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FAT MAN

*Herman Kahn and the nuclear age.***By Louis Menand**

Herman Kahn was the heavyweight of the Megadeath Intellectuals, the men who, in the early years of the Cold War, made it their business to think about the unthinkable, and to design the game plan for nuclear war—how to prevent it, or, if it could not be prevented, how to win it, or, if it could not be won, how to survive it. The collective combat experience of these men was close to nil; their diplomatic experience was smaller. Their training was in physics, engineering, political science, mathematics, and logic, and they worked with the latest in assessment technologies: operational research, computer science, systems analysis, and game theory. The type of war they contemplated was, of course, never waged, but whether this was because of their work or in spite of it has always been a matter of dispute. Exhibit A in the case against them is a book by Kahn, published in 1960, “On Thermonuclear War.”

Kahn was a creature of the RAND Corporation, and RAND was a creature of the Air Force. In 1945, when the United States dropped atomic bombs nicknamed Little Boy and Fat Man on Japan, the Air Force was still a branch of the Army. The bomb changed that. An independent Department of the Air Force was created in 1947; the nation’s nuclear arsenal was put under its command; and the Air Force displaced the Army as the prima donna of national defense. Whatever it wanted, it mostly got. One of the things it wanted was a research arm, and RAND was the result. (RAND stands for Research ANd Development.) RAND was a line item in the Air Force budget; its offices were on a beach in Santa Monica. Kahn joined in 1947.

In his day, Kahn was the subject of many magazine stories, and most of them found it important to mention his girth—he was built, one journalist recorded, “like a prize-winning pear”—and his volubility. He was a marathon spielmeister, whose preferred format was the twelve-hour lecture, split into three parts over two days, with no text but with plenty of charts and slides. He was a jocular, gregarious giant who chattered on about fallout shelters, megaton bombs, and the incineration of millions. Observers were charmed or repelled, sometimes charmed and repelled. Reporters referred to him as “a roly-poly, second-strike Santa Claus” and “a thermonuclear Zero Mostel.” He is supposed to have had the highest I.Q. on record.

Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi’s “The Worlds of Herman Kahn” (Harvard; \$26.95) is an attempt to look at Kahn as a cultural phenomenon. (Kahn is the subject of a full-length biography with a similar title, “Supergenius: The Mega-Worlds of Herman Kahn,” by a former colleague, Barry Bruce-Briggs, which, though partisan, is thorough and informed, and which Ghamari-Tabrizi, strangely, never mentions.) She is not the first to treat Kahn as more an artist than a scientist. In 1968, when Kahn was at the height of his celebrity, Richard Kostelanetz wrote a profile of him for the *Times Magazine* in which he suggested that Kahn had “a thoroughly avant-garde sensibility.” He meant that Kahn was uninhibited by conventional ways of thinking, alert to abandon positions that were starting to seem obsolete, continually trying to find new ways to see around the next corner. As Ghamari-Tabrizi points out, this was the mode of RAND itself. The atmosphere there was one part Southern California nonconformity and two parts University of Chicago rigor. People at RAND imagined themselves to be well out on the curve. They read widely and held salons, where they talked futurology; some had arty décor in their offices and took up gourmet cooking. They were eggheads in a world of meatheads, and they regarded the uniformed military man in the same way that the baseball statistician Bill James regards Don Zimmer: as a relic of the pre-scientific dark ages, when the wisdom of experience passed for strategic thought. The wisdom of experience was useless in the atomic era, because no one had ever participated in a nuclear exchange. The variables of nuclear strategy were too complex to be pondered without the aid of advanced quantitative methods and a high-speed computer. One of the earliest of the atomic-age defense intellectuals, Bernard Brodie, had made his reputation with a book called “A Guide to Naval Strategy,” published in 1942. When he

wrote it, Brodie had not only never been on a ship; he had never seen an ocean. He carried this spirit into his work on the bomb.

Ghamari-Tabrizi thinks that if nuclear strategy is a science it is, at best, an “intuitive science,” more imaginative than empirical, and she relies a lot on the vocabulary of literary criticism to interpret it: the grotesque, the fantastic, the uncanny, the hardboiled, “the aesthetic of spontaneity,” “serious play.” She does not withhold judgment about the merits of Kahn’s work, but she is interested mainly in the feel of the moment, the moods and tastes of a time when the Cold War, and the anxious talk that swirled around it, had many Americans scared almost to death. It is an adventurous approach, and rewarding when it works. That it does not always work was implicit in the gambit.

Kahn was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, in 1922, and grew up in the Bronx and, after his parents divorced, in Los Angeles. He went to U.C.L.A. and majored in physics. During the war, he served in the Pacific theatre in a non-combat position, then finished his B.S. and entered a Ph.D. program at Cal Tech. He failed to graduate—family financial problems interfered—and, after a halfhearted attempt to enter the real-estate business, went to work at RAND. He became involved in the development of the hydrogen bomb, and commuted to the Livermore Laboratory, near Berkeley, where he worked with Edward Teller, John von Neumann, and Hans Bethe. He also entered the circle of Albert Wohlstetter, a mathematician who had produced an influential critique of nuclear preparedness, and who was the most mandarin of the RAND intellectuals. And he became obsessed with the riddles of deterrence.

The defense policy of the Eisenhower Administration, announced by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations in 1954, was the doctrine of “massive retaliation.” Dulles explained that the United States could not afford to be prepared to meet Soviet aggression piecemeal—to have soldiers ready to fight in every place threatened by Communist expansion. The Soviets had a bigger army, and they threatened in too many places. The solution was to make it clear that the American response to Soviet aggression anywhere would be a nuclear attack, at a time and place of America’s choosing. It was a first-strike policy: if provoked, the United States would be the first to use the bomb. An overwhelming nuclear arsenal

therefore acted as a deterrent on Soviet aggression. Eisenhower called the policy the New Look.

The New Look was good for the Air Force, because it made the nuclear arsenal, and its delivery system of bombers and, later on, missiles, the country's principal strategic resource. But the analysts at RAND considered massive retaliation a pathetically crude idea, an atomic-age version of Roosevelt's big stick. They thought that it was practically an invitation to the Soviets to precede any local aggression by a preëmptive first strike on American bomber bases, eliminating the nuclear threat on the ground and forcing the United States into the land war it was unprepared to fight. There was also a major credibility problem. How aggressive did the Soviets need to be to trigger a thermonuclear response? Was the United States willing to kill millions of Russians, and to put millions of Americans at risk of dying in a counterattack, in order to prevent, say, South Korea from going Communist? Or West Berlin? There had to be some options available between disapproval and annihilation. The doctrine of massive retaliation was a deterrent—a way to prevent war—but it was inherently destabilizing. National defense policy required something more nuanced, and figuring out what, since Eisenhower was uninterested, fell to the people at RAND.

Kahn began working on the problem not long after Dulles's speech. In 1959, he spent a semester at the Center for International Studies, at Princeton, and then toured the country delivering lectures on deterrence theory. In 1960, Princeton University Press published a version of the lectures (with much added material) as "On Thermonuclear War." Kahn was not really a writer, and his book—six hundred and fifty-one pages—is shaggy, overstuffed, almost free-associational, with a colorful use of capitalization and italics, long excursions on the strategic lessons of the First and Second World Wars, and the sorts of proto-PowerPoint charts and tables that Kahn used in his lectures.

"On Thermonuclear War" (Bruce-Briggs suggests that the title, an allusion to Clausewitz's "On War," was devised by the publisher) is based on two assertions. The first is that nuclear war is possible; the second is that it is winnable. Most of the book is a consideration, in the light of these assumptions, of possible nuclear-war scenarios. In some, hundreds of millions die, and portions of the planet are uninhabitable for millennia. In others, a few major cities are annihilated and only ten or twenty million

people are killed. Just because both outcomes would be bad on a scale unknown in the history of warfare does not mean, Kahn insists, that one is not less bad than the other. "A thermonuclear war is quite likely to be an *unprecedented catastrophe* for the defender," as he puts it. "But an 'unprecedented' catastrophe can be a far cry from an 'unlimited' one." The opening chapter contains a table titled "Tragic but Distinguishable Postwar States." It has two columns: one showing the number of dead, from two million up to a hundred and sixty million, the other showing the time required for economic recuperation, from one year up to a hundred years. At the bottom of the table, there is a question: "Will the survivors envy the dead?"

Kahn believed—and this belief is foundational for every argument in his book—that the answer is no. He explains that "*despite a widespread belief to the contrary, objective studies indicate that even though the amount of human tragedy would be greatly increased in the postwar world, the increase would not preclude normal and happy lives for the majority of survivors and their descendants.*" For many readers, this has seemed pathologically insensitive. But these readers are missing Kahn's point. His point is that unless Americans really do believe that nuclear war is survivable, and survivable under conditions that, although hardly desirable, are acceptable and manageable, then deterrence has no meaning. You can't advertise your readiness to initiate a nuclear exchange if you are unwilling to accept the consequences. If the enemy believes that you will not tolerate the deaths of, say, twenty million of your own citizens, then he has called your bluff. It's the difference between saying, "You get one scratch on that car and I'll kill you," and saying, "You get one scratch on that car and you're grounded for a week." "Massive retaliation" sounds tough, but unless a President can bring himself to pull the nuclear trigger, it's just talk.

In "On Thermonuclear War," Kahn argues that deterrence is not insured by the policy of massive retaliation, which he calls the theory of the "Splendid" First Strike. Deterrence is insured by a credible second-strike capability—by what the United States can do *after* a Soviet nuclear attack. He writes, "*At the minimum, an adequate deterrent for the United States must provide an objective basis for a Soviet calculation that would persuade them that, no matter how skillful or ingenious they were, an attack on the United States would lead to a very high risk if not certainty of large-scale destruction to Soviet civil society and military forces.*" He also argues for the development of a Limited War

Capability—that is, the ability to counter Soviet aggression with conventional forces. That capability, too, is a deterrent, since it solves the “Scratch that car and I’ll kill you” problem. Again, the threat of apocalypse is not proof against a minor infraction.

The most infamous pages in “On Thermonuclear War” concern survivability. What makes nuclear war different, Kahn points out, is not the number of dead; it’s a new element—the problem of the postwar environment. In Kahn’s view, the dangers of radioactivity are exaggerated. Fallout will make life less pleasant and cause inconvenience, but there is plenty of unpleasantness and inconvenience in the world already. “War is a terrible thing; but so is peace,” he says. More babies might have birth defects after a nuclear war, but four per cent of babies have birth defects anyway. Whether we can tolerate a slightly higher percentage of defective children is a question of trade-offs. “It might well turn out,” Kahn suggests, “that U.S. decision makers would be willing, among other things, to accept the high risk of an additional one percent of our children being born deformed *if that meant not giving up Europe to Soviet Russia.*”

The book proposes a system for labelling contaminated food so that older people will eat the food that is more radioactive, on the theory that “most of these people would die of other causes before they got cancer.” It advocates providing citizens with hand-held radium dosimeters, which will allow them to measure the radioactivity their own bodies have absorbed. One symptom of radioactive poisoning is nausea, Kahn explains, and, when one person vomits, people around him will start to vomit, convinced that they are dying. If the dosimeter indicates that no one has received more than an acceptable dose of radiation, everyone can stop throwing up and get back to work reconstructing the economy. Kahn dismisses the notion that a society that has just suffered the obliteration of its cities, the contamination of its soil and water, and the massacre of a large portion of its population might lack the civic virtue and moral fibre necessary to rebuild. “It is my belief that if the government has made at least moderate prewar preparations, so that most people whose lives have been saved will give some credit to the government’s foresight, then people will probably rally round,” he writes. “It would not surprise me if the overwhelming majority of the survivors devoted themselves with a somewhat fanatic intensity to the task of rebuilding what was destroyed.” The message of the book seemed to be that thermonuclear war will be terrible but we’ll get over it.

“Kahn’s specialty was to express the RAND conventional wisdom in the most provocative and outrageous fashion imaginable,” Fred Kaplan says in his excellent history of the Cold War defense intellectuals, “The Wizards of Armageddon” (1983). This is true, except that, unlike most of the defense establishment in the nineteen-fifties, Kahn was an early advocate of civil defense. He was the champion salesman of the fallout shelter, and was especially excited by the potential of mineshafts as evacuation centers. He produced plans for building shelters in the rock below Manhattan, estimating that “very high-quality” shelter spaces could be constructed there for between five hundred and nine hundred dollars apiece. But—and this is the strange logic of deterrence—the essential purpose of investing billions in civil defense was not to save lives but to enhance the credibility of America’s nuclear threat. “Any power that can evacuate a high percentage of its urban population to protection is in a much better position to bargain than one which cannot do this,” Kahn explains in “On Thermonuclear War.” He contemplated the possibility of several mass evacuations every decade in order to bolster American credibility. Having more shelters than the Soviets is like having more missiles: it is another way of saying, Go ahead, make our day. We can take your nuclear hit and come right back at you. The United States could not afford a mineshaft gap.

RAND was leery of civil defense for client-relations reasons: money spent on fallout shelters and dosimeters was less money for the Air Force. Eisenhower, too, opposed civil-defense programs, in part because he didn’t think that nuclear war was survivable, and in part because he was a cheapskate. Facilities for the evacuation of millions cost too much to construct. In the nineteen-fifties, the people who were enthusiastic about fallout shelters and evacuation drills, the now derided emblems of Cold War domestic culture, were liberals. All of the hundred million black-and-yellow fallout-shelter signs that appeared in the United States during the Cold War were put up by the Kennedy Administration—which also made Kahn happy by distributing two million dosimeters.

In its first three months, “On Thermonuclear War” sold more than fourteen thousand copies. The book received praise from a few prominent disarmament advocates and pacifists: A. J. Muste, Bertrand Russell, and the historian and senatorial candidate H. Stuart Hughes, who called it “one of the great works of our time.” They thought that, by making nuclear exchange seem not only possible but nearly unavoidable, Kahn had,

intentionally or not, presented a case for disarmament. Not only pacifists believed this. “If I wanted to convince a skeptic that there is no security in the balance of terror which American policy is committed to maintaining, I would send him to the works of Herman Kahn far sooner than to the writings of the unilateralists and the nuclear pacifists,” Norman Podhoretz later wrote.

Other reactions were more predictable. *The National Review* thought that the book was not hard enough on Communism. *New Statesman* called it “pornography for officers.” The *Daily Worker* called it “useful.” In *Scientific American*, James R. Newman, the editor of the popular anthology “The World of Mathematics,” said that it was “a moral tract on mass murder: how to plan it, how to commit it, how to get away with it, how to justify it.” Though Kahn’s book is an assault on the overwhelming-force mentality of Dulles and the generals at the Strategic Air Command (who, Kahn once told them, dreamed of a “wargasm”), it is also an attack on the anti-nuclear movement and the belief that nuclear war means the end of life as we know it. Most anti-nuclear advocates thought that arguing that a nuclear war was winnable only made one more likely. An official of the American Friends Service Committee compared Kahn to Adolf Eichmann, and he became one of the movement’s favorite monsters. His house was picketed.

The best-known response to “On Thermonuclear War” was a movie. Stanley Kubrick began reading intensively on nuclear strategy soon after he finished directing “Lolita,” in 1962. His original plan was to make a realistic thriller. One of his working titles was taken from an article by Wohlstetter in *Foreign Affairs*, in 1959: “The Delicate Balance of Terror” (an article that anticipated many of Kahn’s arguments in “On Thermonuclear War”). But Kubrick could not invent a plausible story in which a nuclear war is started by accident, so he ended up making a comedy, adapted from a novel, by a former R.A.F. officer, called “Red Alert.”

“The movie could very easily have been written by Herman Kahn himself,” Midge Decter wrote in *Commentary* when “Dr. Strangelove” came out, in 1964. This was truer than she may have known. Kubrick was steeped in “On Thermonuclear War”; he made his producer read it when they were planning the movie. Kubrick and Kahn met several times to discuss nuclear strategy, and it was from “On Thermonuclear War” that

Kubrick got the term “Doomsday Machine.” The Doomsday Machine—a device that automatically decimates the planet once a nuclear attack is made—was one of Kahn’s heuristic fictions. (The name was his own, but he got the idea from “Red Alert,” which he, too, had admired.) In Kahn’s book, the Doomsday Machine is an example of the sort of deterrent that appeals to the military mind but that is dangerously destabilizing. Since nations are not suicidal, its only use is to threaten. “The whole point of the Doomsday Machine is lost if you keep it a secret!” as Strangelove complains to the Soviet Ambassador.

There were a number of possible models for the character of Strangelove (who at one point tells the President about a report on Doomsday Machines prepared by the Bland Corporation): Wernher von Braun, Teller, even Henry Kissinger, who was an admirer of “On Thermonuclear War,” and whose book “Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy” (1957) pondered the possibility of tactical nuclear wars. Peter Sellers picked up the accent from the photographer Arthur Fellig, known as Weegee, when he was visiting the studio to advise Kubrick on cinematographic matters. But one source was Kahn. Strangelove’s rhapsodic monologue about preserving specimens of the race in deep mineshafts is an only slightly parodic version of Kahn. There were so many lines from “On Thermonuclear War” in the movie, in fact, that Kahn complained that he should get royalties. (“It doesn’t work that way,” Kubrick told him.) Kahn received something more lasting than money, of course. He got himself pinned in people’s minds to the figure of Dr. Strangelove, and he bore the mark of that association forever.

Kubrick’s plan to make a comedy about nuclear war didn’t bother Kahn. He thought that humor was a good way to get people thinking about a subject too frightening to contemplate otherwise, and although his colleagues rebuked him for it—“Levity is never legitimate,” Brodie told him—he used jokes in his lectures. Mordancy was his usual mode; Ghamari-Tabrizi compares him at one point to Charles Addams. “One way not to make a reputation is to find a hole in the airdefense system,” he would tell audiences. “It’s all holes.” Explaining the assumptions he made about people when he discussed the prospects for postwar recovery: “We assumed that they are the same kind of slobs postwar that they were prewar.” On what everyone will eat in the fallout shelters: “I personally intend to live with the chef at Lindy’s who really understands sour cream herring and other quite storable delicacies.”

Ghamari-Tabrizi has some enterprising pages comparing this sort of ob-la-di, ob-la-da banter with the satire of contemporaries like Mort Sahl and Jules Feiffer, and with the sick humor of Lenny Bruce and *Mad*. This is one of the places, though, where she seems to be reaching. (She doesn't mention it, but Kahn was a target of one of Sahl's routines: "He is a fascist . . . a genocide who goes home at night and plays with his kids and asks them, 'What are you going to be *if* you grow up?'") Kahn was the opposite of a satirist. He was a believer. Questioning military policy was his business; questioning the policies that military policy is designed to protect and enable was not. For all the avant-gardism, all the high-powered analytic techniques and "thinking outside the box," Kahn's work was fundamentally in the service of preserving the system, and without cynicism. In this, he was like most of the Cold War defense intellectuals. The attitude was: We are trained scientists. We've studied the situation with detachment and disinterestedness; we have taken nothing for granted, given no hostages to sentiment. And we conclude that the world as it is—in this case, a global rivalry between two nuclear powers in an escalating arms race—is acceptable (provided that the policy changes we recommend are adopted).

"On Thermonuclear War" is a preposterous monument to this way of thinking. Complications and qualifications are swatted away like flies. "I will tend to ignore, or at least underemphasize, what many people might consider the most important result of a war—the overall suffering induced by ten thousand years of postwar environment," Kahn writes at one point. He addresses anxieties about the effects of fallout by analyzing three radioactive isotopes, noting, almost incidentally, that there are about two hundred other isotopes in fallout, which he does not discuss. His margins of error can be staggering. Sentences like this are not uncommon (in a discussion of defective genes): "Given the uncertainties, the problem could conceivably be five times better or worse."

A good deal of Kahn's speculation about nuclear scenarios was based on information from Air Force intelligence, which is the only classified intelligence RAND had access to, and which, not surprisingly, habitually overestimated Soviet strength. The widespread panic about a missile gap was an artifact of this bias. In 1958, RAND estimated that the Soviets had three hundred intercontinental ballistic missiles; in fact, even in 1961, the year John Kennedy became President, after a campaign accusing Eisenhower of letting

the United States fall behind in the arms race, the Soviet Union had only four missiles in its arsenal. But Kahn didn't know this. It's not clear, really, how much he did know and how much was speculation and hortatory display. Ghamari-Tabrizi interviewed a number of Kahn's associates, and she includes a telling comment about what it was like to work with him. "Nothing was ever finished," Irwin Mann, a mathematician, told her. "It was terribly sloppy. It was an enormous myth that anything was studied. Nothing was studied. Not really. He didn't study anything. He was enormously smart."

Critics like Newman complained that what is missing from Kahn's work is a moral sense. Kahn had a reply to this objection, which was that the insistence that nuclear war is immoral will never prevent nuclear war. What is missing from his analysis is not morality; it's reality. The reason his scenarios are fantastic to the point, almost, of risibility is that they deliberately ignore all the elements—beliefs, customs, ideas, politics—that actual wars are fought about, and that operate as a drag on decision-making at every point. Kahn was writing during the Khrushchev period, after Sputnik and during the Berlin crisis, when levels of Soviet bellicosity were high. But even if Soviet behavior had been more pacific his analysis would have been the same, for his methodology, the RAND methodology, required him to posit an eternally and implacably hostile enemy. In strategic thinking, you have to assume the worst of your opponent, and to assume that your opponent assumes the worst of you. To believe less is to make yourself vulnerable to bluffing. In Kahn's world, the adversary is always, as he put it, "bright, knowledgeable, and malevolent."

This is what the historian Peter Galison has called the Cold War "ontology of the enemy"—the image of the adversary as a "cold-blooded, machinelike opponent . . . a mechanized Enemy Other." The machine does not have ideals or values, issues on which it might compromise or goals that might encompass something other than its own aggrandizement. It wants only to win, and every move it makes is a move in that game. It's a short step from this abstraction to the domino theory, the belief that Communist expansion is an inexorable and practically mindless force. One of the ironies of the Cold War is that the RAND intellectuals, highbrow hardliners who enjoyed relatively little influence when Eisenhower was President, got their reward when Kennedy came into office. Robert McNamara welcomed them into the Defense

Department, where, the best and the brightest, they applied their methods to the interesting problem of Vietnam. One of them was Daniel Ellsberg.

By then, Kahn had left RAND. He moved to Chappaqua, New York, and, in 1961, founded the Hudson Institute—"a high-class RAND," he called it. Consultants included the sociologist Daniel Bell, the French political philosopher Raymond Aron, and the novelist Ralph Ellison. William Gaddis was engaged to help with the writing. Kahn liked debate, but the ad-hominem attacks on "On Thermonuclear War" had bruised him, and he softened his tone. He published a response to critics, "Thinking About the Unthinkable," in 1962, and another book on military strategy, "On Escalation," in 1965. He was a consultant to the Defense Department from 1966 to 1968, criticizing the government for announcing its willingness to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, and advising "a sharp, potentially uncontrollable increase in threat, which might raise anxiety about points of no return." He couldn't understand bombing North Vietnam unless it made life unbearable for the enemy. But he looked for an exit strategy, and he claimed to have introduced the term "Vietnamization" to the Nixon Administration, which adopted it as the path to "peace with honor." It sounded better, Kahn later explained, than "de-Americanization."

In the nineteen-seventies, Kahn became a dealer in the futurology business—the fascination (prevalent at a time when the present day did not bear much examination) with imaginary Armageddons and pots of gold over the rainbow. In Kahn's case, it was all pots of gold. He devoted his institute's resources to refuting popular apocalyptic scenarios like Paul Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb" (1968) and the Club of Rome's "Limits to Growth" (1972). He argued that the potential of capitalism and technology was boundless, and predicted that human beings would colonize the solar system (an unbeatable type of deterrence: you threaten us, we'll evacuate to the moon). His politics went right. "The Coming Boom: Economic, Political, and Social" (1982) is a hymn to Reaganism. In his last book, an update of "Thinking About the Unthinkable," he charged Jonathan Schell with exaggerating the effects of a nuclear war in his best-selling "The Fate of the Earth" (1982). Kahn died, of a massive stroke, in 1983. That was the year a group headed by Carl Sagan released a report warning that the dust and smoke generated by a thermonuclear war would create a "nuclear winter," blocking light

from the sun and wiping out most of life on the planet. Kahn's friends were confident that he would have had a rebuttal.

Did the defense intellectuals of the nineteen-fifties, in their efforts to calculate ways of preventing nuclear war, actually push the hands of the clock closer to midnight? Part of the difficulty in answering this is that, at the time, no one really knew where midnight was. Most of the thinking and writing of the period was carried out in a haze of ignorance, misinformation, and deliberate exaggeration. The early Cold Warriors—people like Dean Acheson, Paul Nitze, and the members of the Committee on the Present Danger—were at least as worried about American attitudes as they were about Soviet intentions. Obsessed with preparedness, they sometimes did not scruple about overstating the threat for which preparation was necessary. They practiced psychological warfare on their own people. Strategists like Kahn and Wohlstetter abetted this politics not by inflating the facts but by doing what they thought it was their job to do: thinking down the road, around the next technological and geopolitical bend. They wrote about things like hardening bomber bases and missile silos long before the Soviets had any ability to land warheads on targets that small. They were not responsible for starting the arms race, but the more they speculated on the unknown terrors of the future, the faster the race was run. The bomber gap, the missile gap, the mineshaft gap: RAND flourished on gaps. So did the armed services and the weapons manufacturers. When Eisenhower, in his farewell address, warned of “the military-industrial complex,” this was the intersection of mutually reinforcing interests he had in mind.

What drove the Cold War, though, was not business or science. It was the factor that is supposedly bracketed off in systems analysis: politics—the opportunities for partisan gain made available by gesturing toward the ubiquitous shadow of an overwhelming emergency. And the manipulation was not all on one side. If the United States assigned the Soviets the role of mechanized Enemy Other, the Soviets did their best to play it. The occasional hyperbole of the Committee on the Present Danger was nothing compared with the bluster of Khrushchev and Gromyko, men who had their own domestic constituencies to worry about. It served both sides in the Cold War to take each other's rhetoric at face value. We have yet to learn how not to do this. ♦

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