Two Apes on a Treadmill?

Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race

by Richard Rhodes

Knopf. 400 pp. $28.95

Reviewed by
Gabriel Schoenfeld

WHAT WAS the nuclear arms race between the U.S. and the USSR all about? Who started it, what fueled it, who deserves blame for the dangers of the nearly five-decade-long contest and credit for bringing it to a close?

These questions are not merely of historical interest. They touch upon the nature of national power in the nuclear age, and they also bear on our current dilemmas with North Korea, Iran, and others. Richard Rhodes, a highly regarded historian who has written comprehensive accounts of the making of the A-bomb and the H-bomb, has now delved into the major issues involved. There is therefore ample reason to welcome the appearance of *Arsenals of Folly*—or so one would think.

RHODES BEGINS his narrative not at the dawn of the nuclear age but near its terminus, in the 1986 disaster at the Soviet nuclear-power station at Chernobyl. Deploying his considerable talents as a storyteller, he evokes the horrific toll taken by the catastrophe—human, economic, and environmental. Above all, he strives to convey how the event was experienced by those, especially the newly ascendant Mikhail Gorbachev, who dealt with its consequences first-hand. What the radiation disaster unambiguously confirmed for the Soviet leader, Rhodes writes, was the sheer unacceptability of a nuclear war.

Keeping his eye throughout on the endgame of the nuclear competition, Rhodes next steps backward to reconstruct its history. What exactly had been driving the two sides to amass huge collections of warheads with enough explosive potential to destroy each other many times over?

Regarding the Soviet side, Rhodes paints a surprising picture. In his telling, the post-Stalinist leadership had understood the unacceptable consequences of a nuclear exchange from the very beginning. As early as 1953, Nikita Khrushchev had been deeply shaken by his first briefing on the subject: "I became convinced," he would recollect much later, "that we could never possibly use these weapons, and when I realized that, I was able to sleep again." Although Khrushchev and subsequent Soviet rulers would engage in bellicose rhetoric from time to time, rhetoric was all it was. The masters of the Kremlin never seriously entertained the idea of fighting a nuclear war with the United States.

Unfortunately, Rhodes adds, whatever the intentions at the top, the Soviet leadership repeatedly had to accommodate pressure from below. Thanks to the twin influences of central planning and the martial legacy of World War II, a bureaucratic perpetual-motion machine ceaselessly churned out weapons in quantities far exceeding any rational defensive need. The "unintended consequence" of this "military-industrial dominance of government policy," explains Rhodes, "was the piling up of Soviet arms" during the very period in the 1970's "when both the Soviet Union and the United States were pursuing policies of détente."

EVEN MORE unfortunate, in Rhodes's telling, was the fact that during those same years, policymakers in the U.S. became deeply divided about what was happening in the USSR and how best to respond to it. On one side, he writes, were those who grasped the core fact: in an age of weapons of total destruction, the intensive Soviet build-up had no genuine military significance. On the other, winning side were hardliners who saw only the surface reality, feared what they saw, and whipped up the fears of others to the point where the U.S., like the USSR, was propelled into acquiring its own huge quantity of useless arms.

Thus did the two superpowers come to resemble, in Rhodes's account, "blind, plodding oxen of mutual belligerence." With strategic decisions on both sides anchored in one or another species of irrationality, it is no wonder that the entire nuclear confrontation would become a resource sink. Each side devoted vast amounts of national treasure to a rivalry based on a misapprehension of the other side's intentions. Fearing the United States, the USSR viewed every American

---

GABRIEL SCHOENFELD *is the senior editor of* COMMENTARY.

weapons acquisition as a mortal threat. The U.S. behaved the same way. The result was the creation of those two "arsenals of folly," the title and point of Rhodes's book.

What to say of this account? A first and fundamental flaw is its treatment of the USSR. As is clear from the footnotes, which point exclusively to secondary sources, Rhodes does not know Russian. Nor does he know Russia, or Russian leaders. Burnishing the reputation of Nikita Khrushchev, for example, Rhodes hails him as a reformer of the USSR's legal system who, following Stalin's death in 1953, initiated a variety of forward-looking policies—including, "most of all, the restoration of due process in political cases."

As the Soviet politburo said of Khrushchev when they deposed him from power in 1963, this is "harebrained." In the Soviet context, the very idea of applying due process to "political cases" is itself a contradiction in terms. The most that can be said for Khrushchev in this connection—and it is not inconsiderable given what came before him—is that during his reign, mass arrests ceased and political dissenters were no longer shot but imprisoned. But that is hardly the same thing as "due process."

Rhodes's account of the Soviet nuclear question in the 1950's and early 60's is equally twisted, especially in its rendering of Khrushchev as a kind of Russian Mahatma Gandhi. The leader whom Rhodes quotes as saying he "could never possibly use" nuclear weapons was to use them repeatedly—not, to be sure, by detonating them on enemy territory but by testing a great many of them in the atmosphere and aggressively deploying them in Cuba for strategic gain. Explaining such behavior as essentially defensive, or as the product of insecurity in the face of American power, is unpersuasive on its face, and Rhodes's struggle to stuff conflicting evidence into a suitcase where it will not fit is risible.

Turning to Gorbachev, Rhodes heaps accolade after accolade on that leader for his role in peacefully ending the cold war. Gorbachev does unquestionably deserve a measure of credit here; as the empire around him collapsed against his will, he chose not to order tanks into the streets. But does that mean this man who rose sedulously through the ranks of the Soviet Communist party apparatus over a period of decades must be mythologized as a reformer from the very outset of his career?

Rhodes has done exactly that, lamely trying to silence objections by asserting that a mental process of "compartmentalization" had enabled Gorbachev "to bury his doubts [about the Soviet system] during his rise to power" and also helped him "to conceal his radicalism from his politburo colleagues." This is just Rhodes adding more gloss to a career spent licking the boots of a succession of brutish leaders, including Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko. Rhodes's primary source for his generous account, unsurprisingly, is Gorbachev's own self-serving memoirs, treated by him as unerringly true gospel.

IF RHODES searches for every opportunity, no matter how happenstance, to cast his Soviet subjects in a sympathetic light (in one particularly ludicrous passage, he even lauds the Ph.D. dissertation written by Gorbachev's wife Raisa—its subject was the conditions on Soviet collective farms—for "add[ing] to Gorbachev's understanding of democratic process"), his tune abruptly changes when he turns to the American side. Here we meet a succession of dangerous ideologues and dyed-in-the-wool war-mongers, some of whom were haunted by personal demons.

A case in point for Rhodes is the American strategist Paul Nitze, who in 1950, while working for the National Security Council, authored NSC-68, one of the key documents of postwar American foreign policy. This analysis of American national security featured an "egregious exaggeration" of Soviet war-fighting ability. Where did it come from? Rhodes finds a clue in Nitze's memoirs, where he would write that as a ten-year-old boy in Chicago he had felt compelled to join a gang in order to gain protection against another and even fiercer gang. This experience, Rhodes maintains, was what led the adult Nitze to imagine the men in the Kremlin as "masters of evil—a small boy's view of a menacing gang."

But the psychologically damaged Nitze was just one of an entire "team of sorcerer's apprentices, whose trail of wreckage extends into the present century." Among them, Rhodes names Richard Perle, who sported "characteristic dark circles around his eyes even as a young man," the "waspish" Richard Pipes, whose "paranoid" formulations in the pages of COMMENTARY were translated into policy during his term in the Reagan White House, "neoconservatives" like Paul Wolfowitz, and a collection of other "hardliners" including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and of course Reagan himself.

As opposed to the ever more clear-eyed Gorbachev, the Reagan of Rhodes's narrative is presented as a man with a blinkered mind, incapable of grasping or generating any form of abstract thought. Reagan's way of approaching the world, Rhodes helpfully explicates, was "characteristic of religious, and particularly of fundamentalist, thinking, an archaic mode in which facts are allegorized into parables." The fantasizing Reagan was thus predisposed to a "totalizing anti-Communism" that in turn fueled his "militant rhetoric" and made him spurn "negotiation as a path to ending the nuclear arms race."

It was Reagan, we learn in this book, who recklessly brought the world to the brink of actual nuclear war in the early 1980's by engaging in a military build-up that the Soviet leaders were convinced was preparatory to a preemptive American strike. American military maneuvers during Reagan's presidential tenure repeatedly forced the USSR into a reactive posture. Thus, when a South Korean Boeing 747 passenger jet strayed into Soviet territory in 1983, and the Soviet military shot it down, killing 269 civilians, "some share of the blame for the loss of innocent life," writes Rhodes, "surely belongs . . . to the Reagan administration."

RICHARD RHODES enjoys the reputation of a distinguished historian. What could possibly explain his relentless inversion of the history of the cold war, his embarrassingly fawning treatment of Soviet leadership, his almost visceral revulsion for the American side?

As it happens, such inclinations are not new with him. Intimations of them were visible in previous books as well, and especially in *Dark Sun* (1995), his history of the first hydrogen bomb.* But that at least was a serious work of scholarship; however one might dispute Rhodes's benign interpretation of Soviet conduct or his tendency to place the onus for the cold war on the United States, he still offered in *Dark Sun* an informed and mostly reliable account of his principal subject.

Arsenals of Folly is a different story altogether, a work contaminated by animus through and through. Relying on a range of anti-American scholar-activists like Richard J. Barnet and Jonathan Schell, and left-wing journalists like Sidney Blumenthal and Seymour Hersh, Rhodes has falsified the history of the arms race in the service of a particular cause. Nor is the nature of that cause a secret. It is spelled out on the dust-jacket, where readers are invited to savor a "narrative that reads like a thriller" and instructed they will learn from it "how militant conservatives, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Perle, use[d] threat inflation and fear-mongering—*strategies they would use again to promote the war with Iraq*—as impetus for the Reagan administration's unprecedented arms build-up" (emphasis added).

The point of this book, it emerges, is thus to project the past onto the present in order to vilify the Bush administration and its war to depose Saddam Hussein. In his own concluding words, Rhodes writes that the "militarization" of America under Bush has bequeathed to us "ramshackle cities, broken bridges, failing schools, entrenched poverty, impeded life expectancy, and a menacing and secretive national-security state that [holds] the entire human world hostage." So now we know the true origins of our own homegrown American brand of totalitarianism.

---

* See Walter A. McDougall's review in the October 1995 COMMENTARY.

Understanding the past in order to understand the present is what history is all about. Exploiting the past to score political points in a contemporary debate is not history but propaganda. If *Arsenals of Folly* is indeed a work of history, it is one only in the Soviet sense, the sense in which the past is brazenly rewritten to bring it into conformity with the party line of the moment.