Roots of War

by Richard J. Barnet

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After reading Herbert Feis™ From Trust to Terror and Richard J. Barnet™s Roots of War, one is left with the impression that these two books are representative not only of two historical schools, that of traditionalism and revisionism respectively, but even of two separate generations. Although both were written during the final stages of the Vietnam War and both Feis and Barnet would claim to be American patriots, the brand of patriotism displayed by the two is decidedly different. Feis, the hardened economist and bureaucrat who worked for both the Department of State and the Department of War between the years 1930 and 1945, is the American apologist. Barnet, a critic of the war in Vietnam, wrote two books on disarmament, served in the Department of State under JFK and founded the Institute for Foreign Policy Studies. He is the "thorn in the flesh" that keeps democracy on its toes.

Feis, as a traditionalist, does not question the accepted wisdom common to the US diplomats, statesmen, elected officials and generals who saw the beginnings of the Cold War. Arthur Schlessinger, Jr. said after Feis™ death in 1973 that, "though Herbert Feis did not question the historical and intellectual framework within which the American policy developed, he was by no means a writer of old-tie history, intent on proving the infallibility of official judgement." That official intellectual framework, and not the fallibility or infallibility of the official judgement, was for Barnet the very root cause of the ignominious failure of US foreign policy in Vietnam. Barnet, who reveals himself to be somewhat of a left-leaning revisionist, attacks the conventional wisdom with a vengeance perhaps only surpassed by Pravda or Izvestia.

The theses of these two books are indeed antithetical, but taken together they offer the student of the Cold War a balanced view which neither of these two taken alone provides. With the goal of unearthing the roots of the Vietnam War, Barnet outlines the defects of the US bureaucratic national security system, its capitalistic economic system and apathetic public. Barnet argues the US policy of permanent mobilization for war is based upon an ideological norm in domestic policy. That norm is what Barnet labels the “American business creed”. A Calvinistic stress upon order and efficiency, hard work and progress combined with a Hobbesian reverence for the Leviathan-like central "national security structure" characterizes this creed. Barnet urges a basic change in this traditional American ideological norm. Feis confines his analysis to the twisting diplomatic moves and counter-moves which constituted foreign policy developments during the onset of the Cold War between 1945 and 1950. He argues implicitly throughout his account that the responsibility for the move of US-USSR relations from the trust of the Grand Alliance to mutual terror in a world plagued by nuclear proliferation is to be placed exclusively on the “thorn in the flesh” that keeps democracy on its toes.
It will be the goal of this review to highlight those aspects of these mostly contrasting analyses which shed the greatest light upon the still raging conflict within the USA as to whether to conduct, or to deescalate the Cold War. The contrast is first seen in terms of overall impression: stated that Barnet’s account is quite a bit more readable. His inclusion of psychological analytical techniques and philosophical considerations of political ideologies, to include an incisive analysis of neo-Leninist theory, serves to keep the reader’s attention for much longer periods than does Feis’ strict historical accounting of post-WWII diplomacy.

Though similarly one-sided, these two books demonstrate differences in literary style to as great a degree as their authors’ plainly visible antithetical prejudices. Feis chooses by the hand through five years of crucial policy negotiations and lays bare the splits within the camp of the Western Allies as well as the East-West split which Cold War. At times, Feis is as critical of the obstructions provided by the recalcitrant French as he is of the Soviets. This provides somewhat of a respite from his condemnation of the Soviets. Barnet divides his complaints into three categories: the national security bureaucracy’s autonomous and guilt-free perpetuation of the US preparedness for all-out nuclear war; the imperialistic nature of the US’ capitalistic business creed which, along with a “pseudo-Christian” morality, pervades both the exclusive “national security bureaucracy” and the “American business elite” cementing them together in a common goal of perpetuating the mutually beneficial military-industrial complex; and finally the manipulable American public, which takes little or no interest in foreign policy.

Where Feis may be faulted for the inclusion of too much cumbersome detail, Barnet succumbs to the dangers of excessive abstraction. For instance, Barnet’s “national security managers” who use “rat psychology” and systematically commit “bureaucratic homicide” during the Vietnam War, although occasionally tied down to names such as McGeorge Bundy or Robert McNamara, remain nameless abstractions. With Barnet, the United States is the sole beneficiary of all criticism. One tires of this eventually.

In the presentation of Cold War history offered by the two authors one sees the convenient exclusion of those topics which might seriously threaten the validity of their individual arguments. Barnet is particularly guilty of this. His commentary totally ignores the malicious Russian war machine, which like the US war machine must undoubtedly bear some of the blame for the US’ permanent mobilization for war. In like manner, by his silence on the matter, Feis relieves US government officials from any guilt of deceit or willful deception of the American people, the Western Allies or the Soviets. If Feis is to be trusted completely, the US is simply incapable of this type of action. If Barnet is to be wholly trusted, the fact that the Soviet Union has committed untold numbers of human rights violations and shown imperialistic tendencies will be entirely ignored.

One can see the selective treatment of the Marshall Plan by the two as an exam-ple of this seemingly innocent tendency. Feis portrays the US proposal of the Marshall Plan as a selfless act of the American Government and ignores the fact that the US business community was eventually to benefit immensely from the rebuilding of the European industrial machine. In criticizing the US business interests for their role in developing the Marshall Plan, Barnet ignores the fact that the US Government was largely motivated by the desire to take the governments of Europe “off the welfare rolls”, so to speak. In developing the Marshall Plan, the US Government was indeed balanced by a healthy dose of self-seeking concern on the part of US business concerns. Feis consistently ignores the role of the American business community in forming US foreign policy consensus. To see this clearly, one would certainly have to read Barnet’s account.
This selective coverage given to events of the Cold War period is best seen in the way Barnet covers the Soviet involvement in Eastern Europe. It was, turning to the Feis text, the Soviet installation of the Lublin Poles to power in Poland which, as an example of Soviet deceit and lack of good intentions, served as the catalyst for US distrust of Soviet intentions. Of the Soviet involvement in Poland, as of the rest of Soviet involvement in Eastern Europe, "accords which the American Government had thought to be clear and valid were distorted." (Feis, 173). The account which Feis gives of the initial souring of US-Soviet relations (to include war reparations exacted from Germany by Russia, the US termination of Lend Lease, the US disengagement from the Chinese nationalists and the development of the US policy of containment) is entirely absent in the Barnet account.

Certainly, after the subjugation of the Poles, the US had best beware of Soviet promises of autonomous democracies for Eastern Europe. Feis argues that Soviet intentions for some type of strategic buffer zone in the region were probably sincere, but by no means sufficient to justify Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe. Reading Barnet, one would never know that the Soviet Union expanded its sphere of influence greatly during the period of 1945-1950. It is obvious that, as Barnet ceaselessly ferrets out US policy inconsistencies, he selects his information just as carefully as does Feis. He refers numerous times to the US support of a repressive military regime in Brazil during the 1960s but ignores the manner in which the Soviet Union moved rapidly into Eastern Europe during the late 1940s and 1950s. Although perhaps not intentional, this omission is glaring to the careful observer.

It should be noted, to Feis's further credit, that his article is more extensively permeated by a careful consideration of primary sources and their origins (such as the Truman Doctrine and Kennan's Long Telegram). This produces a feeling of immediacy which Barnet's account lacks and evokes sympathy for the perception of US, British and French diplomats, even if their fears appear to be greatly exaggerated.

It is these apprehensions, these "paranoias", which dominated the thinking of diplomats during this immediate Cold War period following WWII that Feis relates best. In Feis's quite obviously, absolutely no mention of the affects of the interaction between Government and the US public in the forming of Cold War consensus. Clearly Government seems to be acting in a veritable vacuum and arriving at decision autonomy. This executive privilege of the national security elite, only implied in a substantial portion of Barnet's argument. As Barnet observes, the "national managers" submit to the limitations which public opinion places upon foreign policy at the same time as they mold that public opinion. He argues that, "though the world of real elite preserve, it is evident that those who make foreign policy always have one eye on the public reaction." (Barnet, 266).

Furthermore, Barnet assails the myth of "monolithic" Communism aimed at world domination. This myth, according to Barnet was created by the US Government by playing on the American people's Calvinistic fears of the Communist political system about which they knew little or nothing. Barnet holds that, during the period of the Cold War, "anticommunism came to serve as a kind of glue to hold a rapidly fragmenting society together." (Barnet, 255).

It should be carefully noted that in his analysis, Barnet probes the motivations behind foreign policy much more deeply than Feis would ever consider doing. For example, I of the Catholic Church, organized labor and the media in enlisting public support for Cold War policies. Significantly, Barnet is just as unsympathetic with the Catholic hierarchy as he is with the "national security managers' visceral anticomunism into foreign policy. The roots of anticomunism, so synonymous for Barnet with the roots of war, include not only the "paranoid diatribe" of government officials but also the vicious reaction of Catholic clergy, union bosses and the press. Here, Barnet's otherwise generalized and sweeping analysis is more careful
Sympathy with Feis or Barnet, like sympathy with the Cold War diplomats (US, Soviet) is greatly dependent upon the reader's own political orientation. Thomas Lask, a commentator for The New York Times, noted that "those who feel the American foreign policy since the end of WWII, especially as it relates to Vietnam, is a signal success will not much enjoy Richard Barnet's critical investigation of who makes the policy and how it is made." Reviews of Roots of War vary from the condescendingly critical review by Warren F. Kimbll conservative Catholic magazine America to that of the conspicuously positive critic in the more liberal The Nation. The Nation raves, "one has come to expect important books of Richard Barnet. This time he has surpassed himself." Kimbll finds that, in Roots of War, "often facts which diminish his [Barnet's] arguments and the book is "more of a plea than a history" (Kimball, 537).

The less committed reviews of Roots of War remain fairly objective and professionally detached from Barnet's work. These, however, consistently take Barnet to task for being heavy on criticism of those who exercise power and weak on solutions which would pro use of power. According to E. Berkley Thomas, in the Saturday Review, "unfor [Barnet's] apocalyptic formulas for the future do not possess the cogency of his critiques of the past." The gene the aged and at that time ailing Feis provided for less sordid reviews. The gene From Trust to Terror is summed up in The New York Times by Richard R. Lin1 states that "Mr. Feis does little more than the admittedly considerable job of n from trust to terror".

The common criticism issued against Barnet, that of lacking a positive approach gap of the Cold War, is also a problem to be found in From Trust to Terror. Feis bewildered as to the future of the Cold War and leaves those problems which l generation had seen growing to the next generation to solve. He closes by add the US and the USSR that together "we must turn over the tale to the philosoph since-born." (Feis, 412). He asks rhetorically, "will they resign themselves? Or rebel against the past and reform?" (Feis, 412). Barnet, in his conclusion, urges solutions as a reduction of the national security bureaucracy, a lessening of the growth in US business circles and a greater participation of the public in the for policy. Barnet concludes that "we can have a chance for a generation of peace American people demand it and are prepared to build a society rooted in the (Barnet, 341).

How this is to be accomplished he does not say, but perhaps that is the topic f That neither Feis nor Barnet can offer a concise plan for deescalating the Cold Even thirty years after the end of WWII and the onset of the Cold War, the deb US over whether or not the de- escalation of the Cold War should even be a go policy. After listening to President Ronald Reagan address to the American pe congressional aid for the CIA-backed Contras fighting the Sandinista Gover one is reminded of President Truman's calling for aid for the embattled Gr Though the specifics are different, the scenario is quite similar. The message d American public is the same - "monolithic" Communism is assaulting the "fre War rages today and we are no closer to peaceful coexistence with the Soviet l were thirty years ago.

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