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The Fog of Cold War

By John V. Walsh
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“Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?”

That’s not my department,” says Wernher von Braun.

From Tom Lehrer’s ballad of Wernher von Braun

From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning is the enlightening memoir by Paul Johnstone, a man who worked in the “department” that decided where “they” would come down. Johnstone labored there during WWII and then from 1949 to 1969, the initial period of the Cold War and the period covered by this book. On August 29, 1949, the USSR caught the world flat-footed when it set off its first nuclear bomb. Thus began the years when frightened children scrambled under their desks by day and were tormented with mushroom cloud nightmares by night. The U.S. and the USSR stood on The Brink over the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Crisis when The Wall went up. Those years were the initial period of nuclear standoff called MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction).

What Johnstone saw as he went about his duties horrified him – and it should also horrify us. For it is the thesis of the Afterword, by the author’s daughter, the prominent political commentator Diana Johnstone, that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. moved quickly from “MAD to Madness.” Madness refers to plans for a knockout nuclear first strike on Russia,

aided and abetted by the latest missile defense boondoggle. That was a favorite fantasy of the generals in the post-WWII era. Whether we now live in another era of Madness, when a disabling first strike again dances in the heads of the Elite, or once again in an era of MAD is an open question in my mind. But Paul Johnstone's memoir is a work of great importance in either case.

Paul Johnstone started out in Henry Wallace's Dept. of Agriculture during the New Deal, but was moved to the Department of War after Pearl Harbor. His job was to pick targets for conventional bombs in Japan, although not the targets for the first atom bombs. When the Cold War commenced, he studied how targets for nuclear weapons should be selected and how much damage The Bomb would do when dropped on various corners of the USSR. He also assessed the damage of Russian nukes landing in various corners of the U.S. He worked at the most august levels of US intelligence: Air Force Intelligence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of Secretary of Defense.

Some of Johnstone's studies became part of the Pentagon Papers, and Daniel Ellsberg. Johnstone gave the manuscript for this memoir to his daughter, Diana Johnstone, when he was on his deathbed in 1981.

A central message of the book is the inevitable failure of intelligence. This aspect of the memoir is hard to apprehend in all its facets without actually reading it. Why can "intelligence" not be trusted? First the intelligence agencies lie – and do so quite consciously when it suits those who command them or the desires of those who command their commanders. Anyone who does not recognize this by now has not been paying attention. Intel did this most notoriously in recent years in the case of the non-existent WMD that led the US to a multitrillion dollar war on the innocent people of Iraq – which we fight to this day even though Barack Obama declared the war "officially" over.

But even when the Intel agencies are trying to make honest estimates, they face other obstacles. This is the major lesson that Paul Johnstone delivers. Let us take a few examples. On the topic of trying to assess the damage done by nuclear weapons either on the USSR or on the US, he writes:

"They (the effects of nuking a target, jw) would be researched, and in time – much time – a lot would be learned about them, although not enough ever to provide the basis for predictive measurements. So men do what men always do. They calculated what was calculable as best they could, and generally ignored, or dismissed with mere mention by name, the factors that, however relevant and crucial, were incalculable. Or they would just make a wild guess. One problem was that whatever the uncertainties, those utilizing the information were rarely in a position to understand its degree of reliability. "(p. 39 of *From Mad to Madness*, hereafter FMTM)

So the "decision makers" for nuclear war could well be acting on intel that is "a wild guess," and they would not know it!

And here is Johnstone writing on the way that the “wild guesses” and other intelligence estimates come to be made, most notably about enemy capabilities – an essential if one plans to start a nuclear war:

“I believe that, to anyone who has been deeply immersed in it and then has had the privilege of viewing it with some measure of detachment, military intelligence must seem a world of flickering light, dark shadows, mood music and whispered rumors, half heard against trumpeted accompaniment proclaiming dire threats that imperil us from outer darkness. Shapes are partly perceived at best, most commonly merely implied, often not seen at all, and often what you think you see is really not there at all. There are always some things you know you know, but you never know how many things there are that you have no evidence even to suspect. You do not know how much of what you see is deliberately staged to mislead you.

What is seldom realized is that there is always a dominant mood that determines, more than the sharpest senses or the most acute reasoning, what you decide is out there and what is going on. Like all the world and all experience, it is kaleidoscopic; and the bits and pieces that flit before your eyes are what you thought you’d see before you looked.

Always of course there are the true believers. The images immediately before their eyes are God’s own truth. It’s a matter of right or wrong, bright sunlight or utter darkness. Then there are those not fully convinced nor deeply caring, who find it least troublesome to see what others say they see. Like herded sheep they may once in a while say “baa,” but though they may distrust the direction they are driven in, they feel reassured following the path forced on them by the pressure of the bodies next to them.” (FMTM, p. 63)

In other words, in the end the data and analysis do little more than to confirm pre-existing sentiments and prejudices.

Then there were the “experts” who had their own agenda. A striking example is the “Special Studies Group” set up in the early 1950s in the Air Force Directorate of Intelligence. Johnstone writes:

“It was headed by Steve Possony, a Hungarian émigré who professed to be an expert on Communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Steve was the first of several Central European émigrés I met in the next few years who passed as experts on Communist Europe....Others were Stausz-Hupé, Kissinger, Brzezinski and many lesser lights such as Leon Gouré and Helmut Sonnenfeldt. In every case I felt that they were thinking, consciously or otherwise, as representatives of a lost cause in their native land, and I always believed that they were used by the military because their ‘obsessions’ were so useful.” (FTFM, p.80)

Of course it is not clear who was using whom here. But we can think of a latter day equivalent in Bush 2 time when neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz dominated the Pentagon. As they ginned up the War on Iraq, it was all too clear that their loyalty to Israel came into play. For while the wars in the Middle East and North Africa did little to advance the interests of the US, costing it blood, treasure and new enemies like ISIS, those wars left in ruins potential adversaries

of Israel in its neighborhood. There can be little doubt that the interests of Israel were served by these American “strategic thinkers.”

Johnstone goes on:

“The one product of Possony’s group that I most distinctly remember was an annual appraisal of the strategic situation. And the reason I remember it, perhaps, is that every year that appraisal forecast a massive Russian land attack on Western Europe the following year. Several of us began to laugh about it after a while, but the forecast was always intoned awesomely and with superficial plausibility. I do not know whether many people who heard the briefings really believed the forecasts. I suspect many doubted it would really be next year, and thought it more likely the year after or even later. But even doubters approved the forecast because, they reasoned, it was better to err in this direction than to minimize the danger. Above all, it was good to say things that emphasized the need for strong defenses.” (And I might add big military budgets, jw) (FTFM, p. 80)

The issues that Johnstone raises are relevant not only for scholars, but for each and every one of us since our very existence hangs by a thread increasingly frayed by the incessant anti-Russia drumbeat in our media. That drumbeat has reached a neo-McCarthyite crescendo in these days of Kremlin Gate where politicians crazed by hatred of Putin like John McCain or hatred of Trump like nearly every last Democrat hold sway.

The relevance of the memoir is inescapable, and this is laid out with considerable insight in a preface and a postscript by Johnstone’s daughter, Diana. Diana Johnstone, a journalist residing in Paris and a frequent commenter on French and U.S. Politics is also the author of *The Politics of Euromissiles* (1984), *Greens in the European Parliament – A New Sense of Purpose for Europe* (1994), *Fool’s Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions* (2003), and *Queen of Chaos: The Misadventures of Hillary Clinton* (2015) – this last published right here at CounterPunch Press. She is careful of the conclusions she draws. In addition, Paul Craig Roberts’s Foreword adds a further dimension to the book since he worked with some of Paul Johnstone’s colleagues and also inside the Reagan cabinet when the first Cold War finally came to an end. (Regrettably here we are again – in Cold War 2.0.)

I remain unconvinced only by one conclusion of the book and that lies in Diana Johnstone’s Afterword. One thesis of the Afterword is that we went from the era of MAD back to the era of Madness, that is an attempt at a nuclear first strike, after the demise of the USSR. That may well have been true in the first decade of the Century when Russia was still on its back and China was relatively weak. (Diana Johnstone cites literature from this period to make her case. See also “The End of Mad”.) Bush was in power then, and the neocons were in the driver’s seat. Bush withdrew from the ABM treaty in June, 2002, which opened the door to developing the ever elusive anti-missile system that would make possible a first-strike on Russia and/or China. (At times first strike capability is called “nuclear primacy”.) Those ABM plans persisted and have been implemented right up to the present with their deployment in Eastern Europe nominally against Iran and in South Korea nominally against the DPRK. They are in fact aimed at Russia and China, and no one is fooled by other claims, least of all Russia and China.

But we are now 15 years out from 2002 and Russia's economy and military are much stronger under Putin. Moreover, China's GDP was only about 18% of the US GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms in 2002; it is now in 2017 about 120% that of the US., and the gap grows daily. And of course military power grows out of economic power. Things have changed. Certainly, the US maintains a vast edge in its military capability, but is it enough for the neocons and neoliberalcons to realistically dream any longer of a nuclear first strike? I doubt it, but the grave danger is that they are living in the past and that their "intel" is telling them that nuclear primacy is still theirs. Why? Because the intel agencies might feel that is what their bosses want to hear. After all, who wants to abandon past glory. Empires do not have a great track record when it comes to accepting decline. Living in the past is one of the things that might concern us after reading Paul Johnstone's work. So it is a book of considerable importance for the moment. It warns us of the perilous age in which we live, and it tells us that the need to create a structure of peace in a multipolar world is urgent.