

# COMMENTARY AND CORRESPONDENCE

## RHETORIC AND REALITY

*To the Editor:*

Professor Stephen Meyer, in his review of *National Security in the 1980s: From Weakness to Strength* [FLETCHER FORUM, Vol. 5, no. 1, Winter 1981] has justified interest in the volume by discovering a correlation between the authorship of the articles and membership in "President Reagan's defense brain trust." As these members include Richard Burt of Secretary Haig's staff, Fred Iklé and Bing West of the new Pentagon Team, and Richard V. Allen and Geoffrey Kemp of the NSC staff, this discovery represents major sleuthing on his part. Had he dug a little bit deeper and found that the book was published by the Institute for Contemporary Studies whose trustees at that time included Casper Weinberger and Edwin Meese (who also took part in the discussions which constitute part of the book), his discovery would have been of Holmesian proportions. Unfortunately, Professor Meyer discovers little else in his review essay; none of the clues to Reagan's future NATO policy in Richard Burt's essay, for example, which sent European diplomats in Washington scurrying so fast to obtain copies of the book that the first printing ran out after a month. This is a review concerned with issues of the past while the book takes the 1980s as its brief.

Professor Meyer is particularly keen on the point that Reagan's team heed the advice of some contributors, namely that "non-military solutions to some of America's pressing national security problems will hopefully be heard by the new Administration." Or does he mean that non-military solutions will be heard hopefully? Whichever, Professor Meyer has yet to discover that security analysts living in the present routinely consider "the non-military components . . . and political/psychological components . . . of the larger power balance," as he concedes Paul Nitze does in his essay. Yet he misses the larger point. One of the reasons the book was published is that for several years it appeared to be impossible in this country to have the military component considered in the power balance; in this decade it surely must. Meyer is struggling to understand today's real world where ever increasing Soviet military power

continues, alas, to intimidate governments and drive peoples to appeasement before armies even move in. On present evidence he has left room for his own continued education.

Meyer certainly lacks, however, none of the confidence of yesterday's analysts in America's purported technological superiority. Despite the larger outlays (larger by 300% according to CIA and Pentagon sources) the Soviet Union has long been making for research and development, he states that, "there is no operational Soviet weapon system . . . that the U.S. could not build . . . . There are, however, many systems which the Soviets could not build due to their technological constraints." If true, the statement is trivial at best. For we fail to use such claimed technological advantage and in any event we fail to deter Moscow from pressing onward to new technological heights. But even if it is true, how much longer will we possess these mystical advantages? Given the lead time necessary to get programs going, I wonder how significant this advantage will be tomorrow given the cancellations and cutbacks Jimmy Carter implemented yesterday. I doubt that the Soviets, in the interest of fair play, will slow down their research and development until we can get ours going. I have no doubt that, with determination, we can *reclaim* superiority in technology, but I rest uneasily with the jingoistic self-satisfaction in which superiority is asserted. Saying it doesn't make it so.

We learn that Edward Luttwak's essay on strategy is "largely a superficial attack on systems analysis;" Luttwak's legion of students, watching for such nuggets from his emerging study of strategy, might deem this opinion akin to a statement that George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a superficial attack on interspecies animal organization.

Books like this, published within five months of the conference at which its topics were discussed and only four months after the essays were completed, are sure to have rough edges. Professor Meyer correctly praises Albert Wohlstetter's brilliant contribution for its "thoughtful analysis of Western security problems in the Persian Gulf." As it was twice the length of most of the other contributions and demonstrates Wohlstetter's legendary rigor to the fullest, it deserves full credit. As an editor, however, I must note that had all the authors been given the extra three months Wohlstetter had for completing his indispensable contribution, the volume would have been much smoother and far more even. But it would not then have been available for the months of public debate during the election, for which it was in large measure written.

Professor Meyer is entitled to his own opinion of the worth of individual essays. Ironically, however, it is his review that "distorts the facts," something he accuses this writer of doing:

For instance, in arguing that the Carter Administration purposefully promoted nuclear inferiority as a desirable policy, he [Scott Thompson] notes

statements by NSC staffers and State Department officials and substitutes “inferiority” where they spoke of “parity.”

The “statements” referred to include the now celebrated comment of Carter’s NSC staff assistant, Victor Utgoff, that if America possessed military superiority, “we would occasionally use it as a way of throwing our weight around in some very risky ways . . . It is in the U.S. interest to allow the few remaining areas of strategic advantage to fade away.” [See, John Lehman, “A Symposium,” *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1979] Now, if we lack the advantage — and indeed, if we cede the advantage in *all* areas as Utgoff calls on us to do — is that parity? What is the meaning of the word: if I am not mistaken, American inferiority in every area is Soviet superiority in every area. The subsequent possibility that the Soviets, given superiority, might “throw their weight around in some risky ways” either does not bother Utgoff or is wholly discounted by him.

Similarly, I quoted a “senior sovietologist” at the State Department to the effect that “if the Soviet Union were more militarily powerful than the United States the world would be safer; it then would not feel insecure and threatened, whence flowed the real danger.” “More militarily powerful than the United States,” whatever else it means, hardly connotes or denotes parity. It is regrettable that, when Professor Meyer’s review is compared with the book and with present day reality, one finds it not only full of the rhetoric of yesterday’s views — so hopeful about the military balance, so naive as to Soviet purposes and uses of military superiority, and so self-deluding about the pace of Soviet military progress — but of simple misstatements of fact.

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#### THE “HOSTAGE CRISIS”

*To the Editor:*

The hostage story was the subject of unprecedented news coverage from the very beginning. The genuine public outrage at the action taken against American nationals by citizens of a foreign nation with the explicit approval of their government was easily understood. Less easily accepted, however, was the unfortunate example of sensationalist journalism which the American media presented to the public throughout the trying affair. When we needed insight, we were given a steady diet of reports heavily laden with ethnocentric values. The country’s two most prestigious newspapers, and the standard by which much of

the nation's news is judged, led the pack of reporters, headline writers and editors in the dissemination of often unquestioned, uninvestigated information. They cited example after example of Iranian torture and atrocities, while we watched the smiling faces of 52 seemingly well-fed, healthy-looking Americans participate in three strenuous days of homecoming activities. The agony of more than a year of captivity need not be denied in order to present the public with the accurate unprejudiced news coverage they deserve.

In fact, news deteriorated so steadily in the days following the American's return to the U.S. that one respected Boston TV journalist, speaking out on a radio talk-show, was led to label with stinging criticism his own employer's coverage of the events, "one-dimensional."

Over the months during which the world endured this ordeal, we heard comparatively little about the historical, political and economic ties between the U.S. and the Shah which may have helped to elucidate the extreme action taken by Iranians against a nation as powerful as the United States. One reason for this seems clear. The great majority of "expert" and "on the street" sources interviewed for broadcasting or print, were those whose comments and opinions fell within the historical and political framework accepted by American nationalists and jingoists. The news media in exercising its "power over the interpretation of reality" had no use for views of those who were not largely inclined to accept moderate, conservative and "official" explanations for the crisis and its origins. Thus, when activist Dick Gregory and others of similar persuasion travelled to Iran to present the American public with their interpretation, they found remarkably few media personnel who were willing to provide them with coverage.

The overall ethnocentric reporting of events, issues, and ideas relevant to the "hostage crisis", in my assessment, has had several effects.

First, it implicitly justified the U.S. imposed reign of the Shah. Typical of American coverage was a syndicated interview with Michael Matrisko, who was a political officer in the U.S. embassy in Iran when it was seized by Iranian students. In response to a question about the treatment of people living under the Shah's government Matrisko told a reporter,

People complain about the Shah. It's very popular to. The Shah was the leader of Iran for 37 years. I think all in all considering the fact that he was a world leader for 37 years, he has a fantastic record . . . What would be said about him now? The Shah made great mistakes, yeah. He also made tremendous progress . . .

Compare this widely circulated interview with comments made in 1974 by Martin Ennals, secretary-general of Amnesty International. He said, "no country in the world has a worse record in human rights than Iran;" a stated conclusion of enormous *international concern*, but which received minor media atten-

tion at the time. In his book *Deciding What's News*, sociologist Herbert Gans writes, ". . . for many years stories about the Shah of Iran dealt only with his dedication to modernization policies, and news about his brutal treatment of political opponents and intellectuals was still sparse."

Second, it obscured for a large number of Americans who are politically unaware of events outside of this country, the most fundamental reasons for Iran's terrible anger, as well as of the Third World's rage toward the U. S. Print and broadcast journalists are generally remiss in showing that a good number of states view our government as a potential threat to their sovereignty and right of self-determination. Iran, Nicaragua, Angola, and Grenada are included among a long list of others.

Third, the "Fourth Estate" has essentially echoed the Reagan Administration's warnings against "international terrorism" in the wake of alleged atrocities against Americans in Iran. The Reagan/Haig perception of terrorism, despite a lack of credible evidence, has been used to rationalize continued and increasing U.S. military aid to the right-wing junta in El Salvador.

United States aid and support of the Shah underlies the very conditions which led to years of repression in Iran, and created the motivation for the takeover of the American embassy.

Finally, the coverage by the press of the "hostage crisis", I am convinced, contributed to an atmosphere of blind patriotism and bigotry. The terms "brutal", "uncivilized" and "barbarian" were often quoted uncritically to describe the Iranian people, their history, and their government. (Terms that conjured up images of royalty were those applied to the Pahlevi family, i.e., Peacock Throne.)

It is significant that newspeople rarely see fit to use similar adjectives and nouns in reports dealing with the treatment of inmates in U.S. prisons although the conditions of prisoners here goes far beyond the personal horror experienced by the former hostages. Indeed, as with the ongoing problems of people of color in our nation's ghettos, reservations, and barrios, American journalists have for the most part failed to elucidate the underlying facts, figures, and questions relative to the state of U.S.-Iranian affairs.

The coverage has been episodic and inundated with pejorative buzz terms which provided ammunition for American rage, an impetus for patriotism, and a high increase in ratings and subscriptions; but not an increase in understanding.

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