

THE ROLE OF U.S.  
DEFENSE INTELLECTUALS  
AND  
DOMESTIC POLITICAL TRENDS  
by  
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It is rare for an intellectual to control the levers of power. In recent world history perhaps only Vaclav Havel, Lenin and Trotsky qualify—and then Trotsky barely so, and only for a few years until Stalin forced him out. Certainly, no U.S. intellectual in the past 100 years has achieved an independent position that would allow him or her to bring a certain vision to fruition. Intellectuals are, as a class, condemned by their very nature to be the handmaidens of power. Therefore, by extension, the influence they wield rests largely on their closeness to the source of political power---in the American system, whoever occupies the White House.

This seems simple enough but it is a lesson that observers would do well to remember. Intellectuals in defense policy cannot really persuade an administration to follow a particular course of action, since each administration takes office with its own preconceived objectives. Not all the learned tomes, position papers or fact-crammed speeches will persuade a president to abandon his core beliefs on policy. The most that defense intellectuals can accomplish is to enable the goals of the White House; to refine, not redo.

Yet this is not to say that because you are following the broad outlines of policy from the White House that you cannot effect major changes within that particular purview. Take the case of the two men who perhaps did more to transform the American fighting forces than anyone else—besides Ronald Reagan—in the 1980s: Andrew Marshall and Albert Wohlstetter.

Marshall and Wohlstetter met and worked together in the 1950s at RAND, that once upon a time secretive think tank in Santa Monica, California. There Wohlstetter, a mathematician by training and an intellectual gourmet by inclination, became famous in national defense circles for his work on nuclear second-strike capability and his so-called Basing Study, which advocated better preparation against a surprise Soviet nuclear attack. Both Wohlstetter and Marshall went on to advise The Gaither Committee, a 1950s group of defense intellectuals that furiously advocated an increase in national defense spending, which prompted then President Eisenhower to issue his famous warning about the military industrial complex.

In the 1970s, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger—who had also been a RAND analyst—appointed Andrew Marshall to head the Office of Net Assessment, a sort of mini-think tank within the Pentagon devoted to exploring new ways of making war. Wohlstetter, who by the 1970s had departed RAND and set up his own security-consulting firm, PAN Heuristics, often consulted with Marshall. Wohlstetter also served

as an adviser to Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, as well as to the growing number of opponents of detente with the Soviet Union during the Ford Administration.

With the ascent of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the concurrent increase in defense spending--\$44 billion more just in his first Pentagon budget—Wohlstetter and Marshall put their heads together to reexamine the foundational thinking of American military might: that supremacy in nuclear weaponry alone was enough to triumph in the battlefield. (As an aside, it is curious that the comment that Wohlstetter made about his wife’s maiden name, Roberta Morgan, would also apply to his compadre-in-arms— the initials of their last names were the same, only inverted, W & M.)

Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has credited Wohlstetter with being the first defense strategist to realize that precision guided munitions could be more useful than nuclear weapons, due to the universal reluctance to use that nuclear weaponry in military conflicts. Already during the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with the Soviet Union, Wohlstetter had advocated keeping non-nuclear Tomahawks for their versatility, instead of trading them away as a bargaining chip. To Wolfowitz, Wohlstetter’s perspicacity was proven during the Gulf War of 1991, where, “it was a matter of considerable personal satisfaction to watch those missiles turning right angle corners.”

Ironically enough, Marshall and Wohlstetter’s realization that developments in technology would give the nation that knew best how to harness innovation an

unsurpassable advantage was supported by Soviet military theorists, the most prominent of these being Field Marshall Nikolai V. Ogarkov with his pamphlet, “Always Ready to defend the Fatherland.” As Marshall has stated, “It was the Soviet military theorists, rather than our own, that were intellectualizing and speculating on the longer-term consequences of the technical and other changes that the American military had initiated.”

This technological transformation sought by Wohlstetter and Marshall would come to be known as the Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. The first formal proposal of guidelines on how to achieve it was contained in a report for the Commission on Integrated Long Term Strategy, a 1980s Defense Department study group headed by yet another RAND alumnus, Fred Ikle, then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Reagan administration. Ultimately, all these changes resulted in smarter weaponry—mainly through the use of microchips. Digital communications was the not so secret weapon that allowed the US to de-emphasize a rapidly aging nuclear strategic arsenal and develop a lean and highly mobile fighting force.

The apotheosis of the RMA was, of course, the highly controversial Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003—where a swift-moving, lean expedition was able to crush Saddam Hussein’s much larger forces in a matter of days. That war’s “Shock and Awe” campaign, with its precision guided missiles striking Baghdad being steered from thousands of miles away in the Nevada desert, was the pinnacle of the kind of Star Wars military action propounded by Wohlstetter and Marshall—fast, accurate and antiseptic,

with hardly any loss of manpower. (That the liberation of Iraq degenerated into a scenario that could have been staged by the occupying forces of the Empire is something else together.)

Yet, regardless of the brilliance of Wohlstetter and Marshall's insights, none of these changes in the make up of the American fighting forces, this astounding transformation called the RMA, would have been possible without the blessings of the White House. Ronald Reagan was dedicated to a policy of renovation and acceleration of technological change and, as we have stated, the president sets policy, and intellectuals can only refine it.

There is an exception, though: when a vice president takes office because of the incapacity ---constitutional or otherwise---of the top executive. In the last sixty plus years there have been two occasions when intellectuals managed to significantly alter national defense policy after a president was sworn in., and they both occurred under what might be termed accidental presidents, Harry Truman and Gerald Ford. In both of these, the same defense intellectual, through heroic efforts, managed almost single-handedly to change the rules of the game: Paul Nitze.

To say that Paul Nitze was headstrong is a vast understatement, to put it mildly. He was self-righteous, obstreperous and dazzlingly brilliant. Before David Halberstam coined the phrase, Nitze already exemplified the best and the brightest of the Eastern Establishment. He made his fortune in the stock market early in life, during a period very

similar to ours, the late 1920s and 1930s, when Ivy League colleges served as feeders to Wall Street firms. Having made his pile, married a beautiful wife and bought a horsy estate in Maryland, he devoted the rest of his life to government service.

As Isaiah Berlin might have observed, Nitze was a hedgehog, not a fox. His one big idea, the one he knew everything about, was the peril that Communism and its standard-bearer, the Soviet Union, represented to the United States. Nitze came along with the rest of the FDR bureaucracy when Truman became president—and when he was named head of the president's policy planning staff he wasted no time in selling the new president on the Communist threat. At first, the Truman Administration was dubious of claims of a looming Soviet menace; the Soviets had been our allies during the war and besides the U.S. had other issues to contend with. Millions of soldiers had to be demobilized in the middle of a recession. Demands on the federal budget were enormous, and most everyone wanted to return to civilian life and forget all about bombs, war and rationing. In response, Ambassador George F. Kennan drafted the containment doctrine, which argued that the Soviet Union could be kept cooped up in its own lair through American vigilance.

But then, in fairly quick succession, Greece fell into a communist provoked civil war, Soviet troops marched into Eastern Europe, the Soviets exploded their own atomic bomb, China turned Communist under Mao Tse Tung and the Korean War broke out. Suddenly, things were not so rosy anymore and containment was not so attractive. Nitze, seizing his chance, drafted the notorious NSC-68, a memorandum for the National

Security Council on how to conduct foreign policy in the nuclear age. From there on, the rules changed, as the stakes were considered vital to American survival. Nitze wrote:

“The Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world. The [Soviet] design, therefore, calls for the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin. To that end Soviet efforts are now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian land mass. The United States, as the principal center of power in the non-Soviet world and the bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion, is the principal enemy whose integrity and vitality must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another if the Kremlin is to achieve its fundamental design. “

Nitze’s warning about Soviet expansionism worked so well that President Truman adopted NSC-68 as the official policy of the land and quadrupled the national defense budget to almost \$40 billion. In a matter of months, Nitze had succeeded in changing the defense posture of the United States and the entire Western alliance. Nitze was aided in his efforts by a lobbying group called The Committee on the Present Danger, which would be reincarnated more than twenty years later under similar circumstances, when the country and the Administration also believed it could cozy up to the Soviet Union without negative repercussions. Not so coincidentally, that was the occasion of the second accidental president, Gerald Ford.

Ford came to office as a moderate Republican who thought détente with the Soviet Union was in the best interest of the United States. At the time, most voters shared this belief. 1974 surveys showed a wide majority of Americans wanted the U.S. to do more to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, while nearly half the population complained the country was spending too much on defense. In addition, a plurality had a favorable view of the Soviet Union and very few gave much credence to the possibility of a devastating nuclear war.

Paul Nitze strongly disagreed with all those sentiments, and not surprisingly, he again sailed into the fray to change things. By the time Ford took office, Nitze had already resigned from the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks or SALT I in protest over the unfair military advantage détente gave the Soviet Union. He was seconded by other critics who saw détente as giving the Soviets cover to increase their nuclear arsenal while still contesting American influence in Third World places such as Angola, Namibia and Nicaragua through Cuban surrogates. These critics—among them Albert Wohlstetter, and Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson--also opposed détente as amoral; they proclaimed human rights to be as important as free trade in the nation’s policy toward the Soviet Union. One of their main allies within the Ford Administration was Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who was famously quoted as saying, “Spengler was an optimist,” referring, of course, to Oswald Spengler, the author of ‘The Decline of the West.’ Schlesinger also said, “The Soviets ...have a mailed fist. It is now encased in a velvet glove...détente is the velvet glove.”



Ford found Schlesinger to be too conservative for his taste. Wanting to keep on the architect of détente, Henry Kissinger, Ford fired Schlesinger and, at the recommendation of his chief of staff, Dick Cheney, replaced him with Donald Rumsfeld. Ford retained Kissinger as Secretary of State but named General Brent Scowcroft as national security adviser. Schlesinger's firing served only to galvanize the opponents of détente, who now also numbered former California governor Ronald Reagan, who wrote Schlesinger had been let go for daring to tell the truth about the inadequacy of the nation's fighting forces.

Aided by Eugene V. Rostow, who had been undersecretary of state for political affairs in the Johnson Administration, Nitze reorganized The Committee for the Present Danger. Nitze and Rostow brought both Democrats and Republicans into it, among them AFL-CIO leader Lane Kirkland; former Secretary of State Dean Rusk; economist Herbert Stein; former deputy secretary of defense David Packard; and former chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, and, of course, Reagan and Schlesinger.

Some of the critics of détente had once been liberals, Socialists or even, in the case of Albert Wohlstetter, members of communist cells in the 1930s and 40s. Now older, and in some instances somewhat wiser, they claimed to have been "mugged by reality." They were dubbed 'neoconservatives' for their liberal trends in domestic social issues and right wing beliefs in foreign affairs. Once this group achieved critical mass, members took their message to the American public, unleashing a relentless wave of anti-

détente propaganda in op-ed pages and policy magazines. Finding himself under political siege, Ford shifted to the right; he dropped liberal New York governor Nelson Rockefeller as his running mate, a move he would later regret as the most cowardly of his entire political life, and draped himself with the mantle of the conservative wing of the Republican Party in order to secure the nomination in 1976. The critics also convinced Ford to approve an independent assessment of intelligence regarding the intention and accuracy of Soviet forces, the notorious Team B, which would go over the official figures released in the CIA's National Intelligence Estimates.

None of this did Ford, or these dissenting defense intellectuals, any good since, as we all remember, Ford lost to liberal Jimmy Carter. However, though they lost the battle, the opponents of détente ultimately won the war—both in public opinion and at the ballot box. By the end of 1976, the official U.S. government view was that the Soviet Union was seeking superiority over United States forces. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan took the White House, fifty-one members of his administration were members of the Committee on the Present Danger, including Reagan himself, CIA Director William Casey and National Security Advisor Richard V. Allen.

These are the success stories of defense intellectuals changing extant government policy. They are the exception. Take the case of President Dwight Eisenhower, who, in his second term, came to the realization that the United States would not be able to survive a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union; he became convinced that co-existence and eventual disarmament were the best way to assure the survival of the nation

and the world. Eisenhower refused to increase the Pentagon budget in spite of the complaints of what he would term the military-industrial complex, with its constant bewailing of a so-called missile gap with the Soviet Union--which in the event proved to be in our favor by a factor of over a hundred to one.

The hue and cry of defense intellectuals demanding a more aggressive posture toward the Soviet Union moved Eisenhower to bewilderment and annoyance, but not action. When The Gaither Committee approached Eisenhower and asked for forty billion dollars to augment civil defense so that the nation could survive a Soviet sneak nuclear attack, Eisenhower rebuffed them. Never mind that Eisenhower himself had appointed them to look into the nation's defense preparedness in the wake of the successful launching by the Soviets of the first unmanned space vehicle, the Sputnik. Eisenhower's response to their report was as plain spoken as an Iowa farmer's: "You recommend spending a billion dollars for something in there. You know how much a billion dollars is? Why, that's a stack of ten dollar bills as high as the Washington Monument!" And with that he politely but firmly showed them the door and shelved their recommendations.

The same showing of intellectual impotence occurred, oddly enough, during the Reagan Administration. Much has been written about the transformation that the California governor effected on national policy—how the U.S. went from a general policy of détente with the Soviets to one of massive arms build-up and confrontation that many allege ultimately brought on the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. However, as

we have seen, this was just a refinement of the ideas that Ronald Reagan brought with him to the White House—the arguments buttressed his beliefs, they did not change him. In fact, when Reagan himself changed his mind much like Eisenhower and, with the advent of perestroika in the Soviet Union, shifted from confrontation to negotiation, those very same intellectuals who had backed Reagan, who had, they thought, tutored him on the intricacies of foreign affairs, felt betrayed. As John T. “Terry” Dolan, then chair of the National Conservative Political Action Committee complained, ‘The administration hasn’t co-opted the ‘peace’ movement. The ‘peace’ movement has co-opted the administration.’ However, Reagan paid no heed and followed his gut, deciding he could trust Gorbachev because he had looked deep into his eyes and glimpsed his soul.

Excuse me, wrong conservative president, wrong Soviet hierarch. However, the point is the same. Intellectuals do not shape the major features of national policy, they only finesse the details. So, what recourse does an intellectual have if he or she radically disagrees with current Administration policy? There are two courses of action: Silence. Or regime change.

Silence is self-explanatory. You wait patiently in your academic ivory tower or your brown brick think tank, waiting for a new Administration more in synch with your own core beliefs. The second one, regime change, means actively changing the landscape so that the next president must deal with changed facts on the ground and have to adjust to parameters that the intellectual—and his friends, for such a feat cannot be accomplished by any one single person—has changed inalterably. Or, for at least a good

eight years. We saw how that was accomplished under Ford. Yet, in a way, that was only a replay of the game plan that brought the Kennedy Administration to power.

In the late 1950s, a small band of thinkers hitched their wagon to the rising star of the junior Senator from Massachusetts through a group called Professors for Kennedy. Not only intellectuals from Harvard Yard and the top universities of the day but also, *sub-rosa*, analysts from the RAND Corporation, lent the campaign an intellectual heft that otherwise might have been sorely missing, regardless of whether Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize was honestly won or not. These policy slayers were helped by having Richard Nixon as the purveyor of peaceful co-existence—a vice president who personally supported a stronger approach to the Soviets but who was constrained by the Republican party and the political decorum of the time to not disagree publicly with his Commander in Chief.

By constantly harping on the presumed military superiority of the Soviet Union—through leaks to newspapers of erroneous classified data, through strategically placed articles like Albert Wohlstetter's "The Delicate Balance of Terror" in *Foreign Affairs*, through interviews in *LOOK*, *Time* and other publications—these defense intellectuals changed the political landscape and made possible a new perspective on policy. Lecturers such as RAND's Herman Khan went around the country, preaching the doctrine of nuclear preparedness, assuring incredulous Americans that yes, the world and the U.S. could survive a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union—even if half the population was

turned to ashes or radioactive, flesh dropping walking corpses out of ‘The Night of the Living Dead.’

The role that U.S. defense intellectuals, the so-called Whiz Kids--Robert McNamara, Daniel Ellsberg, Alain Enthoven, Charles Hitch, Paul Nitze--played in the Kennedy Administration is highly instructive but also widely known. As that story has been covered many times before, I will not bore you with another iteration of the changes they effected following Kennedy’s dictate to reshape the Pentagon into a creature subservient to the White House, instead of a collection of independent fiefdoms called Army, Navy, Air Force, etc. As JFK would have said, they got the country moving again. Of course, that movement also meant disasters such as Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and the Cuban missile crisis, not to mention ushering the largest increase in defense spending seen up to that time in the United States.

Nevertheless, what is significant is that although changes in the intellectual landscape allowed a new administration to take power, once it was in office, those very same intellectuals who had helped seize the White House had no choice but to mold themselves to the wishes of the president. Witness Vietnam: once Washington decided to step up its efforts at quelling insurgency in Southeast Asia, no amount of liberal exsanguinations or massive street protests would prompt the Kennedy and especially the Johnson Administration to deviate from course. In the end, even Defense Secretary Robert McNamara quit; all that the intellectuals and political kingpins could do was

persuade President Johnson not to run again. They could not stop the war. The president called the shots.

Thus it was in recent American history with the group of party faithful—in this case, the Grand Old Party—who provided the intellectual ballast for the last Iraq war. Many of the people who helped place Reagan in office plowed open the ground for the presidency of George W. Bush. In fact, some of the highly ranked political players that first surfaced under President Ford after his dismissal of James Schlesinger—Rumsfeld, Scowcroft, and of course, Dick Cheney—assumed crucial roles during the Bush Administration. However, they were not intellectuals. For our purposes, I believe a much more fascinating role is the one played by those defense intellectuals who advocated what was called Pax Americana, a term that seems to have gone by the wayside much as ‘The War on Terror.’

Having succeeded in changing the intellectual climate under Reagan, these so-called neoconservatives at first found themselves baffled by the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Apparently they hadn’t been reading their own reports on how weak the Communists were.) But they soon recovered and neoconservatives who came to political life in the 1980s went on to hold almost as a sacred principle that America, as a magnanimous hegemon, should control the destinies of the world, or, as it was termed, have “full spectrum dominance.” Years later, some would openly advocate that the United States declare itself an empire and start acting accordingly. However, politics often confounds, as do voters. Reagan’s successor, President George G.H. Bush, who had

somewhat hesitatingly followed the broad ideological outlines of neoconservatism, and who had ridden an enormous wave of popularity during the Iraqi war Desert Storm only a few months before, found himself out of office in 1992. President Clinton, in spite of his admiration for all things Kennedy, had no desire to engage in the same kind of muscular foreign policy of the 1960s, so off the neoconservatives went to the political wilderness, to pave the way for the next president who would see things their way.

Taking a lesson from the two incarnations of The Committee on the Present Danger, some of the key figures in the neoconservative movement founded the Project for the New American Century, to, in the words of its charter, “promote American global leadership and...Reagan era military strength and moral clarity.” Among the charter signatories were former Reagan officials Paul Wolfowitz and Fred Ikle; historian Francis Fukuyama; original neoconservative intellectuals Norman Phodoretz and Midge Dicter; former RAND associates Henry Rowen, and Donald Rumsfeld; Wohlstetter protégé and RAND director Zalmay Khalilzad; as well as Bush era eminences Jeb Bush and vice President Dan Quayle. The PNAC’s co-founders were the editor of The National Review, William Kristol, son of original neoconservative Irving Kristol, and historian Robert Kagan. Although other groups also boasted of neoconservative membership, and some think tanks, like the American Enterprise Institute, seemed to be exclusively peopled by them, few had the kind of star power of the PNAC.

In addition to rearmament and advancement of the Revolution in Military Affairs, one of the PNAC’s central mission tenets was intervention in Iraq. The members urged



President Clinton in an open letter in 1998 to draft a plan to depose Saddam Hussein. It would be, in their words, “a new strategy that would secure the interests of the United States and our friends and allies round the world. “ Under pressure from the PNAC’s allies in the Republican dominated Congress, the following year President Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act, which declared, ‘It should be the policy on the United States to support efforts to remove the [Hussein] regime from power.’” After the razor-thin victory of George W. Bush over Al Gore in 2000, the PNAC packed the new Bush administration with its members, just as the Committee for the Present Danger had packed the Reagan Administration with its own. When the tragedy of 9/11 struck, these defense intellectuals were there to guide the president.

Yet, as revealed by Paul O’Neill in his book, ‘The Price of Loyalty,’ followed by the accounts of National Security Advisor Richard Clarke and a host of others—President Bush’s mind was no *tabula rasa* when it came to Iraq after 9/11. His first instinct was to look for an excuse to intervene in Iraq—after the obvious target, the weak sister, Afghanistan, was taken out. In Bush’s case, temperament stood in for intellectual conviction—he was determined not to repeat his father’s mistakes—and that included finishing that business in Baghdad.. His sense of American triumphalism may have been nurtured by the advice of Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Fithe, Donald Rumsfeld, vice president Dick Cheney and the others—but all they did was provide a set of intellectual tools that allowed the Texas native to act like the cowboy he always wished he had been. ‘Bring ‘em on’ and ‘Wanted Dead or Alive’ were not just phrases from a movie western, as might have been during previous presidents, they were actually

words to live by under Bush Junior. And when the war in Iraq war started going badly in 2007, and many of his erstwhile supporters, the same defense intellectuals who had said taking out Hussein would be a cakewalk and that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators, decried the mismanagement of the occupation and suggested the U.S. pack up and go, Bush stuck to his guns. Like a Texas hold ‘em player, he upped the ante, with the troop surge. Bush said then, even if he, his wife and his dog were the only ones left standing, that he would not back down on Iraq. For better or for worse, he kept his word to the end of his presidency. The future of that policy is now in the hands of another president, who seems more enamored of the Brookings Institution than of the American Enterprise Institute.

As we have seen, intellectuals in American defense policy circles always run the risk of meretriciousness—bluntly speaking, of being so many Camilles singing their tune for Administrations already set on preordained paths. Intellectuals are allowed to fuss over the details—the number of ships, the placement of missiles, in brief, to rearrange the deck chairs—but they cannot alter the course of the ship of state once the President has fixed it, even if they bought the ship, keep it clean and keep it going. Only if they change the cultural landscape can defense intellectuals have deep, significant influence—that is, if their candidate wins.

On the other hand, intellectuals could always run for office themselves. There’s no reason why Czechs and Russians should have all the fun.

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