Book review

Arsenals of Folly: the making of the nuclear arms race
by Richard Rhodes
Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2007, $34.95
386 pages including notes, bibliography, and index

[1] This is the third (of a proposed four) book by the Pulitzer Prize winning author in his history of nuclear weaponry. The first was the WW II development of the atomic bomb, the second the post-WW II development of the hydrogen bomb; and this reviewer speculates that the last may be in regard to the peace dividend enjoyed by all following the collapse of the USSR in 1990 and the end of the cold war and the arms race. This volume covers the arms race from the close of WW II until the 1990 disintegration of the USSR.

[2] What is so disappointing is the mendacity of our public servants and office-holders. “Sexing up” the threat posed by Iraq as reason for the 2003 invasion of that benighted country merely continues the tradition we in the west and our counterparts in the east have suffered for the past 60 years. Partly through greed, the exaggerated capabilities of our enemies has fed the military-industry complex in the west and its Russian counterpart. Other motivations included the perceived necessity of bringing home to the nation the imminent peril faced. This end (educating the community including our political leaders) justified the means (lies and exaggeration) adopted. The sad fact is that the identities of those peddling the need for muscle flexing have stayed the same. There seems to be a longevity of life for those proposing that others engage in warfare while they themselves cannot be released to personally participate in the hostilities. In those instances where mortality has winnowed the ranks of earlier ‘neo cons’, their places were ably taken by their disciples.

[3] Their analyses of the necessity of defence spending were further flawed by the failure (intentional or otherwise) to properly assess the threat posed by the other side. When comparing the size of the US’s arsenal with that of the Iron Curtain countries, the proponents of the arms race conveniently ignored those nuclear weapons possessed by the UK and France and those deployed by the US in the NATO nations. Similarly, when reporting on Soviet expenditure (in terms of either GDP or dollar expenditure) on the arms race the proponents failed to account for the inefficiencies of the Soviet economy and industry. That Russia was spending so much on its
acquisition of nuclear weapons only meant that they were acquiring a lesser number of weapons than the West was capable of acquiring with lesser expenditure. Given the intelligence of the proponents, that this failure to compare apples with apples may have been deliberate (in order to bolster their case) cannot be discounted.

[4] Therein lies the explanation of President Eisenhower’s farewell address warning against the military-industrial complex. As an experienced military man in possession of the U2 spy-plane photographs taken over Russia, Eisenhower knew that his critics were beating up the so-called “missile gap” to push their own agendas. That there was no missile gap could not be disclosed by Eisenhower without admitting to the illegal U2 overflights of Russian airspace. Possibly not appreciated by Eisenhower at the time was that the Russians had their own military-industry complex proponents similarly pushing for nuclear arms domination.

[5] I cannot with confidence assert that the author disputes the winning of the cold war by the west and the consequent end of the cold war. The feeling I gained from this book was that the real ‘architect’ of the ending of the arms race and the cold war was Mikhail Gorbachev who recognised the waste of economic assets in increasing the inventory of nuclear arms beyond those more than necessary to destroy the planet several times over and the financial millstone that the arms race imposed on both the superpowers. Further, I was disturbed to learn just how poorly our political leaders (of both sides) were at playing poker when the stakes were Armageddon. Readers may be surprised to learn that the West’s posturing in the 1970-80s under Carter and Reagan brought the world just as close to all-out nuclear war (at least twice) as did the well-recognised 1962 Cuban missile crisis. That this did not occur is more good luck than good management.

[6] The costs of the cold war were astronomical for the USSR in civil deprivation, but even the ‘victor’ has paid dearly in deferred maintenance of major infrastructure. While Russian longevity (or life expectancy) actually declined, American life expectancy stalled, ie, it did not continue to rise. And America has yet to pick up the tab for past civilian infrastructure belt-tightening with run-down cities, decaying bridges and highways, failing schools, entrenched poverty, and diminished health care for its citizens who funded the arms race and were required to tighten their belts to do so.
The USSR suffered civil destitution while the US only suffered civil impoverishment. For this both nations continue to pay. Economists estimate that each dollar spent on US defence diverts 29 cents away from investment in future production which results in a permanent loss of 6 cents per year every year in perpetuity. Thus, an extra billion dollars of defence expenditure in one year reduces investment (in future productivity) by $292 million resulting in a permanently diminished output of $65 million per annum.

I began this review speculating that the proposed final fourth volume will canvas the peace dividend enjoyed by all since the end of the cold war and the arms race. Perhaps that was overly-optimistic with the current moves to re-assert Russia as a super-power by President Putin. Without any particular insight into the author’s plans I wonder whether he will in fact be writing of the squandered opportunities lost since the end of the cold war with the consequent continued arms race and further development of nuclear weaponry. Certainly the closing pages of this book suggest the author to be less than enchanted with the supposed gains or ‘peace dividend’ enjoyed by the world as a consequence of the end of the cold war and the arms race.

I close with noting that the real role played by Secretary Gorbachev and President Reagan may not be fully appreciated until many years in the future. Certainly, this book has caused this reader to more favourably re-assess the statesmanship of US President Ronald Reagan. The exercise of such statesmanship was brought about by the recognition of the economic wastefulness and the possible failure of supposedly ‘fail safe’ systems to avoid inadvertent nuclear war.

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