

Naval War College Review

Volume 36
Number 5 *September-October*

Article 20

1983

The Soviet First Strike Threat: The U.S. Perspective

Joseph E. Thach Jr.

Jack H. Nunn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Thach, Joseph E. Jr. and Nunn, Jack H. (1983) "The Soviet First Strike Threat: The U.S. Perspective," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 5 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss5/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

making. Misperception, crisis, and crisis management are covered, but the extreme crisis of surprise attack is not. See *Strategic Military Surprise*, edited by Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan, 1982, and the "hypergame" studies of Bennett and Dando in the *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, January 1979.

Section 8 deals with the international system. The important theme of national images and international systems is treated by K. Boulding (1959). Here, perhaps, Professor Kim has been too modest and too strict an editor; the section would have gained by an excerpt from his work on *China, the United Nations, and World Order* (Princeton, 1979). Small and Singer (1970) quantify war from 1816 to 1965, thus providing a bridge to quantitative and computer-based real-time studies of international, especially dyadic, relations. Bruce Russett's "Cause, Surprise, and No Escape" (1962) takes up a very topical concern; see Geoffrey Barraclough, *From Agadir to Armageddon: Anatomy of a Crisis* (London, 1982).

A bibliography of ten pages usefully completes this anthology; no index is needed and none is supplied. All in all, the anthology is the best book of its kind if only because it is the only book of its kind.

John Tashjian
Arlington, VA

Nunn, Jack H. *The Soviet First Strike Threat: The U.S. Perspective*. New York: Praeger, 1982. 292pp. \$31.95
Risk and uncertainty often act to inhibit timely and responsive

national security policies. Jack H. Nunn contends that for many years they strongly influenced high-level American decision makers to both misperceive and overestimate the "worst case" possibility of a totally disarming Soviet "strategic" first strike threat.

While his assessment may spark some controversy among more expert readers, it also should be noted that Nunn has done a great deal to support his analysis and findings. Using a wide array of source materials, including numerous Department of Defense documents released under the Freedom of Information Act or otherwise recently declassified, he makes a strong case for his viewpoints.

Nunn's analytical approach and organizational format are the strong points of this work. Unlike many similar topical efforts, which presume a good measure of reader expertise from the outset, Nunn's work permits topical access to a wide audience by "returning to the basics" with a careful exposition of the essential nature of national security and resultant threat perceptions in his introduction and the first several chapters. If at first glance it appears overly simplistic this approach actually enhances comprehension for his more substantive treatment of the postwar period that is covered later on in the work. His discussion of the pre-World War II doctrinal antecedents to postwar U.S. national security policies (Chapter II), for example, attempts a direct linkage to the respective influences of Clause-

witz, Mahan, Mitchell, and Douhet on postwar US strategic policy formulation. Since the clear majority of US military leaders were familiar with the strategic teachings of these men prior to World War II, and had applied their precepts successfully during that global conflict, Nunn asserts that such influences extended into the nuclear era with even more sophisticated applications. Likewise, he firmly establishes the close relationship between strategy and technological innovation as a primary dynamic in contemporary US national security policy perceptions.

This initial coverage helps establish a set of meaningful criteria for Nunn's evaluation of US policy perceptions on the possibility of a disarming Soviet first strike threat from 1945 to the present day. In generally chronological order, his progressive by-chapter assessment (Chapters III through VII) comprises the core of this work. Described therein are the influence of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the emergence of the cold war Soviet-American rivalry, the first successful atomic weapons tests in the USSR and the Korean conflict on official US outlooks upon the growing Soviet threat over the next decade.

In particular, Nunn asserts that Pearl Harbor, a classic example of strategic surprise, remains deeply imprinted on the American national security psyche with a resultant pronounced tendency towards "worst case" appraisals of Soviet threat capabilities and intentions. If

some might contend that Nunn is encouraging a disregard for historical experience, it would be more correct to state that he actually proposes a more sober, objective and, hence, realistic estimate of Soviet threat potential in which the "worst case" scenario of a totally disarming Soviet first strike is but one possible option.

This approach is readily apparent in his discussions of the massive retaliation doctrine and the "bomber gap" during the fifties and on the advent of ICBMs along with the mutual assured destruction concept in the early 1960s. On the post-1961 period covered in Chapter VII, Nunn observes that much exaggeration of Soviet strategic nuclear force capabilities was resolved with improved and routine US strategic intelligence collecting capabilities. Concurrently, Nunn adds, improvements in intelligence, along with US development of bombers, ICBMs, and sub-launched ballistic missiles, transforms the spectre of a preemptive Soviet first strike into factual and objective parameters for threat estimate purposes. In that context, Nunn makes an excellent case for an effective strategic intelligence program as a vital underpinning for both current and future development of US retaliatory capabilities.

While the work may appear argumentative at first glance, it does force the reader to reevaluate his views on US national security policy. It is also supported by numerous topical charts and a solid bibliography that further enhances its value

as a refreshing reexamination of US national security policy development in the nuclear era.

Dr. Joseph E. Thach, Jr.
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Public Affairs

Cave Brown, Anthony. *"Wild Bill"*

Donovan: The Last Hero. New York:
Times Books, 1983. 891pp. \$24.95

Whether "Wild Bill" Donovan deserves the accolade of "the last hero" given him by Dwight Eisenhower is a matter of debate as are many of the facts about Donovan's career in wartime intelligence. What is not a subject of dispute is that his life was indeed eventful. Born in Buffalo, New York in 1883 to a blue-collar, Irish-Catholic family, William Donovan was taught to achieve—in the Catholic Church, in athletics, and in school—by his disciplinarian father. In 1908 Donovan received a doctorate of laws from Columbia University and returned to Buffalo. He soon prospered and made the right connections with the city's Protestant elite through his marriage and in his legal career. Adding to his stature in World War I, he earned a Distinguished Service Cross and eventual field command of the famed Fighting 69th Regiment.

After the war the Republican Donovan's political prospects seemed bright. However, he was unable to overcome a Democratic trend in the Empire State and twice failed in bids for elective office. He did serve as assistant attorney general in the Coolidge administration but when the chance came to enter intelli-

gence work in 1940, he put aside his lucrative legal practice.

According to this latest biographer, Anthony Cave Brown, a British journalist already known to students of World War II as the author of *Bodyguard of Lies*, Donovan apparently had some dealings with military intelligence as far back as the First World War. Cave Brown surmised that in 1916, while traveling throughout Europe for Herbert Hoover's food relief organization, Donovan did some work for the British intelligence services. Although the evidence for this activity is not strong, what is fact is that in 1919 Donovan was persuaded to interrupt a pleasure trip to the Orient to accompany the US ambassador to Japan on a special mission. It was to travel into Siberia to evaluate the White Russian movement of Admiral Alexander Kolchak during the Russian Civil War.

At the outset of World War II, Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service began cultivating Donovan, now a successful international lawyer operating out of New York and Washington. Why Donovan was approached is unclear. The British might have overrated Donovan's influence in Washington, or perhaps he had indeed rendered them assistance in 1916. However, the association soon paid dividends to the British, for Donovan's law firm assigned one of its talented young men to find a precedent which would allow President Roosevelt to transfer fifty overage destroyers to the Royal Navy in 1940. Donovan's rapport