



The Cold World They Made: The Strategic Legacy of Roberta and Albert Wohlstetter by Ron Robin.

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Ron Robin's fast-paced and fascinating intellectual biography is aptly titled. The strategic world that Roberta and Albert Wohlstetter made was indeed cold—arctic, even. The Wohlstetter Doctrine infamously rejected the notions of both containment and mutually assured destruction (MAD) as too soft to thwart the Soviet Union. The Wohlstetters spent their careers arguing vehemently that national survival required Americans to be willing to use nuclear weapons—including tactical ones—offensively. They also insisted that the US military must invest in long-term, expensive, high-tech weapons to ensure that the nation could forestall surprise attacks and outstrip Soviet technical and economic capabilities. The Wohlstetters' doctrine was cold-bloodedly focused solely on American survival. Even after the Cold War ended, the couple advocated eternal vigilance against superpower threats. Robin's thoughtful research reveals why they preached their gospel so insistently for so long. Tracing the careers of three of their acolytes, Robin shows the couple's enduring strategic influence.

An accomplished cultural and intellectual historian, Robin (NYU) argues that the Wohlstetter Doctrine reflected Roberta and Albert's "social worldview" (4). That said, he had trouble isolating that worldview, because his subjects were such careful curators of their public images. By the time they entered public life as RAND analysts in the early 1950s, they had meticulously cultivated the public personae of a highly cultured, yet rather traditional couple. The journalists they welcomed into their impeccable modernist home in Los Angeles (Laurel Canyon) recorded moments of intellectual domesticity; Roberta served delicious finger foods while Albert waxed eloquent. Beyond the glossy pages of magazines, they left little record of their private lives; in addition, they sought to erase any residue of their youthful radicalism as graduate students at Columbia and Radcliffe in the 1930s.

Robin corroborates what several of Albert's critics suspected: his image as the pair's intellectual heavyweight was a front. In actuality, he owed a deep philosophical debt to Roberta's Bancroft-Prize-winning *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*.¹ Indeed, among Robin's most perceptive contributions is his revelation of Roberta's intellectual prowess and influence. Her pathbreaking study of surprise at Pearl Harbor rejected popular "interpretations of the debacle as the result either of incompetence or of pernicious motives" (54). Instead,

Inherent cognitive flaws and self-deceptions were the most formidable enemies of all. Having decided beforehand that the Japanese would most probably carry out their major naval offensive elsewhere [than Pearl Harbor], the Americans either misinterpreted or ignored information to the contrary. Warnings that conflicted with well-entrenched beliefs, Roberta explained, would always be ambiguous, if not deceptive, even without elaborate deception on the part of an enemy.... [The attack was] the result of an unmanageable—and chronic—confluence of technical, managerial, and cognitive failings, a perfect storm that would surely happen again.... [For Albert] the lesson of Pearl Harbor for the thermonuclear age was to eliminate the temptation of an enemy first strike by providing adequate defensive shelter and

1. Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 1962 (orig. a 1958 RAND Corp. study).

the removal of the countervailing forces from immediate enemy striking range.... Beginning with that belief, Albert would stake his career on advocating for a highly lethal redundancy in weapons and their delivery systems. His strategies of deterrence were all premised on the annihilating consequences of a credible second strike. (56–58, 70)

Robin stresses that Pearl Harbor was only the proximate cause of their doctrine. The final cause was Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the subject of Roberta's unfinished doctoral dissertation in English literature. The Wohlstetters found Hamlet's self-deception and incapacity to act both abhorrent and symptomatic of broader human psychological and intellectual frailties. In his foibles were the symbolic roots of their doctrine: that without constant reminders of danger and the need for vigilance, Americans would lower their guard; that policymakers must always anticipate any enemy capability, not just the most reasonable or likely, and overcome complacency and indecision by a sustained commitment to action, especially in the face of uncertainty.

Hamlet was a recurrent theme in Roberta and Albert's work, a tragic figure whose story provided the metaphorical basis for American strategic responses to enemies like Cuba and Iraq and fickle allies like France. Yet, for all of their insistence that danger sprang from weak human psyches, they also stressed the threats posed to American national security by "unpredictable, volatile, and manipulative" enemies—specifically, nation-states on the alert for weakness (137). Robin explains how the Wohlstetters' myopic fixation on bipolarity and conventional military confrontation blinded them to signs of Soviet weakness in the 1980s and the rising threat of non-state and religiously motivated international actors. Their conviction that history is cyclical and their lack of strategic imagination ossified their thinking as their careers wore on.

But, Robin shows, the Wohlstetters left an army of disciples to apply their doctrine to new strategic challenges. He provides damning and compelling accounts of the misguided, hubristic policy contributions of Paul Wolfowitz, Zalmay Khalilzad, Richard Perle, and the defense community that heeded them. While each deviated in some degree from his mentors' thought, all espoused their insistence on assertive international intervention in the name of American national interest and believed that threats must be countered by preparing for "all conceivable contingencies" (270). This strategic mindset yielded tragic and deplorable results.

Ron Robin has done a great service for the history of strategic thought. While justifiably critical of their followers, he treats his principal subjects with admirable neutrality—no small feat, given how loathsome Albert, in particular, often seems to have been. He is, however, too noncommittal as to whether the Wohlstetters were pawns of the decision-makers who endorsed their work, as Bruce Kuklick has argued,² or themselves provided fresh insights that shaped US national security policy. *The Cold World They Made* will engage and enlighten intellectual historians, scholars of science and technology, students of US foreign policy, and anyone wondering why, some twenty-five years after the Cold War ended, the ruthless and discredited tropes of old strategic philosophies keep resurfacing.

2. In *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2006).