

A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon

Neil Sheehan. New York: Random House, 2009. 534 pp., index.

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If the American public was polled to identify the iconic milestones of the Cold War, the 18 August 1960 launch of the US rocket Discoverer XIV probably would not make the list. The launch was a spectacular visual show, but so were most launches of the time. Only a few were in position to appreciate the significance of that particular launch. The rocket was a Thor intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM), a product of the US Air Research and Development Command under the direction of Air Force General Bernard Schriever. Behind the IRBM and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) programs was achievement of a nuclear strike capability superior to the Soviet Union's. However, Discoverer XIV was not armed with a warhead; it carried a camera.

What shot into space that day was the first deployment of the CIA's CORONA satellite, which in that one mission obtained more overhead images of the Soviet Union than were acquired from all the 24 U-2 flights over Russia that had taken place until then. Intelligence from the CORONA program would settle the question of the so-called missile gap and inform US policymakers of Soviet missile development for a decade thereafter. Ironically, today we can look back and measure the successes of the IRBM and ICBM programs with considerations that do not include their primary function, the delivery of weapons. Among their contributions to keeping the peace was their use in carrying up to space the instruments that gathered the sort of intelligence whose absence had been behind the urgency of their development.

In *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War* Neil Sheehan tells the story of the US missile arsenal in a way that intends to "convey the essence of the Cold War and the Soviet-American arms race through the human story of the men caught up in [it]" (481). Sheehan paints a rather "American" portrait of the participants, who often had immigrant or otherwise humble backgrounds (including the German-born Schriever) and many of whom were educated in West-coast university technology programs. This American story also reveals the brazenness and savvy behavior of junior officers, such as Schriever and the "Junior Indians," so called because they sat in the seats around the side of the room while their superiors were at the table. Schriever and the Junior Indians showed astute knowledge of the system as part of a 1948 effort to separate their R&D from the Air Force's massive Air Material Command (AMC), gaining flexibility and a degree of auton-

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omy for their work. Also part of this American story is the postwar technological and commercial production boom in the public and private sectors.

Sheehan succeeds in telling a human story, although mainly in the professional lives of the characters. Sheehan doesn't explain if this was his preference or an indication that these men did not have time for their families, but this reader came away sensing the latter was the case. And oddly, among the other personalities such as Air Force General Henry "Hap" Arnold, AMC's Curtis Lemay, and lesser-known scientists and junior officers, Schriever's human side seems flat in comparison. Readers of Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (1988) should not expect the dynamism and contradictions that made John Paul Vann a memorable biographic subject. In this case the narrative is driven not by Schriever as an enigma but by Schriever as an exemplar of the anxieties and gambits of a Cold War drama.

Sheehan deals with intelligence in two ways. First, he discusses some of the early atomic espionage cases against the United States. Although these cases are mostly well-known to Cold War scholars, Sheehan's extensive use of interviews led to some fresh insights. One example is revelation of the family circumstances of Theodore Hall, a Soviet spy in Los Alamos. Hall's brother, Air Force Col. Edward Hall, was a colleague of Schriever's and a recurring figure in the book and apparently was unaware of Theodore's spying until the declassified VENONA intercepts of Russian communications were revealed in 1996.

Second, Sheehan highlights the deliberate use of intelligence in justifying ambitious and expensive weapons programs. Fear and lack of hard evidence on Soviet missile progress before the mid-1950s led the United States to operate in urgency against an opponent presumed to be ahead in the race. Yet for years the Intelligence Community had little evidence of what the Soviets were actually doing. There was the unscrupulous as well. In one case an Air Force colonel faked an intelligence report on Soviet rocketry to ward off a budget cut. In another case, a senior officer made assertions about a Soviet ICBM program that, apparently unknown to him, U-2 imagery refuted.

Sheehan recounts Schriever's encounter, after a White House meeting, with Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles and Vice President Richard Nixon. Schriever's team had just finished giving President Eisenhower a briefing in which, in order to win presidential support for a missile program, it had depicted aggressive Soviet ICBM development efforts. After the presentation, Dulles, in the presence of Nixon, subjected Schriever's team to what one of the Air Force attendees called "cops and robbers questions" on the intelligence basis for their briefing. The team struggled to provide answers because their evidence on the Soviet ICBM program was admittedly thin.

Observers of the defense and intelligence contracting businesses will see roots of now-familiar realities. One is the imperfectly aligned interest between a contractor's financial bottom line and the needs of national service. Schriever illustrates what he calls greedy and persistent private-industry proposals during the period for a five-engine, 220-ton ICBM, which practically the entire scientific and engineering community insisted was not feasible. (The Atlas ICBM weighs in at

120 tons and the Minuteman ICBM at 32.5 tons.) Sheehan also describes the growth in those times of reliance on contractors—he notes the ubiquity even then of nondescript buildings with vague indications of what tenants might be inside, so common now around Washington and defense/aerospace facilities country-wide. Insiders will recognize mild resentments sometimes present in a US military or intelligence contractor-client relationship, such as whether a government agency owns programs whose “actual work,” as certain participants will say, is done by contractors. Competition among government offices for budgets and priority will also sound familiar.

Where might this book fit into the literature of the Cold War? If most Cold War histories can be seen as history from the top down, and if the late physicist and Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman can look at “Los Alamos from Below,” then perhaps Sheehan’s book can be taken as Cold War history from the middle outward. It is a well-researched and innovative exploration of the arms race through the work of a lesser-known pioneer and thus a fresh addition to the literature.



