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Fred Kaplan. *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. ISBN: 9781982107291.

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INTRODUCTION BY JACQUELYN SCHNEIDER, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

In his review of Fred Kaplan's *The Bomb*, Marc Trachtenberg reminds readers that "it is important to see the past for what it was." This, as both Trachtenberg and Robert Jervis agree, is the overwhelming merit of *The Bomb*, a remarkable history of one of the wonkiest niches of U.S. national security strategy—the operational planning of nuclear wars. In the book, Kaplan takes readers across six decades of nuclear planning and, in doing so, reveals a remarkable consistency throughout America's nuclear history: despite numerous attempts by many presidential administrations, U.S. nuclear strategy has never been able to escape the impetus for first strike. Kaplan makes a compelling argument that the U.S. has been imprisoned by its own operational planning requirements, unable to draw down its nuclear arsenal largely because of path dependencies that were set in motion by service cultures which Kaplan traces back to World War II.

What makes *The Bomb* so novel—even when compared to Kaplan's impressive previous work, *The Wizards of Armageddon*—is the story he weaves about the complicated interaction of planning, strategy, and policy.¹ This is not a tale of some linear progression of strategic thought from massive retaliation to mutual assured destruction to flexible response (though all these doctrines make cameo appearances in the book). Instead, *The Bomb* draws back the curtain on the purported strategic wizards, and what is revealed is a world of bureaucratic fights and service culture antipathies that proved to be far more influential to actual nuclear options than any one strategic document. In this exploration of the organizational influences on nuclear strategy, *The Bomb* would be equally as appropriate for a course on military innovation as one on nuclear strategy, assigned alongside Carl Builder's *Masks of War* or the rich military innovation and nuclear strategy work found *Arguments that Count* by Rebecca Slayton or *Inventing Accuracy* by Donald Mackenzie.²

All of this to say that Kaplan's greatest contribution in the book—and one that both Trachtenberg and Jervis identify—is to significantly nuance the importance of presidents to U.S. nuclear strategy. The interplay between the hand these presidents are dealt by bureaucratic interests (usually through the Single Integrated Operational Plan, SIOP) and the hand that they want to play places serious doubts on any literature on nuclear strategy that focuses solely on executive decisionmakers. While not a direct critique levied by Kaplan, his compelling presentation of the importance of bureaucracies to presidential nuclear choices calls into question research that places too much emphasis on leaders' personal agency in use of force choices and not enough attention on the complex budget and bureaucratic processes that shape the options from which they can choose. In Kaplan's story, where Presidents seem to matter is not in the development of nuclear strategy, but in the complex stratagems of diplomacy and signaling they must resort to in order to *not use* the SIOP. Presidents can use nuclear strategy to increase investment in nuclear programs, but they have little success at then paring these programs down. The resounding lesson that nuclear budget watchers should take from this book (especially as the U.S. embarks on what will invariably be a leaner post-COVID-19 budget year) is that true nuclear change is most likely to occur through executive changes to nuclear planning bureaucracy and not through changes in nuclear strategies or posture reviews.

Both Jervis and Trachtenberg applaud Kaplan for his remarkable ability to gather inside knowledge on these wonky nuclear decisions, especially from this cast of nuclear characters who are notoriously tightlipped. However, it is Kaplan's idiosyncratic access to these decisionmakers which may bias a bit of his contemporary account of nuclear history (which has yet to be archived or declassified and therefore much more dependent on personal anecdotes). The book ignores much of the Clinton administration and devotes far less focus than one would expect to George W. Bush's administration given that Bush reneged on the Test Ban Treaty and supported major nuclear modernization. This period of omission is particularly relevant to Kaplan's story because the Clinton and Bush administrations were also the first to develop nuclear strategy after the dissolution of Strategic Air Command and the subsequent stand up of Strategic Command. One cannot help but

¹ Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991)

² Carl Builder, *The Masks of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Rebecca Slayton, *Arguments that Count* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013); Donald Mackenzie, *Inventing Accuracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

wonder if the reorganization of Strategic Command significantly changed the interests of the bureaucracy (or made these interests less relevant), or whether Navy or Marine commanders of the new Strategic Command, like Admiral Cecil Haney, General James Cartwright, or Admiral James Ellis, made any moves towards adoption of what Kaplan presents as the Navy's preferred minimum deterrence doctrine.

If Kaplan's book is light on characters during these administrations, it is remarkably detailed about other players in this nuclear history. In particular, former National Security Council senior director for defense policy and arms control Franklin Miller gets a good shake in Kaplan's telling, a rare hero of nuclear disarmament in a story that is dominated by conniving generals and hapless (or at least handcuffed) civilian strategists. Like Miller's ghost presence in today's Nuclear Posture Review, the former senior director's influence is felt throughout the second half of the book. This is particularly relevant to Kaplan's underlying polemic (that the U.S. has unwittingly placed itself in a first strike dilemma) as Miller has recently launched a strong public advocacy program for low-yield nuclear weapons. Miller's critics (like former secretary of defense William Perry) argue that Miller has his logic wrong and that the introduction of low yield nuclear weapons makes it more likely that U.S. presidents will use nuclear weapons preemptively. This is a critique that Kaplan does not fully engage in the book.

In the end, despite any quibbles with Kaplan's telling of this arcane and largely buried history of nuclear bureaucracy, the reviewers strongly endorse *The Bomb*. Today's policymakers racing for 'a new Cold War' with China would benefit from reading *The Bomb* and taking a closer evaluation of the historical lessons they seem to have taken from Cold War 1.0, lessons that Kaplan goes to great detail to debunk. This is all the more relevant today because Kaplan's lessons about the power of bureaucratic interests go far beyond nuclear strategy. Over decades, the U.S. has built a military that is so deadly, so destructive, so able to shock and awe, that it is able to deter most significant military action against the U.S. or its close allies. But in doing so, the U.S. has perversely created a military that must strike first in order to succeed—a similar dilemma to what Kaplan's presidents often face when making nuclear decisions. Today's military planners would benefit from Trachtenberg's remonstrance "to see the past for what it was" and look to *The Bomb* as a warning tale about building bureaucratic processes that strongly incentivize preemption, nuclear or otherwise.

Participants:

Fred Kaplan is the "War Stories" columnist for Slate and the author of five other books, including *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War* (Simon & Schuster, 2016); *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (Simon & Schuster, 2013, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist); *1959: The Year Everything Changed* (Wiley, 2009); *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Wiley, 2008); and *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Simon & Schuster, 1983). For 20 years, he was a staff reporter for the *Boston Globe*, working from Washington (1983-91), Moscow (1992-95), and New York (1995-2002); he was a member of the team that won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for a special *Sunday Globe Magazine* on the nuclear arms race. A former Edward R. Murrow Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a Schwartz Press Fellow at New America, he graduated from Oberlin College and has a Ph.D. from M.I.T.

Jacquelyn Schneider a Hoover Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, a non-resident fellow at the Naval War College, and a senior policy advisor to the Cyberspace Solarium Commission. Her research focuses on the intersection of technology, national security, and political psychology. She has a BA from Columbia University, MA from Arizona State University, and Ph.D. from George Washington University.

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University and Founding Editor of ISSF. His most recent book is *How Statesmen Think* (Princeton University Press, 2017). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and is the founding editor of the International Security Studies Forum. He has

received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology and ISA's Security Studies Section, the Grawemeyer Award for the book with the Best Ideas for Improving World Order, and the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war.

Marc Trachtenberg, an historian by training, is now a Research Professor of Political Science at UCLA. He is the author of many books and articles dealing mainly with twentieth-century international politics.

REVIEW BY ROBERT JERVIS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Although the dust jacket of Fred Kaplan's book portrays a familiar mushroom cloud and the book's title is *The Bomb*, the photographs within the book are of individuals, not weapons, and this indicates its focus: "presidents, generals, and the secret history of nuclear war," as the subtitle puts it. Kaplan is a leader in this field, and his first book, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, is a classic and remains well worth reading.¹ Indeed, thanks to that book and those of many other scholars, while there is a lot we do not know, it is exaggerating a bit to call this "the secret history of nuclear war." The book is not a re-hash, however. One of its virtues is that after skipping lightly over the first fifteen years of the nuclear era, it continues the story past the end of the Cold War, with a chilling concluding chapter on the policies and behavior of President Donald Trump. Those who are relatively unfamiliar with the period will learn an enormous amount, and even experts will find nuggets, twists and turns, and important themes.

Rather than trying to summarize the history that Kaplan presents, let me focus on the themes of the book. While none of them are unfamiliar to those in the field, they are important and Kaplan brings them to life with carefully chosen quotations and vignettes.

Ever since Thomas Schelling stressed the point, experts have known that what is new about the nuclear era is not overkill, but mutual kill—with secure retaliatory forces on both sides, war would result in mutual destruction.² This has often led to a neglect of the fact that American war plans (and Soviet ones?) did involve a great deal of overkill. For a variety of bureaucratic reasons, large numbers of warheads were assigned to the same target; at the end of the Cold War, for example, Moscow was scheduled to be hit by 689 warheads, many of them with very high yields (187).

Second and related, there usually was an enormous gap between the political guidance coming out of the White House and what the war plan (the Single Integrated Operational Plan or SIOP) called for. Supervision was lax, both because political leaders shied away from the bloody business of war and because leaders of the Air Force and the Strategic Air Command (SAC) (later changed to Strategic Command (StratCom)) refused to let their civilian bosses interfere. Presidential decision memoranda and Department of Defense implementing papers changed much more than the war plans themselves.

Third, policy-makers failed to understand the extent to which targeting and the procurement reinforced each other in a process of bootstrapping. Rather than the government tackling the perhaps impossible task of estimating what targets had to be attacked in order to deter the USSR or fight a war if necessary, the more that even obscure targets were added to the list the greater the number of warheads that were "needed," and when large numbers of warheads became available, more targets were located (16, 25, 146, 188).

Fourth, starting with President John F. Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, presidents and secretaries of defense were deeply disturbed by the SIOP briefings they received and sought a wider range of options. Being put in the position of having to choose between doing nothing and destroying civilization was unacceptable, and so there had to be ways of introducing more flexibility and the possibility of limited nuclear options. As Kaplan explains, SAC never rejected these orders, but was slow and grudging in the changes it made. Only toward the end of the Reagan administration was overkill reduced and significant flexibility introduced thanks to the efforts of Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and the civilian analysts he empowered, especially Franklin Miller. The story Kaplan tells is fascinating and important, but since it discusses events in the 1980s the documents have not been declassified. As Kaplan notes, his account rests on interviews and an invaluable account by Miller himself (332).

¹ Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

² Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

We should not be too quick to condemn SAC, however. As Kaplan hints at but does not fully discuss, fighting a limited nuclear war was probably impossible, ironically in part because the USSR was too weak, lacking fully invulnerable retaliatory forces and adequate warning systems. It was not unreasonable for the military to believe that if a war had to be fought, the objective should be to end it with as much military advantage and as little damage to the U.S. as possible, even if the destruction would be unimaginable. The only way to do this was to use the bulk of the American nuclear force, and to strike first. The military plans were indeed horrendous, but much of the Washington thinking was out of touch with reality.

Fifth, when presidents like Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Barack Obama sought to limit the arms race through arms control agreements, the price the military and congressional hawks exacted in return for their support often greatly increased the expense and potency of the nuclear force (131-139, 243-248). It was no accident that Democratic presidents were more often trapped this way than Republican ones because the former, being seen as “soft on Communism” had to provide greater pay-offs to their hardline domestic adversaries.³

Kaplan’s narrative brings out the twin problems that were beyond solution and drove so much of this madness. As he notes but does not stress, the essential U.S. political goal was not so much to deter a direct Soviet attack on the homeland as it was to protect allies, mostly in Europe (‘extended deterrence,’ as it is called). Lacking conventional forces of sufficient strength to repel a Soviet attack, the U.S. had to threaten to use nuclear weapons. But since doing so would have an unknown but significant probability of leading to an all-out war, how could the U.S. make this threat credible? Limited nuclear use only made sense if it could simultaneously remain limited and yet succeed in defeating or deterring the Soviets, and it was far from clear that this was possible no matter how much careful thought went into the policy. Two quotations get at this quite nicely. When, in the mid-1980s, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs Colin Powell was briefed on a war game involving the limited use of nuclear weapons to deal with a Soviet invasion of West Germany, and was told that the likely Soviet response was a nuclear volley of its own, he asked “does this make any sense at all?” (190) Obama reacted to a National Security Council discussion of arcane nuclear scenarios and calculations in the same way: “let’s stipulate that this is all insane” (243-44—the quotation unfortunately lacks a source). Both Powell and Obama continued with the discussion, however, and were unable to act on the implications of their insight. American officials kept searching for just the right possible responses, but there simply was no Goldilocks solution. When Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was presented with a “limited” nuclear option in response to a Soviet invasion of Iran he rejected the plan for using nearly 200 nuclear weapons: “Kissinger exploded. ‘Are you out of your minds?’ he screamed. ‘This is a limited option?’” When the generals returned with a plan calling for using only three nuclear weapons, “Kissinger’s eyes rolled. ‘What kind of nuclear attack is this?’... if the president carried out this plan, Brezhnev would think he was ‘chicken’” (119).

Despite the much greater flexibility and proliferation of options developed during the post-Cold War period, the Trump administration felt the need to meet the perceived Soviet threat of using low-yield nuclear weapons in the event of a war over the Baltic republics by introducing a new submarine-launch warhead with a (relatively) low yield (279-283). It is not clear that there is any logical limit to the variety of options that presidents might want.

If the impossibility of coming up with plausible plans for fighting and winning a limited nuclear war was one half of the basic dilemma, the other was, on the one hand, the tension between trying to deter a nuclear war and to keep it limited if it broke out, and, on the other, the need to actually fight it and limit damage to the US if it were to occur. Deterrence and defense in some ways reinforced each other, but as Kaplan shows, in other ways they were in conflict. This came out clearly in a discussion between the commander of StratCom and the civilians whom Obama had tasked with reviewing the war plans. In a discussion of how deeply the U.S. forces could be cut, it became clear that Obama could “cut a lot of American weapons without degrading a deterrence. But if you were concerned about what happened if deterrence failed,... [and] you wanted to destroy the enemy’s remaining nuclear weapons and other military sites, then you would have less room for error” (239, also

³ Sarah Kreps, Elizabeth Saunders, and Kenneth Schultz, “The Ratification Premium: Hawks, Doves, and Arms Control,” *World Politics* 70:4 (October 2018): 479-514.

see 240-42). The military always had to keep a focus on how it would fight the war if it were to occur. Civilians had the luxury of looking elsewhere.

For all its many virtues, *The Bomb* has a few shortfalls. Most obviously, the fascinating discussion skirts the question of the two-way influence of nuclear weapons and world politics. Readers who are interested in whether nuclear weapons made the world safer or increased international tensions (or perhaps both), and in how and whether the state of the nuclear balance influenced Soviet and American behavior, will be disappointed. I do not want to criticize Kaplan for not having written a different book, but readers should understand what is not being addressed as well as what is. Second, although Kaplan focuses on individuals, particularly presidents and generals but also important civilian analysts, it remains unclear exactly how much freedom of maneuver they had. For years presidents and their top advisors sought a more flexible SIOP to little or no avail. Carter and Obama sought deep cuts, but were largely thwarted. Reagan famously sought strategic defense as the answer, but that was—and probably still is—beyond reach. If one were to tell the story without using the names of individuals but only the titles of their offices, I wonder if a reader could detect the coming and going of presidents and generals or whether other forces predominated. Third and related, Kaplan pays less attention to Soviet behavior (real and perceived) and to changes in technology. Of course this is a legitimate choice—Kaplan's text covers 60 years in 300 pages and much must be left out. Nevertheless, we are increasingly aware of the role of changing technology in opening and closing routes to military advantage.⁴

There also are errors scattered through the book. Kennedy's comment that because of the crisis over Berlin, "it will be a cold winter" was made to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev at the end of the Vienna summit meeting, not to an aide afterwards (49). Khrushchev's shift to a more hard-line position toward the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis was caused by new information indicating that the invasion of Cuba was not imminent, and not by his having been overruled by politburo hard-liners (70). Admiral Arleigh Burke's nickname was "31-Knot Burke" not "30-Knots Burke" (85). (He earned moniker during World War II when he said he was heading to an engagement at 31 knots when the top speed of his ships was 30 knots). Kaplan says that at the time of the crisis over Dien Bien Phu, the besieged French outpost in Indochina, Secretary of State "John Foster Dulles offered the French foreign minister two tactical atomic bombs" (105). The source he cites makes clear, however, that this claim is made in the French minister's memoirs written years later and is likely to be an exaggeration if not an invention.⁵ Kaplan also repeats the familiar claim that the Soviet leaders feared that the 1983 NATO exercise Able Archer might have been a cover for a preventive war despite the fact that Soviet experts have debunked the claim (160-161).⁶

It might not be out of place to note that the book is dedicated, among others, to the late Vern Lanphier, a fellow graduate student with Kaplan at MIT who went on to a career in Navy intelligence and the CIA before becoming a consultant on national security issues. I worked with him at the CIA and admired him greatly (as did everyone else in the unit). It is a

⁴ Brendan Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26:4 (July 2017): 606-641; Long and Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38:1-2 (February 2015): 38-73; Kier Lieber and Daryl Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Nuclear Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

⁵ William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 29.

⁶ Simon Miles, "The War Scare that Wasn't: Able Archer and the Myths of the Second Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, forthcoming; Gordon Barrass, "Able Archer 83: What Were the Soviets Thinking?," *Survival* 58:6 (2016): 7-30; Raymond Garthoff, "Soviet Leaders, Soviet Intelligence, and Changing Views of the United States, 1965-91," in Paul Maddrell, ed., *The Image of the Enemy: Intelligence Analysis of Adversaries Since 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015): 28-67; Mark Kramer, "Die Nicht-Krise um 'Able Archer 1983': Fürchtete die sowjetische Führung tatsächlich einen atomaren Großangriff im Herbst 1983?," in Oliver Bange and Bernd Lemke, eds., *Wege zur Wiedervereinigung: Die beiden deutschen Staaten in ihren Bündnissen 1970 bis 1990* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013): 129-149; Vojtech Mastny, "How Able Was 'Able Archer'? Nuclear Trigger and Intelligence in Perspective," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11:1 (Winter 2009): 108-123.

reminder, one that is particularly useful in today's political climate, of how much we owe to those who work in the government and about whom we will never hear.

Given its broad scope, *The Bomb* cannot bring to light as much new information as narrowly crafted monographs,⁷ and with so much else having been written it cannot have the same influence as *The Wizards of Armageddon*. It is, however, a significant contribution, one well worth reading by experts and interested members of the public as well.

⁷ See, for example, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

REVIEW BY MARC TRACHTENBERG, UCLA POLITICAL SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

On July 30, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was talking with his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, when the subject of America's strategy for general nuclear war suddenly came up. The administration, McNamara warned the president, was "walking into a *very* controversial proposal on our ICBMs this year." Up to that point, he said, the plan had been to target those missiles both on cities and on the enemy's nuclear forces, but that policy was about to change. There really was no point to attacking Soviet nuclear forces because that kind of strike would not "materially reduce casualties in this country." The goal of "damage limitation" was beyond reach, he said; "you can't do that job."¹ And the official rhetoric soon did change dramatically. Counterforce was played down as a goal. The new watchword was "assured destruction," which meant the "capability to destroy both the Soviet Union and Communist China as viable societies, even after a well planned and executed surprise attack on our forces."² The United States, it seemed, had opted for what was called a "second strike" strategy, a strategy focused on deterrence and based on the threat to retaliate after riding out an attack on America's own nuclear force.

But while the rhetoric may have shifted, there was little change in the war plans. The USSR's military forces, and especially its nuclear forces, remained the most important target. And U.S. officials did not actually deny that that was the case. The argument was that "assured destruction" served only as a guide to force sizing; America would build a force large enough to destroy Soviet society even after absorbing the damage the enemy could inflict in a first strike. But that did not mean that the force would actually be used that way in the event of war. The main goal would still be to destroy the enemy's war-fighting capability.

An argument could be made, that is, that it did not make sense to build a force based on one set of criteria but then plan to use it based on an entirely different set of objectives—that the sort of strategy one had for conducting military operations and the goals that strategy was designed to achieve should have something to do with the sort of force one needed to build. But problems of that sort were scarcely noticed at the time. A big part of the reason is that it was hard for many people to take these problems of nuclear strategy seriously. The idea, as McNamara himself later put it, was that nuclear weapons were "*totally useless—except only to deter one's opponent from using them.*"³ But if the weapons were unusable, whatever plans were developed for how they might be used in a war scarcely mattered, because there was essentially no chance that they would ever be put into effect.

McNamara was by no means the only major figure to take the view that nuclear weapons were essentially unusable, especially on a massive scale. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, for example, admitted publicly in 1979 that the American nuclear guarantee that lay at the heart of the NATO alliance was a bluff, and that the promises about nuclear escalation which the United States had made to its allies were not to be taken seriously. The European allies, he declared, "should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean or if we do mean, we should not want to

¹ Kennedy-McNamara-Bundy meeting, July 30, 1963, President's Office Files, Tape 102/A38, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/MTG/JFKPOF-MTG-102-003/JFKPOF-MTG-102-003>). The passage begins at 11 minutes, 13 seconds, into the tape.

² As defined in Robert McNamara, Draft Memorandum for the President on Recommended Fy 1966-1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense, 3 December 1964, p. 3, available on the Internet Archive website (<https://archive.org/details/FY19661970StrategicOffensiveForcesContinentalAirandMissileDefenseForces/page/n5/mode/2up>).

³ Robert S. McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs* 62:1 (Fall 1983): 79; emphasis in original text. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20041735>.

execute because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilization.”⁴ The U.S. government, it seemed, was at times scarcely willing to even use tactical nuclear weapons. “We will never use the tactical nuclears,” President Nixon told his advisors. The “nuclear umbrella in NATO,” he said, was “a lot of crap.”⁵ But President Ronald Reagan is perhaps the most extraordinary case in point. Reagan, as Paul Lettow has argued, was a “nuclear abolitionist.” He might have been an “anti-Communist hawk,” one of his advisors said, but when it came to the nuclear issue he made comments that seemed “to come from the far left rather than the far right. He *hated* nuclear weapons.” Another Reagan advisor, Jack Matlock, told Lettow that he suspected that Reagan might not even retaliate if the United States itself was attacked: “I think deep down he doubted that, even if the United States was struck, that he could bring himself to strike another country” with nuclear weapons.⁶

Many other examples could be given, but one cannot just leave it at that and assume that nuclear strategy is somehow too unreal to be taken seriously. For as long as these “unusable” weapons exist, there is a finite chance that they might actually be used, and that means that all these questions relating to nuclear weapons are still very much worth thinking about. And these are questions, as Bernard Brodie once noted, “of great intellectual difficulty, as well, of course, as other kinds of difficulty”; anyone who has tried to grapple with them knows very well that they have no simple answers.⁷ But probably the best way to begin to get a handle on them is to look at how they have been dealt with in the past.

That certainly is the assumption that lies at the heart of Fred Kaplan’s new book *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*. What we have here is no mere recounting of events. The history, for Kaplan, is above all a vehicle for getting at some fundamental questions about nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy. And, given Kaplan’s very unusual set of qualifications for tackling those questions, it is scarcely surprising that this book is very much worth reading. It will be of interest both to people new to the field and to people who have spent their lives thinking about these issues.

Kaplan, for those readers who are not familiar with his work, was aptly characterized by a *New York Times* reviewer as “a rare combination of defense intellectual and pugnacious reporter.”⁸ There is no one else in the field quite like him. As a scholar he is simply first-rate. He earned his Ph.D. in political science from MIT in 1983; he worked there with a number of professors who had been deeply involved, in some official capacity or another, with nuclear issues. But unlike many political scientists, he was from the start very good at getting access to and working with documents. Through aggressive use of the Freedom of Information Act and the Mandatory Declassification Review process, he was, in fact, able to have a great deal of very valuable documentation declassified. And, unlike most historians, he has also done a massive amount of interviewing over the years; it is quite amazing what he was able to get the former officials and military officers he interviewed to tell him. His work is based in very large measure on what he personally was able to discover; although he is familiar with the literature

⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, “NATO Defense and the Soviet Threat,” *Survival* 21:6 (November-December 1979): 266. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396337908441850>. This speech was delivered at a conference in Brussels on September 1, 1979.

⁵ National Security Council meeting, November 10, 1970, Digital National Security Archive (<https://search.proquest.com/dnsa/index>), document KT00211; and National Security Council meeting, February 19, 1969, quoted in William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969-1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7:3 (Summer 2005): 48 n.31.

⁶ Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and his Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), 9, 132-33. Emphasis in original text.

⁷ Bernard Brodie, talk at Asilomar conference, April 29, 1960, Bernard Brodie Papers, box 17, Young Research Library, University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles CA.

⁸ Thanassis Cambanis, review of Kaplan’s *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, in the *New York Times Book Review*, 27 January 2013; <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/books/review/fred-kaplans-insurgents-on-david-petraeus.html>.

in this field, this book is in no way a rehash of what other people have written. He has a powerful mind and knows how to use it. And, if that were not enough, he also writes beautifully. So, in short, as a scholar he really is in a class by himself.

His first book, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, a study of the civilian nuclear strategists, came out in 1983. It was a brilliant piece of work and had a strong political message. The defense intellectuals, the argument ran, thought that nuclear warfare could be analyzed in rational terms. But they were simply wrong about that. The bomb was a “device of sheer mayhem, a weapon whose cataclysmic powers no one really had the faintest idea of how to control.” The strategists had lost touch with reality; they treated the theory they had developed “as if it were reality”; “nuclear strategy had become the stuff of a living dreamworld”; the “defense intellectuals” had been taken in by illusions of their own making. And all this mattered because the civilian strategists eventually came to dominate “strategic thinking deep inside the hidden infrastructure of the government”; as a result, their ideas could “mean the difference between peace and total war.”⁹ The implication was that the strategists had too much power, that their ideas had been too influential, and, at a deeper level, that it was basically wrong to try to approach the nuclear question from a rationalist point of view.

The new book is not cut from that cloth at all. There is more sympathy now for the dilemmas people faced and for the idea that one should try to analyze these problems as rationally as possible. At one point, for example, Kaplan talks about how some of the strategists felt that if there was even a small chance that all-out war could be avoided once the nuclear threshold was crossed, they had to come up with plans that might make that possible; and Kaplan can understand why they would take that view (180). His emphasis now is on making the key decisions comprehensible, as the product of rational choices made by rational leaders.

He notes, for example, that even though U.S. officials have often spoken as if American policy had been based on “second-strike deterrence,” in reality, the bomb has always been viewed “as a weapon of war, writ large” (2). That vision, he notes, “has been enshrined in the American military’s doctrines, drills, and exercises” from the onset of the nuclear age through the present (2). Most presidents might have been “skeptical of this vision” but “none of them have rejected it” (2-3)—and Kaplan does provide some very interesting information about this, especially in the chapter covering the Obama presidency. But if they were so skeptical, why then did they decide, in the final analysis, to go along with it? A big part of the answer, he writes, has to do with politics, personalities, and bureaucratic rivalries, and he is very good at laying out this part of the story.

But he recognizes that something even more important came into play. There was, he points out, a way of thinking about nuclear issues which even most presidents ultimately bought into. “With the spread of the bomb,” he writes, “came a logic—a stab at a strategy—on how to deter its use in warfare” (297). Presidents had to convince their adversaries that they really would use it in certain cases, and that entailed convincing themselves that they actually might use it; and they had to build the kind of force and develop the sorts of plans that would enable them to do so. Only in that way could a president credibly threaten to use nuclear weapons, and the threat had to be credible if it was to have the desired deterrent effect. It was in that way, he points out, that “a strategy to deter nuclear war became synonymous with a strategy to fight nuclear war” (297). Showing what that logic was does not, in Kaplan’s view, mean that the situation is not dangerous. But the assumption is that in order to deal with the nuclear issue one has to understand what that logic was—and maybe even sympathize with those who came to accept it, at least it to a certain degree.

Or to put the point another way: to deal with the issue effectively, one first needs to see nuclear reality for what it was. And while one might disagree with Kaplan in a number of areas, he does give an accurate picture of what that reality was. This is more important than one might think, since the public, during the Cold War at least, was systematically misled on some core issues relating to U.S. nuclear strategy. As Kaplan points out, “most people—including otherwise informed academics, arms control advocates, and editorialists—had taken McNamara’s rhetorical shift seriously” (117). They had assumed that U.S. nuclear policy actually was based on the idea of “assured destruction”—that deterrence through the threat of counter-

⁹ Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 11, 386, 390-391. Emphasis in original text.

city retaliation was the only real goal, that there could be no thought of winning by striking first and destroying the enemy's ability to retaliate in a major way. In reality, however, the United States had never given up on counterforce. Even McNamara, Kaplan points out, had approved the development of multiple warheads so accurate that they could restore "to the Air Force a first-strike capability" (98). The balance, in fact, had shifted by the early 1980s to the point where "if the big war came, the United States would win" (157).

So the U.S. government took the goal of prevailing in a nuclear war much more seriously than people had been led to think. But the belief that the United States was interested mainly in deterrence—that it had ruled out the idea of striking first in a nuclear conflict with the goal of winning the war, and had built its policy on the concept of "mutual assured destruction"—was of enormous political importance, especially since it was so widely believed that the Soviets had opted for the opposite kind of strategy. For the idea that the Americans were determers and the Soviets were war-fighters was linked to the notion that whereas U.S. policy was essentially defensive in nature, the Soviets were thinking in terms of actually using their nuclear forces for political purposes. This was taken to imply, especially in the late 1970s, that détente was a sham and that a much tougher U.S. policy was called for.

And the basic point here—that American policy was not nearly as moderate as people thought—is supported by other evidence Kaplan presents. He shows, for example, that the United States was far more aggressive in conducting Cold War operations than most people realize. Even before Reagan took office, he points out, "Air Force and CIA spy planes were routinely crossing into Soviet airspace on intelligence-gathering missions," and under Reagan those sorts of activities were intensified (157-58). In one operation, "Navy combat planes simulated a bombing run over a military site twenty miles inside Soviet territory. The ships and the planes maintained radio silence, jammed Soviet radar, and transmitted false signals; as a result, they avoided detection, even by a new Soviet early-warning satellite orbiting directly overhead."

According to a history prepared for the National Security Agency, "These actions were calculated to induce paranoia, and they did" (158). Kaplan notes that the downing of the Korean jetliner KAL 007 in 1983 is to be understood in the context of these operations—a point which certainly has a major bearing on how that affair is to be interpreted (158). And this, I should note, was not the first time the United States took actions of this sort. In 1954, for example, President Eisenhower had to explain to William Knowland, the Republican leader in the Senate (who had been calling for the U.S. government to break off diplomatic relations with the Kremlin because of Soviet behavior), that there was "a very great aggressiveness on our side," that, especially in terms of reconnaissance operations, "we are very active," and that "we might have to answer to charges of being too provocative rather than being too sweet."¹⁰

All of this throws a certain light on a part of the story most people are not aware of, and perhaps do not want to be aware of. But it is important to see the past for what it was. It is not that understanding the history can provide us with ready-made answers to the great questions of foreign and military policy which are bound to arise in the future. It is not that understanding the United States' nuclear past, in particular, can tell us what its nuclear future should be. But this sort of understanding can provide us with a springboard for grappling with these issues, a perspective we cannot get in any other way. And it helps to be guided through the subject by someone like Kaplan, who brings his own considerable intelligence to bear and, if the book is read with any care, forces us to think seriously about the nuclear issue in the light of that historical reality. For the Cold War might be over, but the nuclear issue is not going to go away any time soon. And, given its extraordinary importance, this is one issue that Americans, as a society, will need to think hard about for many years to come.

¹⁰ Eisenhower-Knowland meeting, November 21, 1954, Ann Whitman File, ACW Diaries, box 3, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene KS; also in U.S. Declassified Documents Online, doc. no. CK2349433166.

RESPONSE BY FRED KAPLAN, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Kt is gratifying—a deep pleasure, really—to read such appreciative and knowledgeable reviews from such authoritative scholars in the field. They leave me very little to say about the book or why I wrote it; they cover that territory well. I have only a few comments.

First, I would quibble with this sentence from Professor Robert Jervis's review: "As he [Kaplan] notes *but does not stress*, the essential U.S. policy goal was not so much to deter Soviet attack on the heartland as it was to protect allies, especially in Europe." (Emphasis added.) I would argue that I do stress this point quite a bit. For instance, I show that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara adopted the counterforce/no-cities doctrine, at least for a while, in part to assure the European allies that Washington continued to have their backs, even as the Soviets built their own long-range nuclear force. In response to President Charles de Gaulle's concern, in particular, that an American president might not "risk New York for Paris," (78, *passim*) McNamara argued, in a long since declassified top-secret speech at the 1962 NATO conference in Athens, that the U.S. plan was not to attack Soviet cities "per se," so the risk wasn't a factor. (The French found the argument intriguing but unpersuasive. So did McNamara, in the few times he was honest about it.) In later chapters, I also show how concern about allies played a major role in President Jimmy Carter's decision to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing II ballistic missiles in Europe (which, in turn, precipitated a near-crisis between the superpowers). Allies also come up as a major impediment to President Barack Obama's desire to declare a "no-first-use" policy.

Jervis also writes that "Soviet experts have debunked the claim" that, in 1983, Soviet leaders feared NATO's Able Archer war game might have been a cover for a real invasion. I don't know who these experts are; but, as I quote in the book, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board concluded, in a very compelling, way-beyond-top-secret report, only recently declassified, "There is little doubt in our minds that the Soviets were genuinely worried by Able Archer" and "At least some Soviet forces were preparing to preempt or counterattack" what they saw as an imminent strike (161). Much circumstantial evidence that I recount in that chapter bolsters this judgment. I know some former U.S. officials who are skeptical of the PFIAB report, but I know several more who were skeptical until they read the report, at which point they were persuaded.

Professor Marc Trachtenberg draws an interesting contrast between my book and *The Wizards of Armageddon*, which I wrote 37 years earlier. In *Wizards*, he notes, I argue that the nuclear strategists steadily lost touch with reality as the history evolved, while, in *The Bomb*, he writes, "There is more sympathy now for the dilemmas people faced and for the idea that one should try to analyze these problems as rationally as possible." This is an interesting point that I hadn't noticed so explicitly. However, I would say the contrast is not quite as glaring as it might seem. What I stress in *The Bomb* is that, during real crises, when presidents pondered the dilemmas posed by nuclear strategy (posed, one might say, by the existence of nuclear weapons), their rational analysis led them to scramble out of the rabbit hole—to evade the strategists' logic—as quickly as possible and to seek a diplomatic solution. In that sense, a rational analysis of the very real dilemmas showed that nuclear strategy was unreal, and that there was, and is, no rational use of nuclear weapons. One of my points is that it takes a thorough, rational immersion in the logic to reach these conclusions most definitively.