

**Bruce Kuklick. *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger*. Princeton University Press, 2006.**

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Robert Jervis, Charles Maier, Anders Stephanson, Jeremi Suri.

---

**Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge**

In *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger*, Bruce Kuklick examines the role of intellectuals in foreign policymaking from the end of World War II through the end of the Vietnam War. Although Kuklick avoids any direct comparisons with President George Bush's administration and his advisers, he did comment on this example in an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2006. Kuklick uses Bush's neoconservative advisers as a lead into his book and central thesis: "If these guys [Bush's advisers] are so smart, their critics want to know, how did they get it so wrong?" with respect to the aftermath of the war in Iraq, the prospects for democracy in the Middle East, and the challenge of radical and Islamic fundamentalists.

Bruce Kuklick suggests that this situation, unfortunately, is fairly typical for Cold War intellectuals and scholars with extensive training, writings, and self-proclaimed understanding who are brought in to provide ideas about strategy but too often ended up groping in the dark and having little impact on policy besides providing a theory or rationalization that policymakers used to explain their policies to the public. "While they professed deep understanding," Kuklick notes, "they actually groped in the dark. Much of the time fashion was more important than validity. At the same time, irrespective of the quality of their knowledge, in the usual case the ideas of the cerebral strategists had little causal impact. They served to legitimate but not to energize policies. Intellectuals were most effective when they showed, after the fact, that some endeavors had been desirable. Or they articulated schema that exculpated policymakers—or themselves—from responsibility for action later identified as bad." (15)

Kuklick's focus is on three overlapping circles of scholars and writers thinking about war from 1945 to 1975. The first group consists of scientifically oriented experts in the academic world with significant associations with the RAND Corporation such as Albert Wohlstetter, Bernard Brodie, and Thomas Schelling. A second group that Kuklick evaluates is centered around Harvard and the Kennedy School of Government and follows the leadership of Richard Neustadt and the May Group led by Ernest May with their studies on presidential leadership and the role of bureaucratic politics in decision-making. The third group of intellectuals interacted with the first two groups and had the most direct influence as policymakers from George Kennan to Paul Nitze, McGeorge Bundy, and Henry Kissinger, who receives a chapter and significant, although not uncritical, approval from Kuklick for developing a strategic concept based more on an understanding of international relations than an abstract theory and applying it with some success.

The commentators have raised a number of important questions about Kuklick's study that certainly merit further discussion:

1. Do the Cold War intellectuals have as little positive influence as Kuklick suggests in shaping viable Cold War strategies and providing more than rationalizations for the choices of policymakers? Do the RAND strategic studies have more influence on policymakers than Kuklick concludes? What about the contribution of intellectuals to the reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan after WWII? How about the influence of intellectuals on arms control and the ultimate end to the Cold War?
2. Does Kuklick give insufficient attention and credit to the intellectuals who developed strategic doctrine and moved from the early arms race to the policy of assured destruction and mutual deterrence?
3. Does the Rand group misinterpret the Cuban missile crisis as a validation of their theories of flexible response and graduated escalation and, like Thomas Schelling, carry this perspective into Vietnam and provide Robert McNamara and Lyndon Baines Johnson with labels for what they wanted to do?
4. How persuasive is Kuklick's analysis of how the RAND influenced advisers and the Harvard-Neustadt group finds ways to distance themselves and leaders from what went wrong in Vietnam. Kuklick stresses how they apply the bureaucratic politics model in their writings and in the *Pentagon Papers* project to shift responsibility, how they shift the blame for the prolongation of the conflict to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, and how in the memoirs and writings of McGeorge and William Bundy and Robert McNamara they minimize Vietnam and emphasize misunderstandings and missed opportunities.
5. Should George Kennan receive more attention—about five pages—and more recognition as more than a blind oracle. Do what extent was Kennan's perspective weakened, like the rest of the American intellectuals, by their hubris, their ambitions, their academic theories? Is Kennan significantly different considering his foreign service training and prolonged service in Stalin's Russia which affected everyone's perspective? Since Kennan expressed more foresight on how the Cold War might end than most analysts, perhaps he should be considered a prescient rather than a blind oracle.
6. Do Eisenhower and Kissinger merit Kuklick's treatment of them as exceptions to the rule on how leaders and intellectuals developed and implemented strategy? Eisenhower's resistance for much of his presidency to RAND advocates of increasing the U.S. nuclear arsenal to threaten the Soviet Union is noted favorably by Kuklick, as is Kissinger's development of a strategic concept and application in dealing with the Soviet Union.

*Participants:*

**Bruce Kuklick** is Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania. He received his B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania in 1963, and a Ph.D. in American Civilization in 1968. His historical interests are broadly in the political, diplomatic, and cultural and intellectual history of the United States; and in the philosophy of history. He has won all major teaching prizes given by the university, including the Senior Class Award. In 2004 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society. He has written nine books, among them one on baseball, *To Every Thing A Season*. His selected publications include *The United States and the Division of Germany* (1972), *The Rise of American Philosophy* (1977), *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (1985), *The Good Ruler: Herbert Hoover to Richard Nixon* (1988), *Puritans in Babylonia: The Ancient Near East and American Intellectual Life, 1880-1930* (1996), and *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720-2000* (2001).

**Robert Jervis** is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. He previously taught at Harvard and UCLA after receiving his B.A. from Oberlin College in 1962 and his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1968. His most recent book is *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (Routledge, 2005). His *System Effects: Complexity in Political Life* (Princeton University Press, 1997) was a co-winner of the American Political Science Association's Psychology Section Best Book Award. *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1989) won the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. He is also the author of *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1970; 2d ed., Columbia University Press, 1989), and *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1984.) He has co-edited eight other books and authored over 90 chapters and articles.

He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology and ISA's Security Studies Section. He serves on numerous editorial boards, is a co-editor of the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, was a member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Contributions of Behavioral and Social Science to the Prevention of Nuclear War, currently chairs the Historical Declassification Advisory Panel for the CIA, and has just received the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for research relevant to preventing nuclear war. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1978-79 and is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1995-96 he was acting Associate Vice-President of Arts and Sciences for Planning and Budgeting at Columbia and has chaired its Academic Review Committee.

**Charles S. Maier** is the Leverett Saltonstall Professor of History at Harvard University. Served as Director of the Center for European Studies from 1994 to 2001, and as Chairman of the undergraduate Social Studies Program from 1991 to 1995. He published *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* in Spring 2006 and is currently collaborating with William Kirby and Sugata Bose on a world history of the twentieth century and writing on the rise and decline of territoriality and on the history of the modern state. Maier currently teaches

undergraduate courses on world history in the modern era, on World War I and World War II, and on political trials. He supervises graduate reading fields in early modern and modern international history, modern social and economic history, and German and Italian history. Maier's selected publications include "Doing History, Doing Justice: The Historian and the Truth Commission" in *Truth v. Justice* (2000); "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era" in the *American Historical Review* (2000); *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (1997); *The Marshall Plan and Germany* edited volume (1991); *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (1988); *In Search of Stability: Explorations in Historical and Political Economy* (1987); *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (1975); *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors* (2006).

**Anders Stephanson** is the James P. Shenton Associate Professor of the Columbia Core. He specializes in 20th century American foreign relations as well as history and theory. He received a B.A. from Gothenburg in 1975, a B. Phil from Oxford in 1977 and a Ph.D. from Columbia in 1986. His published works include *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy* (1989) and *Manifest Destiny* (1995). He is working on a historiographical book on diplomatic history and a work tentatively entitled *The United States as a Cold War*.

**Jeremi Suri** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of the prize-winning book, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Harvard University Press, 2003). He is also the author of numerous articles on international history, social change, and nuclear strategy. Professor Suri is presently completing a book that examines the place of Henry Kissinger's career in the international transformations of the last century: *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2007).

---

**Copyright ©2006 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---