

BOOKS

[*The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War*, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, Harvard University Press, 432 pages]

Clown Prince of Nuclear War

By James P. Pinkerton

AFTER HIROSHIMA, the conclusion of American strategists was that military history didn't matter much anymore. The atomic bomb seemed to have changed war so drastically that now, more than ever, fighting was too important to be left to generals.

Out of that new belief came Robert McNamara's "Whiz Kids," the systems-analyzing technocrats who gave us the Vietnam War. Decades later, that same generalized feeling—that in the face of the new, history was bunk and anything was possible—gave rise to George W. Bush's neoconservatives, the WMD-mongering apparatchiks who launched the Iraq War.

But before the prominence of either of these groups there was Herman Kahn, the subject of this new book by Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi. As she makes clear, Kahn's radical way of thinking blazed a dubious trail for others to follow—for all those practitioners of the abstracted and deracinated theorizing that guided and misguided the U.S. into Vietnam and Iraq.

A household name in the '60s, Kahn authored two best-selling books, *On Thermonuclear War* and *Thinking About the Unthinkable*. And for all the heaviness of his subject matter—and himself, too, weighing nearly 300 pounds—Kahn was intellectually nimble, even glib; one critic was charmed by his "curiously chatty ... digressing ... jazzy style."

Yet for most of his career, the big man was the subject of merciless criticism

and satire. While the character of Dr. Strangelove owes little to him—that wheelchair-bound atom-maniac, in his Teutonic tics, owes more to Henry Kissinger or Wernher Von Braun—the strategist's idea of a "doomsday machine" was at the black-humor heart of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie.

But when it came to bleak comedy, Kahn was in on the joke. In discussing mutations that might come from nuclear war, he asked, "It is possible, isn't it, that parents will learn to love two-headed children twice as much?" As the *Village Voice* observed, "He would make such a great stand-up comic. Who else can make people laugh about mass annihilation?"

Such was Kahn's genius that people across the political spectrum found much to admire in his work, which mostly explored how America might fight, win, and survive a nuclear war. Militarists and right-wingers of the Curtis LeMay/Buck Turgidson school were on board with any idea that aided and comforted their vision of a triumphant first strike. And yet Kahn's concentration on civil defense appealed to many liberals, too; Hubert Humphrey so admired *On Thermonuclear War* that he entered an abridged version of it into the Congressional Record, declaring it "an honor" to do so, since the work "embodies the intellectual honesty and rigor so much needed in discussing the problems of our survival." From further over on the Left, the veteran socialist Norman Thomas added his own backhanded praise: "Kahn deserves ... attention from those of us who believe that universal disarmament down to a police level under a strengthened UN is our sole valid hope of a decent existence."

For decades after 1945, Americans were bewitched, even bamboozled, by the "brave nuclear world" argument. The glare of atomic fire cast sharp shadows across the old landscape; the old military virtues of bravery and strategy on the conventional battlefield seemed like mere black holes of nostalgia and sentimentality. Upon learning of Hiroshima, the young military analyst Bernard Brodie cried out, "Everything that I have

written is obsolete"—although in fact, Brodie was just at the beginning of a long career as a strategic thinker, producing books with titles such as *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*.

"Escalation," in fact, was a usage popularized by Kahn, who became a master of nuclear newspeak. As Ghamari-Tabrizi notes, the advent of atomic weapons brought about a shift as to who could speak with authority on the subject of warfare. She writes, "When officers objected that Kahn was ill-equipped to speak on military affairs, he'd shoot back, 'How many thermonuclear wars have *you* fought recently?'" Indeed, Kahn dripped with disdain for the old-thinking military: he would call senior officers "stupid" to their faces, even as he offered them the chance to prove that they were smart—by signing on to his new worldview.

In the words of a visiting British Member of Parliament, "One of the strangest features of American life in the 1950s—which no doubt will continue throughout the 1960s—is that many of the experts who lead the discussion on the nature of war have no experience in it or training for it." Or, as Kahn—who served an uneventful noncombatant hitch in the U.S. Army during World War II—liked to say, "In this field, everybody is a theorist." So if there were few flights of fancy among the men who had stormed the beaches of Anzio or Tarawa earlier in their careers, Kahn stood ready to fill the void; he sported the right egghead credentials, and yet his great strength was as a horror-story teller, using nuclear grotesquerie instead of ghosts and goblins. Ghamari-Tabrizi rightly connects him to such savants of the horrifically surreal as Hieronymus Bosch and William Gaines, the publisher of the grisly EC Comics line.

Born into a left-wing family in Bayonne, New Jersey in 1922, young Kahn moved west after his parents' divorce, earning a B.S. in physics from UCLA and doing graduate work at Cal Tech. But his lefty associations—he joined Americans for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union and attended

at least a few Communist-front conclaves—and those of his wife’s family led to the yanking of his security clearance in 1953. So he turned to other work inside the military-industrial complex, first at the RAND Corporation, then at the Hudson Institute, which he co-founded in 1961.

Of course, Kahn was not alone in his role as Bard of the Bomb. He was not responsible, for instance, for one of the tallest tales of the age, the so-called “missile gap.” Yet Kahn was eager to play along with the missile-gap story line as a springboard for his own martial musings. He dwelled on what he called “interesting” scenarios about nuclear war and its aftermath, with little regard for anything rooted in reality or practicality; he speculated, for example, about the nuclear peril posed by “Soviet juvenile delinquent Eskimos.”

Kahn’s signature issue, however, was civil defense. In lectures that lasted as long as three days, the strategy-spieler

metaphysics of Kahn to those of another military thinker: Donald Rumsfeld. In June 2002, the secretary of defense essayed aloud about the terror threat: “There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we now know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns.” Completing his logical loop, Rumsfeld added, “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” As Ghamari-Tabrizi comments, Rumsfeld’s “shorthand spree through the core concepts of risk assessment—his unknown unknowns, his absence of evidence and evidence of absence—borrows liberally from strategic futurology.” Which is to say, pure Kahn.

While Kahn, who died in 1983, can’t be blamed for the misprisions of evidence that occurred after his death, his legacy should be judged according to the future mayhem caused by loose use of his methodology. The loosest users have been the neoconservatives, who

and the neo-Kahns have always been on the Left in so many ways, how did they manage to endear themselves to so much of the Right? The answer can be summed up in one word: toughness. Most conservatives pride themselves on being tough, and they are most proud of toughness when it comes to military matters. Here, Kahn held some high ground of his own. He had served honorably, albeit quietly, in the military, and he lost a brother in combat during World War II. So he could walk at least some of the walk.

But mostly he could talk and talk and talk, weaving webs of words around the heads of audiences, wrapping them in a shared vision of hardnosedness and heroism in the unnamed and unknown battles to come. As he often declared, “It takes an iron will . . . to distinguish among the possible degrees of awfulness.”

Yet at the same time, his reveling in “awfulness,” as one contemporary critic noted, held “a certain magnetism” for audiences. That’s the problem with invocations of willpower and the will to power: glorious poetry can often succeed in seducing otherwise sober audiences into acts of militaristic madness.

And while Kahn could joke about his war-vision—“We’re proud to say that we stand halfway between chutzpah and megalomania”—other more recent exponents of the Kahnian method aren’t kidding around. In our time, the dominant clique of defense intellectuals has displayed no humor at all as they have grimly used rhetorical howitzers to blast their enemies—on the Right as well as the Left. And it worked for a while, as civilians possessed of self-declared iron will and moral clarity demolished their opponents in the partisan arena. But of course, political pulverization on the homefront has done nothing to prevent politico-military stalemate on the warfront.

Which leads us to the final irony of the Kahn-neocon vision: for 60 years now, military geniuses have believed that nuclear weapons have made conventional warfare obsolete. But for those same 60 years, the U.S. has fought noth-

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argued for radiation-safe food supplies and fallout-proof factories. He even suggested the encouragement of mining under urban areas, so as to guarantee a large number of readily available mine-shafts in which urbanites could seek nuclear shelter. But through all his scenario-spinning, he maintained a light touch; he joked that the “Cheap Starter Set” for civil defense could be had for \$200 million, while the “Luxurious” program would cost \$20 billion.

For all his prominence, Kahn never came close to the real levers of power. It is other “defense intellectuals,” following in the Kahn tradition, who have since seized measures of control. One such power-moment for them was Vietnam, where the failures and falsities of the Whiz Kids have been much chronicled and compiled.

Another moment is Iraq. And here the author briefly and deftly connects the

gained the sort of hands-on power over the U.S. war machine of which Kahn could only have dreamed.

And just as the neoconservatives are not truly conservative, neither was Kahn. All through his career, he flaunted his left-wing, countercultural connections; he tried LSD, eagerly sat down for interviews with every journalist or film-documentarian, no matter how far to portside, and declared at the height of the Vietnam War, “I like the hippies.” At the same time, he was hostile to political conservatives, jibing, “I wouldn’t want to have dinner with them and I wouldn’t want my daughter to marry one.”

The same anti-conservative worldview holds true among the “neo-Kahns” today. They have little interest in preserving and securing the physical, moral, or cultural integrity of America because their eyes are on the bigger prize of remaking the world. But if Kahn

ing but conventional wars. Those generals and others who maintained that history still mattered have been proven right; nothing about Hiroshima obviated the need to know the “ground truths” of Vietnam or Somalia or Haiti—or Iraq. Failure to study the lessons of history still leads to failure, nukes or no nukes.

For her part, Ghamari-Tabrizi approaches Kahn from the dovish Left. Although she seems to like him as a human being—noting his openness to new ideas, even referring to him as “merry”—she nonetheless dwells on the “*Schadenfreude*” as well as “brutality” of Kahn’s oeuvre. Indeed, from a straight peacenik point of view, it should be easy to dislike Kahn because he was, after all, a willing pawn of the military-industrial complex. But for conservatives, the challenge of evaluating Kahn is trickier. For those on the Right, force is recognized as necessary—not to be celebrated as a virtue but most definitely to be used as a tool when needed. In that sense, the Kahnian approach has a place. Somebody has to think about the unthinkable.

If the U.S. is going to defend itself, it must have defenders, including defender-intellectuals. The challenge for the rest of us is to recognize the difference between the sometimes eccentric thinking behind legitimate war-gaming—and the sinister calculating that has lately preceded illegitimate war-touting.

So, sadly, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi’s book, which offers significant insight into Kahn, is more than just a chronicle of the past. It is an account, too, of the present, in which many of Kahn’s self-anointed successors are still riding high. And it might also be a guide to an increasingly dangerous future, in which Kahn’s memory is trampled under the thudding hooves of Four Apocalyptic Horsemen. ■

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[*The Strange Death of Marxism*, Paul Gottfried, University of Missouri Press, 154 pages]

Dead But Not Gone

By William S. Lind

IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS that the worst characteristic of an otherwise valuable book is its title. Such is the case with Paul Gottfried’s latest work, *The Strange Death of Marxism*. Instead of Marxism’s obituary, what Gottfried has actually written is the story of its transmutation into—well, into exactly what remains in dispute. Whatever it might best be called, it is clearly the basis for the political correctness and multiculturalism that have become the state ideology in most of Europe and the United States.

Along the way, Gottfried does chronicle the death of classical, economic Marxism-Leninism both in and beyond European Communist Parties. There are no surprises here; postwar revelations of Stalinist horrors coupled with a rising prosperity that enabled European workers to join the middle class undermined the powerful French and Italian Communist Parties of the 1950s, along with those in most other countries. Maoist and Castroite attempts to internationalize the workers’ revolution by translating it into Third World liberation kept Marxism-Leninism on life support for a while, but it was already brain dead. By the time the Soviet Union fell in 1989, classical Marxism had long since been stuffed and mounted, like Lenin. Not even the Chinese Communist Party takes it seriously anymore.

Were that the main substance of Gottfried’s book, it would amount to little more than the usual ho-hum academic work. In fact, it is very much more. What Gottfried really presents is the history of Marxism’s bastard offspring, political correctness, and the institution most responsible for its birth, the Frankfurt School. In so doing, *The Strange Death*

of *Marxism* joins Lorenz Jäger’s superb new biography of Theodor Adorno in making the intellectual history of the most radical of anti-Western ideologies accessible to a nonacademic audience.

Gottfried traces the rise of PC and multiculturalism through Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs, the Frankfurt School, and others, showing how Marx’s economic determinism evolved into an obsession with the unholy trinity of “racism, sexism, and homophobia,” which now demands endless sacrifices. The first way station was what Gottfried calls “neomarxism”:

Neomarxists called themselves Marxists without accepting all of Marx’s historical and economic theories but while upholding socialism against capitalism, as a moral position Thereafter socialists would build their conceptual fabrics on Marx’s notion of “alienation,” extracted from his writings of the 1840s [they] could therefore dispense with a strictly materialist analysis and shift ... focus toward religion, morality, and aesthetics.

What happened next is a matter of dispute, more over terminology than anything else. As Marxism became PC and multiculturalism, did it turn into cultural, as distinguished from economic, Marxism, or did it, as Gottfried contends, move so far beyond Marx as to constitute post-Marxism? Gottfried writes,

Is the critical observation about the Frankfurt School therefore correct, that it exemplifies ‘cultural Bolshevism,’ which pushes Marxist-Leninist revolution under a sociological-Freudian label? To the extent its practitioners and despisers would both answer to this characterization, it may in fact be valid ... but if Marxism under the Frankfurt School has undergone [these] alterations, then there may be little Marxism left in it. The appeal of the Critical Theorists to Marx has become increasingly ritualistic and what there is in the theory of Marxist sources is now