

Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation

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Of all former government officials who have turned to the pen, Sir Rodric Braithwaite should arguably be considered one of the more welcome additions. Following three previous books focusing on the Soviet Union and Russia, he has recently turned his attention to the issue of nuclear weapons and the precarious deterrence which has kept them from being used in warfare since 1945. Although by no means a ground-breaking book, and occasionally lacking analytical depth, its publication should be seen as a welcome addition to the literature on nuclear weapons for its clear and approachable treatment of the subject. In addition, Braithwaite should be given special praise for his analysis of Soviet attitudes to the bomb, something which many Western commentators ignore. This is all the more important at a time when nuclear weapons have resurfaced as a pressing issue on the international stage.

The book, which is divided into three parts, starts with an account of the destruction wrought on Japan by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It must be said that the book does not begin terribly convincingly. The style is quite disjointed as Braithwaite jumps between theatres and protagonists in the Second World War without offering clear transitions. It is also here in the first chapter ('The destruction of Japan') that one of the flaws of the book is made evident as the analysis of events and individuals is occasionally lacking in clarity and sophistication. For example, Braithwaite states that the Japanese believed themselves innately superior, without offering any relevant evidence, although he does correctly point out the racist attitudes towards the Japanese held by many in the West (p. 8). The analysis is especially lacking with regard to some of the key early works on the dropping of the atomic bomb. For instance, John Hershey's seminal book, *Hiroshima*, is claimed to have become 'an immediate classic' (p. 9). Although it is true that the book was an instant bestseller, what Braithwaite fails to clarify is that the book did not penetrate the American consciousness at large, nor lead to a lasting worry about the threat of nuclear weapons. Most Americans quickly forgot about the threat, at least until the Soviet Union got the bomb in 1949. Similarly, Braithwaite claims that the article by the American Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, justifying the use of the bomb and published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1947, was 'painfully honest' (p. 24). However, historians such as James Hershberg have pointed out that Stimson was persuaded to write his article by the president of Harvard University, James B. Conant, at a time when public opinion was beginning to shift against the bomb.

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Things improve significantly, however, in the two subsequent chapters, in which Braithwaite analyses the sometimes contradictory attitudes of scientists who helped develop the bomb. Chapter two ('Touching infinity') demonstrates the real strength of this book, which is the treatment of Soviet attitudes to the bomb and the contributions to science of the likes of Lev Landau. The chapter shows the nuances and complexities which are missing from the previous one. This becomes especially clear in chapter three ('Brighter than a thousand suns') where he ably analyses the motivations behind the scientists' desire to develop the even more powerful hydrogen bomb, describing their view of it as 'technically sweet' (p. 68). At times, however, the analysis is still a bit lacking, with sweeping statements such as claiming that the Trinity Test, the first test of an atomic bomb, marked the real start of people talking about Armageddon. This not only overlooks the various Armageddon scenarios present in many cultures and religions around the world but, as Braithwaite points out earlier in the chapter, the earliest atomic bombs were of comparable destructive force to the conventional bombs dropped on Japan throughout the war. This led some commentators to argue that the bomb was simply another weapon, different in the efficiency with which it destroyed, but not in the scale of said destruction (p. 47). The chapter ends well, however, with a strong account of how Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the Manhattan Project which developed the bomb, had his security clearance revoked after a special hearing in 1954 during which some of his former colleagues testified against him. Strangely, Braithwaite does not clearly tie this account in with one of the overriding themes of the book which is the sense of paranoia which came to characterise the nuclear age.

Chapter four ('A flash of lightning') focuses persuasively on the activities of Soviet scientists and correctly points out that, despite the previous purges of the Stalin regime, none of the Soviet physicists working on the bomb were arrested or shot. They were quite simply too much of a scarce and valuable resource to be sent to the Gulag (p. 98). Overall, Braithwaite's treatment of Soviet attitudes and reactions to the bomb are much more nuanced and convincing than his other chapters. This is the real strength of this book, unsurprisingly given the author's area of expertise and previous publications.

The second part of the book ('Forging a system') deals with the attempts of politicians and military tacticians to come up with credible strategies and policies for the bomb. Braithwaite argues that the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD) was not irrational, but also points out that deterrence was only proved by the lack of a nuclear war, which had it happened would in turn have proved that the policy did not work (pp. 117-19). This is an important point although Braithwaite does not elaborate on it as long as perhaps he could have done, as it ties in neatly with his overall theme of the prospect of nuclear annihilation and the paranoia which went with it. Although his source material is generally very good there are times within this section when Braithwaite's use of sources leaves something to be desired, particularly with regards to his use of Wikipedia for data on religious demographics and information on the Venona counterintelligence project during the Cold War (pp. 108, 223).

Chapter six ('Thinking about the unthinkable') is a very enjoyable read outlining how the United States attempted to develop credible nuclear strategies. Particularly interesting is his treatment of the strategist Herman Kahn's (in)famous attempts at trying to actively and creatively think about the prospect of nuclear war, something which inevitably led to comparisons with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*. Braithwaite, however, correctly points out that the real inspiration for the character remains unknown, although he does not quite reach the conclusion of some other authors that *Strangelove* was a composite, drawing inspiration from such colourful Cold War characters as the US air force general Curtis LeMay and the nuclear scientist Edward Teller. Similarly, Braithwaite does not fully explain the context behind Kahn's ideas, developed under the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower who, based on his experience in the Second World War, knew that war has a tendency to escalate. Eisenhower was obviously extremely keen to avoid this in a world with nuclear weapons. As a result, he developed his so called New Look policy which included the prospect of massive retaliation against any perceived Soviet aggression. Kahn, in turn, felt that the New Look plan was too inflexible to be a credible nuclear strategy and therefore tried to come up with various scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used so as to encourage policymakers to think critically about the prospect of nuclear war. The chapter as a whole analyses the nuclear policies of US presidents from Harry Truman to

Jimmy Carter but, quite strangely, does not analyse in depth the policies of Reagan, who arguably had a very profound impact on nuclear issues and the wider Cold War. Braithwaite does cover the Reagan presidency later on in the book but its inclusion here would have made this chapter more rounded and coherent.

Braithwaite, however, once again demonstrates his mastery and understanding of Soviet historiography in chapter seven ('Updating the art of victory') which cleverly illustrates how Soviet strategy, despite being less well-developed than in America, was nevertheless influenced by worst-case scenarios and the concept of deterrence, much as American strategists were. Especially impressive is his treatment of the policies of Leonid Brezhnev, as he illustrates how the Soviet leader tried to strike a balance between the concept of nuclear deterrence and more conservative Soviet ideologues. In this section Braithwaite also helpfully points out the difference between plans and intention in international affairs, something many other commentators miss. In analysing Britain's nuclear strategy in chapter eight ('Strategy for a small island') Braithwaite once and for all debunks the myth that Britain possesses a completely independent nuclear deterrent. As he points out, Britain was, and still is, reliant on the United States for technical support to support its Trident missiles. This argument could perhaps have been strengthened by pointing out that Britain, in part, acquired the bomb in order to secure international prestige. Although he mentions this idea, the important document in question, the Duff-Mason Report of 1978, which paved the way for a Britain acquiring Trident, is not dwelt upon at length and the point is only finally made explicit in a footnote (p. 210).

On the subject of debunking myths, Braithwaite does a phenomenal job in chapter ten ('Now thrive the armourers') by clearly pointing out that the so-called bomber and missile gaps were complete myths (p. 246). He also makes a very valuable contribution to today's climate surrounding discussions on nuclear weapons by pointing out that, despite the long list of nuclear accidents and incidents, the safety systems which prevent the warheads from going off prematurely have worked perfectly and no incident has resulted in a nuclear detonation (p. 360). Once again, however, the analysis at times leaves the reader wanting more. For example, when discussing the Soviet Union's monstrous Tsar Bomba, a nuclear weapon designed to unleash as much as one hundred megatons of explosive power (at the last minute scaled down to fifty megatons due to safety concerns), he fails to state that Tsar Bomba was developed partly because of the Soviet realisation that they were behind in missile production. Tsar Bomba was meant to keep up appearances and convince the world that the Soviet Union was still on parity with the United States, if not in terms of the number of missiles, then at least in terms of the destructive power of its nuclear weapons.

The final chapters deal with the periods in history when the world came dangerously close to nuclear war. Again, there are some curious omissions in this section of the book, most notably in chapter 13 ('Skirting the brink') when Braithwaite claims that the United States never seriously threatened the use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War (p. 318-9). That may have been true for leading politicians such as Truman but Braithwaite leaves himself open to counterarguments by failing to point out that Douglas MacArthur, the general in command in Korea, actively planned to extend the war into mainland China and use nuclear weapons on key Chinese bases, a policy which clearly undermined Truman's own and for which MacArthur was promptly fired. In chapter 14 ('The second Cold War') Braithwaite provides a thoughtful analysis of Reagan's evolving stance on nuclear weapons and his inability to grasp why the Soviet Union might perceive the United States as a threat. This was made evident by the 1983 Able Archer NATO exercise which Braithwaite correctly notes caused more than a little unease in Moscow.

As a career diplomat, Braithwaite is most successful when analysing the actions of governments and politicians, less so when dealing with more popular attitudes to the bomb. He has comparatively little to say about the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and overlooks its European counterpart, the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) movement, entirely. Braithwaite is right, however, to stress that there is little evidence that the widespread movement against the bomb had any effect in changing government policy. As he points out, the first real reductions in the number of nuclear weapons occurred, not due to public protests, but following the establishment of trust between leaders such as Reagan and Gorbachev at summits such as Geneva and Reykjavik. Although not leading to an agreement, these meetings paved the way for the Intermediary-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed in 1987 which succeeded in abolishing a whole

class of nuclear weapons. In the final chapter ('Armageddon averted?') Braithwaite correctly recognises that the number of nuclear warheads only dropped during the second half of the 1980s, after leaders had established mutual trust, something which world leaders today like Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un would do well to remember. He also provides a good analysis of why some Russians have come to rue the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite their hatred of communism, something which further clarifies where Braithwaite's true expertise lies.

The overall message from Braithwaite's book seems to be that cool diplomacy and blinking in the face of a threat from a nuclear adversary is not necessarily a bad thing, especially when informed by an imperfect intelligence process which struggles to form a coherent picture of your adversary's assumptions and intentions. Braithwaite concludes his book by arguing that 'whatever their nationality, the politicians were trapped in a web of inexorable logic. The nuclear weapon could not be uninvented. If their opponent had it or was getting it, they too had to have it if they were not to fail in their patriotic duty' (p. 397). In the final chapter, however, he mentions that Canada, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil and a number of other countries had been capable of acquiring the bomb but decided not to. His analysis could have dwelt more on how these countries, and countries in the former Soviet Union such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, were persuaded to give up their nuclear weapons. It would have been a useful addition to the book to examine the reasons why these nations gave up the bomb. Nevertheless, and despite some lapses in detail, this is still a very good work which provides a clear and accessible analysis of the key themes concerning nuclear weapons, especially concerning Soviet attitudes to the bomb, something for which we owe Braithwaite a great debt.

Notes

1. James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: From Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York, NY, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

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<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/30/the-nuclear-confrontation-by-rodric-braithwaite-review> [2]

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