
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Robert Jervis, Charles Maier, Anders Stephanson, Jeremi Suri.

Commentary by Charles Maier, Harvard University

Bruce Kuklick, as one would expect from his earlier work, has written a highly stimulating and at times brilliant analysis of American foreign-policy intellectuals in the formative postwar years. I think it was C. Wright Mills who coined the phrase “defense intellectuals,” which in fact is the class of thinkers whose impact on Cold War foreign policy making Kuklick proposes to assay by focusing successively on their advice concerning the early nuclear arms race, then the Cuban missile crisis, and finally, Vietnam. He offers, in effect, a partial history of cold-war episodes and an analysis of the defense intellectuals’ reasoning — which he does by examining, among other topics, the early writings on deterrence theory, the deliberations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the escalation in Vietnam and the debates running through and about the Pentagon Papers, the lessons drawn by the scholars who were clustered at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Politics, and Robert McNamara’s continued *apologia pro vita sua*. As a study of defense intellectuals it is most valuable as sociology of knowledge, revealing the habitus and milieux at RAND, the University of Chicago, SAIS, the John F. Kennedy School of Government and other think tanks.

Ultimately, however, Kuklick, who is usually so prepared to eviscerate thinkers who search for power, ends up curiously cowed and even inconsistent. His protagonists’ input to policy, seems to rate at one and the same time as dangerous, negligible, and withal better than no contribution at all. The policy intellectuals “groped in the dark,”…”knew and understood little,”…”had little influence qua intellectuals, except to perform feats of ventriloquy,” Still, “what alternatives do we have to the sort of reasoning in which the theorists of conflict engaged?... I have been hard pressed to offer alternatives. My conclusions are more a meditation than a call for radical change.” (pp. 15-16) As a result, this reader finds the book an instructive, but sometimes puzzling meditation.

Kuklick distinguishes three groups of defense intellectuals: the pioneers of game theory and nuclear strategy, especially as clustered at RAND, who confidently laid down the logic of nuclear deterrence; then the more historically oriented interpreters of Soviet conduct and statesmanship in general, exemplified by George F. Kennan, Paul Nitze, and Henry Kissinger; finally the “staff” advisers to the prince, represented by Richard Neustadt and the analysts of “bureaucratic politics,” who got caught up in the Cuban missile crisis, then the Kennedy-Johnson effort in Vietnam, and finally shaped the scholarly agenda of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. Robert McNamara weaves through these groups as an exemplary defense...
technocrat on his own – reflecting their advice and their anguish, a sort of Ancient Mariner of the Cold War, obsessively telling his story over and over again to whomever he can impale.

In fact Kuklick envisions basically two approaches to foreign-policy cogitation and counseling. On the one side he finds a basically Germanic or Spenglerian style of reflection, exemplified, for all the differences among them, by Kennan, Nitze, Morgenthau, and Kissinger, who peddle foreign-policy truisms cloaked as historical profundity. These advisers appeal to the imponderables inherent in history and understand statesmanship to emerge from a deep understanding of the “tragic” conflicts that preclude easy triumphs. They rather counsel patient resistance or sometimes even compromise with cruder and barbaric powers. Although Kuklick deflates their claims to historical profundity, he holds these expositors in less contempt than the alternative current, who are at once both very American, in their appeal to Taylorite, technocratic, pseudo-scientific expertise, and “Platonic” in their confidence that good government arises when philosophers advise princes. Deweyite rationality, Fordism, Operations Research and game theory and organizational behavior, later the analysis of bureaucratic politics, all succeed each other as candidates for cold-war expertise above politics. Kuklick’s book is most powerful and successful, I believe, as he follows the development of these approaches and the impact these two streams of advisers had on nuclear strategy, on Cuba, the missiles crisis, and the Vietnam War. He examines not only their role on policy but the institutions that nurtured them, and he valuably exploits the think-tank and university archives as well as individuals’ writing and policies.

Kuklick is often scathing about the methodologies the defense intellectuals pressed into service, but allows an occasional defense. RAND theorists, critics said, “ignored the crucial unpredictability of political life,” but as Carl Kaysen argued, were no worse than anyone else (pp. 31-32). Later he charges, Neustadt and Ernest May, who sought to reason from historical analogy – and more important to distinguish valid from invalid analogies – could never solve the problem of discriminating in advance between which analogies might be valid and which counterfactuals warranted. (pp. 93-94). Although the Neustadt approach helped generate the analysis in Graham Allison’s influential *Essence of Decision*, this flawed study maintained that “tangential aspects of the [Cuban missile] crisis were crucial, and did not tell students about crucial aspects.” (p.167). The reader need not give any credence to W.W. Rostow, who was derided by his own policy contemporaries. Even Daniel Ellsberg, whose psychological instability Kuklick amply stresses, and the liberals whose collective guilt for Vietnam was demonstrated in the Pentagon Papers were ultimately, Kuklick argues, trying to get off the hook for the war. Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts argued that the political system had done what it was supposed to and thus was flawed: “In the exoneration of people like himself, Gelb (and his coauthor) propounded the mystification that history had taught him.” Liberals would ultimately scapegoat Nixon, “which is not to say the blame was wrongly placed.” (pp.178-80) Similar slashing judgments are mobilized as Kissinger, McNamara and the Bundy brothers all appear before the bar. Why, asks Kuklick, were they continually rewarded even after demonstrable failure? The defense intellectuals were like shamans or examiners of entrails. Still “there is little alternative than urging that scholars should do it better and with less pride and dogmatism.” (p.230)
Many of Kuklick’s criticisms seem right on the mark. Otherwise smart people give dumb advice, as the Iraq War amply demonstrates once again. McGeorge Bundy was deeply involved with the Cuban policies of 1961, apparently told Yale not to buy equities for its endowment, brought the Ford Foundation into some discredit by hiring Robert Kennedy’s advisers. Every bad decision brought new honors, as is often the case with America’s foreign-policy establishment. Still, Bundy was obviously brilliant and wrote a profound and thoughtful book on the nuclear arms race. Still, more knowledge should be better than less. Kuklick recognizes the limits of Richard Neustadt’s analyses, but obviously still reveres his wisdom. The book is dedicated to him. And even if policy intellectuals don’t get it right more often than would someone flipping coins, our society since the Enlightenment is no longer content with gazing at entrails or tossing pennies. The author, after all, is an intellectual – as is this reader.

Some of Kuklick’s critiques seem less well founded to me. I don’t think that Kenneth Arrow’s famous demonstration that a voting system could not always produce consistent social preferences does not amount to a de facto plea for benevolent dictatorship. (pp. 28-29) Neither does it seem to me that the analysis of nuclear strategy is really adequate although the discussion of the milieus in which it arose is intriguing. I would rank the contributions of game theory and formal strategic thinkers perhaps higher in aggregate than does the author. Kuklick follows Brodie and Wohlstetter (and Nitze) to show how America and Russia both ended up arming to the teeth. He valuably suggests that the proliferation of nuclear weaponry was a RAND answer to avoiding massive retaliation (see the discussion of William Kaufmann (107-09). But while the author’s time frame leads him to take the story up the vast nuclear targeting list of the SIOP in the late 1950s, he hardly considers either George Kistiakowsky’s effort to get nuclear targeting under control or the subsequent efforts to at least move from “war-winning” strategies to war-averting. Over and against McNamara’s early support for escalation in East Asia, the author might have focused on the equally important story of how he accepted and bequeathed the policy of assured destruction, which was the key to mutual deterrence? In a recent reflection on the long nuclear arms race, Thomas Schelling has argued that what was decisive was the fact that policy makers backed away from their instincts of the 1950s – that they might use battlefield atomic weapons without danger of unleashing strategic nuclear warfare. The viable firebreak, he argues and I think convincingly, was not between tactical nuclear weapons and strategic nuclear weapons, but between conventional weapons and nuclear arms of any range and size. (President Kennedy understood that but was prepared to think through the implications.1) Kuklick’s account of nuclear policy stops before Mutual Assured Destruction became accepted, before the restraints on anti-missile systems were upheld, and before SALT negotiations. As Kuklick’s own analysis of counter-factuals makes clear, we can never really know whether atomic deterrence was “robust,” or whether we escaped catastrophe by the skin of our teeth. But there were points along the way where analysts powerfully argued whether more defense meant less protection.

I have some other problems with the book. In its focus on policy advice it has to remain an incomplete history of the Cold War, which would not be a criticism, except that I think the author really wants his text to be a guide to key cold-war decisions. Consider first the Cuban missile crisis. Kuklick faults Allison for initially leaving out the German issue, which, following

---

Marc Trachtenberg, he finds crucial. Trachtenberg’s *Constructed Peace* argues forcefully that the possibility of a nuclear armed Germany explains Khrushchev’s opening of the Berlin crisis of 1958 and his wager on changing the nuclear balance via Cuba in 1962. Without a serious review of the documentary collections, I would not dissent. Nonetheless, his account may undervalue the tensions that arose within the Soviet bloc (the ramifications of the 20th Congress of the CPSU and then of the 1956 Hungarian revolt), which also militated shoring up the GDR regime by letting it control its capital. In any case, the underlying problem with establishing the value of a bureaucratic-politics approach by analyzing the Cuban missiles crisis, is not the omission of the German factor, but the fact that (as Kuklick also suggests by his dismissal of the ExCom’s lucubrations, pp. 117-20), no other crisis of the Cold War seemed so eminently determined by leaders thinking through the implications of their decisions for war or peace.

Ultimately, I would encourage Kuklick to write more about what role history might play in policy advising. I share with him the distrust of such stylized “analytical narratives,” or “controlled case styles,” as they have been variously termed. History itself hardly takes place within these limits. I certainly agree with him that all historical explanation rests on ruling out counter-factuals as much as establishing what finally resulted (pp. 121-26). Since there are so many potentially relevant might-have-beens, much of the historian’s acumen must lie in the determination of which counter-factuals really are fruitful to work through. But this exercise alone will not establish the “usefulness” of history for policy makers. The problem is that we historians believe that ignorance of the past is harmful but cannot establish agreed on narratives version that might provide guidance. What role, then, might history play? It is an illusion to think that it offers maxims for statesmen. At best it provides crude psychological truisms that are valid by virtue of definition. (Appeasing aggressors encourages them to seek greater prizes.) Historians certainly cannot tell us that the present will turn out like the past; they cannot even tell us whether the past is better or worse than it might have. My own view is that at best knowledge of history humbles the policy maker so he or she understands how much scope there is for caprice, contingency, miscalculation. As Kuklick tells us humility might be in order. But will not historical knowledge then lead, as Nietzsche suggested, to the dangers of paralysis? Ultimately, history should do what serious literature, music and art do for aesthetic functioning, make the human mind operate at an enhanced level of analytical capacity. It should serve like a calisthenic that conditions intellect, not an encyclopedia with answers. *Blind Oracles* is certainly calisthenic, and indeed a specimen of tough contact sport.