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With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War by Robert Scheer

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WITH ENOUGH SHOVELS: REAGAN, BUSH AND NUCLEAR WAR. By Robert Scheer. Random House, New York, 1982. Pp. 279.

Reviewed by Eugene W. Hickok, Jr.*

Alexander Hamilton is credited with saying, almost two hundred years ago, that the touchstone of a prudent foreign policy for the United States is to prepare for war and proceed to negotiate. Today, however, the world is a far more threatening place. The rivalries that exist today between the East and the West are the product of a clash of interests and ideologies. More importantly, international negotiations, in this age of nuclear weapons, no longer are based upon a system of trust among professional diplomats, but are founded upon the harsh realization that it is not only naive to trust one's adversary, it is dangerous. As Sir Harold Nicolson pointed out long ago, we are actors in an international arena in which "the old currency has been withdrawn from circulation, we are dealing with new coinage."¹

This fundamental transformation in the character and conduct of international relations among major powers—from diplomacy based upon trust to negotiation under the assumption of mistrust—poses particularly vexing problems for liberal regimes such as the United States. In this country, citizens are expected to take an interest in foreign affairs and to have an opinion on national defense. The complexity of defense policy, however, has rendered it difficult to provide them with information on which to base their judgment. We live in an age in which national defense is reduced to a bewildering alphabet soup of acronyms that stand for everything from military hardware (ICBM, MX, BI) to strategic options (MAD, SALT I, SALT II, START). Most citizens do not understand the nuances of American foreign policy. They want only to feel safe and secure, and prefer to put the idea of a nuclear holocaust out of their minds. They desire a strong national defense, but feel that they lack an adequate understanding of the political and strategic thinking that goes into defense policy.

The nuclear freeze movement indicates, however, that people here and elsewhere have come to recognize that a great deal is at stake when the defense budget is passed or when a new nuclear arms negotiator is appointed. The increased popular interest in achieving meaningful and responsible arms control represents a growing fear among

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1. H. NICOLSON, *DIPLOMACY* 138 (3d ed., 3d printing 1980).

individuals that things have gotten out of hand and that the world is truly on the brink of Armageddon. Popular sentiment regarding the threat of nuclear war, however, is not necessarily informed sentiment. After all, nuclear war is not the issue. Nobody wants nuclear war. The issue is how to prevent such a war from occurring. In the absence of a truly well-informed public, popular sentiment can be of only modest help when addressing this issue. Robert Scheer, the author of *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War*, no doubt recognizes this fact. The tone of the book suggests that he is on an urgent mission to inform the people of the threat to world peace that, he maintains, is being created by the current Administration's attitude toward nuclear war and promoted by the men who have been appointed by President Reagan to negotiate arms control. Scheer, a journalist with the *Los Angeles Times*, has written an interesting and quite thought-provoking book, but not a very good book. In his attempt to make the issues more easily understandable, he has yielded to simplicity. In his attempt to inform the reader of the character of the men who are responsible for formulating our nation's defense policies, he dwells upon personalities and anecdotes far more than actions and circumstances.

Three factors must be considered when analyzing the formulation and merits of defense policy: facts, the perception of facts and the character of the men and women who must make decisions based upon those facts and perceptions. The threat of nuclear war has not altered these considerations; it only has raised the stakes and thereby has made decision-making tougher. The facts regarding the strength of the superpowers are harder to uncover and are more difficult to interpret than they were before the nuclear age. Mr. Scheer dismisses too casually the arguments surrounding this nation's window of vulnerability vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. What is troublesome, as Scheer points out, is the surprising lack of consensus on this issue. His reaction is to argue that a real threat to national security does not, therefore, exist. This assertion is simplistic at best. Although it may never be possible to deliver complete and accurate information regarding Soviet military strength, it is possible, and imperative, that more complete information be obtained before a defense proposal is implemented. Consensus may evade us regarding the facts surrounding the debate, but common sense should not.

The perception of Soviet strength matters a great deal, because facts are difficult to provide and because the real military strength of both superpowers is constantly changing as new, more effective weapons and technologies are developed. Perceptions of Soviet strength are colored, sometimes to a great extent, as much by the way one views Soviet society and what it stands for as by whatever information can

be gathered through United States intelligence. The views of the Soviet Union that are held by Ronald Reagan and George Bush obviously bother the author. Scheer is concerned when candidate Reagan confides in him that "we have a different regard for human life than those [Soviet] monsters do."² He reacts with incredulity when Reagan asks him to consider why the United States has not developed the means to stop incoming missiles.³ As for George Bush, the author seems far more disturbed by the Vice President's personality and appearance than by his statements. In a particularly distasteful paragraph, Scheer finds it important to point out that Mr. Bush is "one of those well-turned-out Yale men of a bygone era who seem to thrive on subtle distinctions of class and status."⁴ Such statements weaken Scheer's argument by bringing his professionalism into question and helping to demonstrate that the author is more interested in convincing the reader than in informing him.

At the heart of Scheer's book is his argument that the current Administration embraces the attitude that nuclear war is merely another form of conventional war. The "hawks" and "neo-hawks" in the Reagan administration are unreconstructed cold warriors who reject any notion of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and who "believe in the possibilities of fighting and winning a protracted nuclear war."⁵ Scheer finds that the United States has moved from a foreign policy aimed at the avoidance of nuclear war to a policy of "preparation for its possible outbreak."⁶ He argues that such a policy precludes the possibility of meaningful arms control negotiations, will lead almost inevitably to further escalations in the arms race and may lead to nuclear war itself. According to the author, if Reagan is playing chicken with the Soviet Union, he is playing a very dangerous game, and if he believes his own statements, then he is dangerous.

The threat Scheer perceives is posed by men the President has appointed to act as arms negotiators. Members of the "Cold War cabal" include Eugene Rostow—who according to Scheer, looks wistfully back upon the Cuban missile crisis as the good old days—and a curious man named T.K. Jones, a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense. Jones not only argues that nuclear war is winnable, but also argues that most Americans can survive if there is a good civil defense plan and enough

2. R. SCHEER, *WITH ENOUGH SHOVELS: REAGAN, BUSH AND NUCLEAR WAR* 31 (1982).

3. *Id.* at 104. In an interesting passage foreshadowing the "Star Wars" speech of March 1983, Reagan remarks that he is struck by the irony that "with the great technology of ours, . . . we cannot stop any of the weapons that are coming at us." *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 30.

5. *Id.* at 8.

6. *Id.* at 5.

shovels with which to dig enough fallout shelters (hence the title of the book).

The author's main point is that these men, along with the President, are entering the process of arms control under the assumption that nuclear war is winnable. Scheer disagrees that this policy is viable and offers the opinions of several eminent individuals who support his argument. But his argument is flawed by his simplistic notion of the arms control process. For Scheer, arms control means limiting and eventually reducing arms. Realistic arms control policy, however, *may* not lead to either of these outcomes. In a world of incomplete information regarding the relative strengths of nations and the intent of national actors, the goal of arms control is to ensure that sound judgment governs defense policy. Mr. Scheer obviously questions the judgment of the President and his appointees. His criticism springs from his opposition to the strategic thinking embraced by their judgment. He fails to recognize that the President's policy may lead to more effective arms control than currently exists; sound judgment regarding a nation's defense rests with a realistic assessment of the nature of the threat to a nation's security.

Once the notion of mutual assured destruction has been discarded by either superpower, prudence dictates that each superpower recognize that it is in their nation's interest to respond to this shift in the environment. Such a response does not lead to war, nor does it even make war more imminent. It does reflect a nation's determination to respond to a threat to its security. Superpowers must be perceived by their adversaries as self-interested actors who are prepared to act on that self-interest. The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons has no meaning when an adversary recognizes that a nation is unwilling to employ its weapons. Essentially, arms control represents the resolution of the mutual self-interest of each actor. The arms control process allows the deterrence model to be employed as both superpowers recognize that it is in their best interest to come to an understanding of their relative strengths, primarily because the threat of a nuclear exchange is real.

Comprehensive and effective arms control policy should be seen as more than an agreement to limit or reduce nuclear arsenals. An agreement may take place not because national actors are willing to make concessions that promote global peace, but because national actors perceive it to be in their nation's interest to reach some accord. In other words, limitations or reductions in nuclear weapons can be the product of an effective United States arms control policy, but they are not the goals of that policy. The objective of United States arms control policy is to influence the Soviet leadership to alter their perceptions of what

is in their nation's best interest.

The most striking feature of President Reagan's policies and pronouncements regarding the Soviet Union is his failure to clarify his Administration's priorities and long-term purposes vis-à-vis the Kremlin. While his antipathy to Communist ideology has been clearly articulated, what this position means for the future of the relationship between the two superpowers is hard to determine. This situation concerns Scheer, who maintains an abiding confidence in his opinion that all Reagan and Andropov need to do is sit down together and realize that the future of the world is at stake. But it is not that simple, and precisely because it is not that simple it can be argued that the President maintains an advantage by keeping the Soviet Union guessing.

One can assume that at least one purpose behind the President's hard line toward the Soviets is to encourage them to think twice before initiating any new international ventures similar to Afghanistan and Poland. Reagan's Latin American policies provide additional evidence of this purpose. In addition, the President may be hoping to convince the Soviet leadership that he is serious about a new arms race and that the status of the Soviet Union's domestic economy makes its chances of winning such a race quite improbable. Should the Soviet leadership come to recognize this possibility, they might enter arms negotiations with a more open mind. Whatever the Administration's long-term purposes, the United States stands to benefit from a policy that not only recognizes the uncertainty of international politics, but also employs that uncertainty to the nation's advantage.

The environment in which international relations transpire differs substantially from that in which domestic politics take place. The immediate objective of every Administration should not be to change that environment, but to understand it and to work effectively within it. It is, however, an environment that Scheer does not seem to understand, or else he fails to discuss it intelligently. What really bothers Robert Scheer is that uncertainty and unpredictability are dangerous elements in international relations, now more than ever. His book could have contributed a great deal of important information necessary for responsible decision-making. It fails to make this contribution because it is neither informative nor informed. Rather than contributing to the national dialogue surrounding this issue, Mr. Scheer only has added to its characteristic confusion.

