

The X-Rated Weapon

Sam Cohen: *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb: The Inventor of the Bomb Speaks Out*; William Morrow; New York.

by Will Morrisey

“This book marks the first time a ‘nuclear hawk’ has defected from the American nuclear establishment,” exclaims the dust jacket. One expects another “What have I done?” lament, guaranteed to make its author a celebrity on the church and college lecture circuit. Partisans of disarmament will surely buy it, hoping to confirm their prejudices. If so, I hope they read it. For Sam Cohen (who worked at Los Alamos during World War II, then became a specialist in radiological warfare, inventing the neutron warhead during the late 1950’s) refuses to see himself as a Dr. Frankenstein:

Speaking candidly and truthfully, I will say that I’ve never had any moral qualms or feelings of guilt about my pursuits in this military field. I have always believed that the United States must have strong and effective military forces—especially nuclear forces.

His patience with dovish colleagues is limited: “many respected scientists . . . know better intellectually but are emotionally helpless to look objectively at issues involving the military use of nuclear radiation.” Or, still more bluntly,

[T]here has been one thing that particularly impressed—better still, depressed—me about most renowned American scientists. This is their ability to be impeccably careful and responsible when working in their fields of specialization (if they’re not, their colleagues will catch them and even punish them) but their sloppiness and irresponsibility when giving their scientific opinion on nuclear weapons when they have

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an ideological bias against them, because they know that their colleagues, who share their bias, don’t give a damn when they do.

Among these are scientists prominent in the nuclear-freeze campaign: the late Dr. George Kistiakowsky, Eisenhower’s science adviser, whose “strong ideological conviction that a nuclear test ban was imperative” led him to support the first such ban (1958), abrogated by the Soviets three years later; Dr. Jerome Weisner of MIT, who campaigned vigorously for John Kennedy and evidently has maintained his partisan allegiance; and Nobelist Hans Bethe, who claimed, with Oppenheimer, that the hydrogen bomb could not be built. Cohen dispels the popular illusion that scientists speak objectively when they engage in politics.

Cohen divides his book into two sections. The first four chapters contain his account of the neutron warhead’s invention and the controversies it provoked. The Pentagon had wanted nuclear warheads that could generate a powerful blast, intense heat, and radiation—in that order. Cohen wanted to reverse that priority, for two purposes: to develop a warhead whose high radioactivity would cause the explosive in an incoming nu-



clear warhead to decompose (e.g., the Sprint anti-ICBM missile which resulted “many years later”); to develop a short-range missile warhead whose intense but short-lived radiation would make it “the first battlefield weapon . . . in history [that] would allow a guaranteed, highly effective defense against an invading army without producing wholesale physical destruction of the country being invaded.”

The Pentagon, particularly the Navy, championed the neutron warhead from 1959 to 1961, not so much because it cared about the weapon itself but because it wanted to end the Eisenhower/Khrushchev nuclear test ban. Then as today, the Soviets denounced neutron technology, with Khrushchev averring, “This is the morality of monsters!” Similar protestations from the community of conscience recurred until September 1, 1961, when the Politburo announced a unilateral end to the ban, followed by “the most massive series of tests the world has ever seen.” Having arranged their experiments in advance, the Soviets briefly gained a lead in nuclear-weapons technology. (Cohen has the good manners not to insist that readers associate this tactic with Mr. Andropov’s recommended “freeze.”) After this debacle, the Pentagon no longer needed the neutron warhead as a weapon in bureaucratic warfare; interest in it disappeared until the mid-1970’s. By then, the policy of détente had yielded a Soviet advantage in European ground troops so striking that even President Jimmy Carter noticed it. He planned the neutron warhead’s production and deployment, then reneged after Brezhnev, Senator Mark O. Hatfield, and other peace-loving souls inveighed against the “capitalist bomb” that “destroys people but not property.” Cohen remarks:

The problem is that any agreement, tacit or explicit, to effect a mutual forswearing of N-bomb production is nonsense. There is no conceivable

way, by means of national technical verification, that such an agreement can be monitored.

Seismic sensors can detect the underground testing of warheads that explode by nuclear fission; they cannot detect the much smaller explosions produced by nuclear fusion in neutron warheads. Once again, this has obvious implications for any nuclear-arms treaty.

President Reagan ordered the production of neutron warheads, but deferred their deployment in Europe until land-based intermediate-range missiles (Pershing II's and ground-launched cruise missiles) are in place. Impatient with international diplomacy, Cohen argues that a weapon good enough to produce is good enough to deploy.

The book's last five chapters consist of polemics on the military, ethical, and political problems associated with Cohen's invention. He quickly disposes of opponents regarded as experts by the news media. To Herbert Scoville, Jr., one of the most-quoted freeze personalities who claims that irradiated soldiers will fight harder, Cohen asserts that the soldiers targeted will quickly become incapacitated, that by asking us to fear the possible behavior of soldiers on the periphery of the explosion Scoville "divert[s] the targeting issue to troops that aren't targeted." To Dr. Kistiakowsky, who claimed that the Soviets could shield their tank crews against radiation, Cohen agrees that indeed one can, "provided that you're willing to incapacitate the tank" by overloading it with heavy armor. To Stanford physicist Sidney Drell, who claims that a neutron warhead explosion would make the irradiated area "uninhabitable for long periods of time," Cohen replies that "This is patently false," that calculations show radiation declining to a safe level in a few hours. To United States Senator H. John Heinz, who claims that the neutron warhead is "literally dehumanizing," Cohen responds that "Speaking for myself, if I were going to be wounded on the field of battle, I'd far

rather be dosed by radiation than burned by napalm, or crushed by blast concussion, or have my body torn up by a land mine or a fragmentation bomb."

These arguments are not just persuasive, they are simple. Orwell argued that intellectuals think badly about war because they imagine suffering so vividly that their fear overturns their intellect. I am convinced that there is another problem: even when intellectuals master their fear, the basic simplicity of warfare befuddles them. It is too unsubtle for them to grasp, all this business of push coming to shove. They complicate the issues beyond recognition, then take professional soldiers for bloody-minded dolts. Cohen, no professional soldier, is at his best when he thinks like one.

But at his worst, Cohen essays geopolitical strategy. His advertised defection from "the American nuclear establishment" consists merely of an argument for isolationism. In a war with the Soviets, he believes, Europe and the Middle East would cost us more to defend than they are worth. Thus he suggests we pull our troops out and use the money saved to rebuild our nuclear arsenal and strengthen our civil defense. These sentiments

are hardly a serious policy for a commercial republic confronting totalitarianism. Soviet domination of Europe and the Middle East would, of course, give them control of two of our principal markets. Even in its military aspect, Cohen's isolationism fails. He calls defending Europe impossible because the Soviets will try to destroy NATO's nuclear defenses, including neutron warheads, before they march. But the Soviets have warned that any NATO warheads hitting Soviet territory—and some surely would—will bring retaliation against the United States itself. If they mean that, they recognize that a European war would probably cause global war. They will not imagine they can win that war unless Western pacifists have their way. Nuclear weapons in Western Europe will tie America to its allies more firmly than at any time in 20 years. Europeans who fear this tie, who feel more threatened by our weapons and our policy than by Soviet weapons and policy, may yet decide to see more clearly. Cohen says they won't, a dubious assertion. One thing seems evident: it would be a bad mistake to insure defeat by giving up too soon. □

In the Mail

Under Scorpio by Thomas G. Bergin; Solaris Press; Rochester, MI. Poems written as poems were once written—before greeting cards and newspaper squibs became the standards.

The Games They Played: Sports in American History, 1865-1980 by Douglas A. Noverr and Lawrence E. Ziewacz; Nelson-Hall; Chicago. Not only can this book be used to win bar bets, but it's also interesting, as lists of statistics aren't.

A Late Friendship: The Letters of Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Wm. B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI. One fears what will happen if the Bell System's campaign promoting the use of telephones as a way of keeping in touch succeeds, particularly in light of these delicate missives.

Publius: Annual Review of American Federalism: 1981 edited by Stephen L. Schecter; University Press of America/Center for the Study of Federalism; Washington, DC. A study of the effects of the sometimes-bitter medicine: the Reagan Administration's "New Federalism" and the states.

Carter Braxton, Virginia Signer: A Conservative in Revolt by Alonzo Thomas Dill; University Press of America; Washington, DC. Not well known, but nonetheless interesting: he was accused of being a pirate; he wasn't certain about cutting the ties with Great Britain; he ultimately signed the Declaration of Independence.

Foppish Fiction

Ed McClanahan: *The Natural Man*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

Todd McEwen: *Fisher's Hornpipe*; Harper & Row; New York.

Kelly Cherry: *In the Wink of an Eye*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.

by Robert F. Geary

What is wrong with contemporary fiction? A reading of this trio of comic novels brings to mind a couple of the many diagnoses. Some years back Lionel Trilling warned that political abstractions could cut the imagination off from the rich complexities of life—from a vision of the mixed nature of human motivation and the often ironical, even tragic, nature of consequences. More recently, a portion of blame has fallen upon the “creative writing” industry, from college courses to writers’ workshops wherein successful names inculcate the familiar subjects, attitudes, and recipes to worshipful apprentices. As a result, the smug outlook on the world prevalent in academia can come to generate fiction that is increasingly imitative, infatuated with technique for its own sake, and marked by a narrow, thin range of characters and pseudosights. Such fiction might find itself well received by the self-consciously literary portion of the reading public, many of whom appear to be withdrawing ever further into a dream world where, for instance, wishing loudly for “peace” will make peace a reality.

Certainly something (though not everything) is wrong with current fiction, at least if we can judge from the evidence of these three slender novels, each of which bids for a few hours of a reader’s time and, with prices between 11 and 16 dollars, more than a little of

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his money. One book is a successful comedy, another an engaging but mixed effort, a third worthless. On balance, though, one can see why many less sophisticated readers look to the paperback racks for amusement if not edification: none of these works manages to engage contemporary reality in a genuinely convincing fashion—and two of them decidedly try.

Ed McClanahan’s *The Natural Man* is by far the best of the group. Perhaps by setting the novel sufficiently far in the past—in tiny Needmore, Kentucky, after World War II—McClanahan can escape doctrinaire poses and capture a richness about people and place in a genuinely funny book about the half year in the life of Harry Eastep when, turning 16, he achieved manhood, though not in the way he expected. In finely turned, lucid, and economical prose, McClanahan deals lightly but keenly with adolescence, the need for roots, the importance of continuity, and, lastly, the meaning of adulthood. For a first novel, *The Natural Man* has a sureness about its prose and characterization that lets the author gracefully reveal surprising depths in the most comical of characters without ever violating their fictional consistency or the book’s tone. The reader, like young Harry Eastep, ends the summer’s string of raucous teenage pranks quietly astonished to find that an unexpected wisdom has come to him amid the high jinks.

The agent of Harry’s coming of age is the formidable “Monk” McHorning who arrives in sleepy Needmore one summer afternoon possessed only of a battered suitcase, a worse reputation, and extensive endowments of brute strength and low cunning. An “orphan boy,” as the locals say, McHorning has been adopted by the high school basketball coach for the simple, venal purpose of ending the Burdock County Bulldogs’ years of defeats by every team except a school for the deaf. Six-five and pathologically ferocious, McHorning seems

the “natural man” to change all that. And with his Camels, condoms, and endless ribald jokes, he appears equally suited to guide young Harry out of unwanted virginity and, in time, out of hickish Needmore (the limitations of which Harry’s early years in comparatively cosmopolitan Dayton, Ohio, have made clear). Inspired by lust and McHorning, Harry plans the seduction of the daughter of the owner of the movie house where he works. Events seem to fall in with his designs when one Philander C. Rexroat, Doctor of Sexuality (a man before his time!) books the theater for a one-night crusade on behalf, allegedly, of sexual hygiene. Harry, with his newly acquired driver’s permit, discerns his chance to take advantage of the presumably aroused hefty young woman and slip away with her during the second showing of the doctor’s “educational” film.

The night of the gin-besotted Doctor’s pathetic and hilarious presentation, Harry does indeed become a man. But suddenly we find ourselves asking what it means, after all, to become a man, to be an adult. What, really, is a natural man? “Art is man’s nature,” said Edmund Burke two centuries ago in rebuke of the levelers, constitution-mongers, and pseudoprimitives who would destroy the civilizing processes in quest of an illusory paradise of social and instinctual democracy. McClanahan’s novel, in its own way, embodies this insight. Monk McHorning’s glandular prowess is and is not what it means to be a natural man. Human nature is physical and instinctual in part (and the book enjoys that dimension). But it is also more. To establish continuities with the past (in the form of bonds with one’s elders), to learn to love a particular place and people (the “little platoon” of which Burke spoke) as Harry learns to love Needmore, and to develop and live by a code of decency—these also are natural, not in the sense that they are instinctual givens but in the sense that to strive for