it did serve as a precursor of the Bush administration's efforts to prod the C.I.A. into offering worst-case assessments of Saddam Hussein's regime. (Indeed, earlier this year The New York Times reported that the Army had buried a 2005 RAND study that was highly critical of the planning for postwar Iraq.) Abella traces it all back to RAND analysts and neoconservatives, whose gloomy view of the cold war, he argues, triumphed during the Reagan years. But the truth is that the Reagan administration wasn't simply the handmaiden of the RAND Corporation and the neocons. It was responding to a real threat.

Abella, co-author of “Shadow Enemies: [Hitler](#)'s Secret Terrorist Plot Against the United States,” is too quick to dismiss American apprehensions as “paranoia.” Also, some of his assertions lack context. He writes that the Reagan administration's “cavalier attitude toward nuclear war and its insistence on placing new midrange missiles in Europe provoked a crisis in the Soviet Union.” He fails to note that [Jimmy Carter](#), at the urging of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany, approved the stationing of Pershing missiles in Western Europe — and that the Soviet Union originally created the showdown by installing SS-20 missiles in its Eastern European satrapies. Anyway, Reagan hated the idea of nuclear conflict and wound down the cold war.

Where Abella excels is in his descriptions of the colorful characters who populated RAND at its inception, like the mathematician John Davis Williams, who “personified what would become hallmarks of RANDites — a love of pleasures of the flesh, a dedication to abstract theory, and a sense of absolute self-righteousness married to an amoral approach to politics and policy.”

He might have speculated about the psychological puzzle presented by a group of sybaritic eccentrics engaging in desiccated activities like “systems analysis” and trying to turn the foibles of the rest of humanity into data points. But now that RAND no longer boasts them, it is surely a far duller place.

Jacob Heilbrunn, a regular contributor to the Book Review, is the author of “They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons.”

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