

Defense Spending: The Dodos and the Platypuses

by Henry Fairlie

There can be no doubt that the United States is immensely strong, and we may be thankful for the fact. Yet there is cause for uneasiness: a feeling—perhaps no more than an inkling—that ten years from now it will be found to have been incalculably weakened.

The country will be weaker because its will has been weakened, in a specific way and for a specific reason: the public opinion of the country, and particularly its informed opinion, is today taking no real interest in defense policy. Unaware of how the country can act effectively, opinion will increasingly assume that it cannot act at all.

One can already sense this in the public debate on any of the danger

areas of the world. The public—including those in Congress and in the press whose duty it is to instruct it—simply is not interested in what kinds of military power the country is capable of using and whose use *ought to be anticipated*. Events in the Middle East or in southern Africa, in the eastern Mediterranean or in the Iberian peninsula, are discussed as if the exercise of any military power by the United States, and not merely total nuclear war, is now “unthinkable.” The public just does not know the various ways in which the country could act effectively or even safely.

If war is, as Clausewitz put it, “not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means,” then the ultimate use of those other means is not something that the American

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people are today being invited to contemplate. It is in this way that the will of the country may be so weakened that its real military strength is in fact unusable, simply because the people do not know how that strength may be applied at different levels, and in different degrees.

One of the insights of J. M. Keynes was into the manner in which informed opinion is the instructor and even the creator of public opinion; and he pointed out that there is a time-lag before the informed opinion of the country is translated into its public opinion. That is why the next ten years seem to me to be so full of danger. The indifference of informed opinion to defense policy—when it is not actually hostile to the “defense establishment”—can breed by the 1980s a public opinion that is so unaware of the real available strength of the country that its strength will be

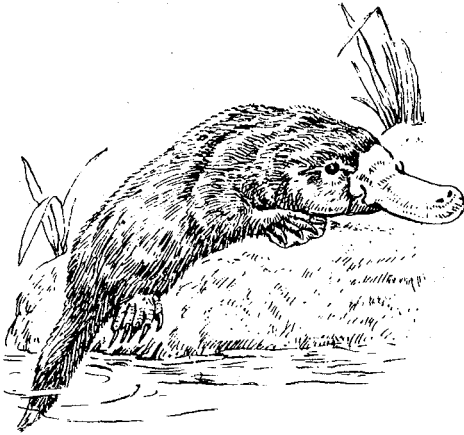
paralyzed.

Lord Wavell, when he was Viceroy of India, wrote to George VI saying that Britain had the power to hold India, but that he did not think that it was possible to do so because the “will at the centre” had gone. There were many factors that had contributed to the erosion of that will in Britain, which do not apply today to America. The weakening of that will in America will be the result of ignorance: an ignorance that is already breeding in the public mind a belief that there is no effective application of military power that can be made which will not lead to total nuclear war or another Vietnam disaster.

My argument may therefore be regarded as an “Essay in Criticism.” The debate about the defense policy of the United States needs to be reinvigorated. Since its military

strength is a political instrument, and its exercise is the ultimate political act of any nation, we ought not to be surprised that the cutting edge which the debate so urgently needs will carry us, at least at first, into the realms of political philosophy. National defense is to a vital extent the ultimate concern of any political thought.

Those whom in this context we usually label as “conservatives,” I intend to call Dodos; and those whom



we usually label as “liberals,” I intend to call Platypuses. Insofar as there is today any public debate about defense, it is normally only from the Dodos and the Platypuses that we hear, and both their positions are untenable.

Consider the Dodo: with its short legs, its huge beak, its disproportionately large body, which could not be lifted from the ground by its flightless wings, and its ruff-like tail of curly feathers with no perceptible function. It is a suitable emblem of a “defense establishment” that may become top-heavy and of those who by their indiscriminate support of every request of the Defense Department encourage this top-heaviness. In particular, it is a suitable emblem of some of the members of the two Armed Services Committees. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the Dodos are less open to criticism than the Platy-

puses. The Dodos are performing a function that is recognizable and legitimate: that of sustaining the “defense establishment” of the country against the many critics who always abound in any democracy in peacetime.

The First Social Service

Consider then the Platypus: a mammal that does not give birth to live offspring but lays eggs with thin shells; its bill lacking teeth, it feeds off worms and water insects; with claws that are hollow, it burrows into river banks for protection. It is a suitable emblem of those who demand an overall reduction of the Defense Department’s weaponry as automatically as the Dodos support increases.

It is the Platypuses who are today most at fault. By simply calling for an overall reduction in the defense budget, they throw the victory again and again to the Dodos: for if it is offered no other choices, any nation will sensibly prefer to waste money on defense rather than risk its own safety. In their present mood, the Platypuses will not recognize that national defense is—and will always be perceived to be—*the first of the social services*; and since the practicality of every other social service depends on its success, it cannot be criticized simply on the grounds of economy.

Platypuses are today faddishly distrustful of strong and extensive government. In their zealotry, the most obvious target is the annual budget of the Department of Defense. But they need to remember that, from John Locke on, the advocates of minimal government have always insisted that one of the legitimate functions of even the least extensive government is national defense. They should heed Locke if they wish to know why Lockheed will always survive: in a government whose activity is reduced, the priority that is given to defense will in fact be reinforced.

This is abundantly clear in con-

temporary politics. The most extreme advocates of minimal government, such as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, are also the fiercest supporters of all the claims of national defense, and philosophically their position is sound, for national defense is the irreducible obligation of even weak governments. It is the control of the "defense establishment" by a strong government, whose activities in other fields will force the claims of national defense into a position of strenuous competition for the available resources, which ought to be the concern of intelligent Platypuses. Strong central government is the only effective rival of the "military-industrial complex."

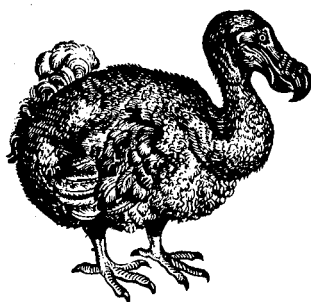
But at this crucial level of the argument, the Dodos are also intransigent. They will not face the fact that, given the cost and the complication of the weapons that are now required, the "defense establishment" has today become the most relentless instigator and nourisher of a socialized economy in the country. The defense industries are, in effect, nationalized industries, which happen to be allowed to make profits for their shareholders. Dodos who inveigh against the "creeping socialism" in America ought to be booing most vigorously at Boeing. Curiously, they never do.

A Debate of Acronyms

It is partly because both the Dodos and the Platypuses conduct the debate about national defense from grounds that are philosophically untenable that this debate is today so casual and, in the end, meaningless. The public is often shrewder than is allowed. It senses when a debate is unreal and so loses interest. It knows well that both the automatic demands of the Platypuses for a reduction in the overall size of the defense budget and the automatic support of the Dodos are unreal; and so it grows indifferent and ignorant, until the time may soon come when it simply will not be able to contemplate the application of the

country's military strength in situations that demand it.

If the chosen grounds of the Dodos and the Platypuses are philosophically untenable, the "pragmatists" have no ground at all. To approach the debate as "pragmatists"—I use the term merely as it was vulgarly used in the Kennedy years—is to throw the argument back to the "experts" in the Department of Defense and the rest of the "defense establishment." It is to admit that the intelligent and even the informed layman is hardly equipped



to judge the relative efficiency of one sophisticated weapon or another. It is to make the debate one of acronyms, so that the public mind is in the end only stupefied by MARVs and MIRVs, by SLBMs and SRAMs. It is to remove the debate about national defense from the realm of political judgment.

Moreover, it means also that the "pragmatic" Platypuses, for all the initial boldness of their demands to reduce the overall size of the defense budget, are in fact confined to criticizing individual weapons or defense systems *after* these have already been proved inefficient or wasteful. It is in the nature of the duckbill Platypus that it nibbles; and although there is always some publicity to be had from "exposing" the scandal of some useless weapon that has cost billions to produce, this kind of criticism is usually too late, and meanwhile some other weapon, at least as useless and even more costly, is in the works.

The public mind and political judgment of the country need to be brought to bear much earlier, and in a

different way: the procurement of weapons should be decided at the same time that the military objectives are defined.

With all its intelligence and thoroughness, the last annual report of James R. Schlesinger is skimpy in its outlines of the objectives that the Defense budget is intended to reach. Given the skimpiness of these definitions, there is no sensible way in which the informed citizen can ask: What is meant to be the function of this weapon, and how is it to be used, against what enemy? Could it not be performed by some other weapon that already exists or is less costly?

The Smell of Rand

It is only in such terms that the debate can be effective and be made comprehensible to the public mind. It is only in such terms that the public mind can be prepared to anticipate the effective use of the military strength of the country in a situation that demands it. It is only in such terms that the public mind can hope to ask intelligently: What weapons that are being developed are not needed, and what weapons that are needed are not being developed; is there a "Spitfire" or a "Hurricane" that is being overlooked?

For example, on the vital question of maintaining a strategic nuclear balance, the annual Defense Department report slips away—it is almost as casual as that—from the doctrine of "sufficiency" to one of "parity." *Sufficiency* was defined by Richard Nixon as "the maintenance of forces adequate to prevent us or our allies from being coerced." Parity or "essential equivalence" is defined in the annual report in terms that are quite different: "...we cannot allow asymmetries to develop in throw-weight, accuracy, yield-to-weight ratio, reliability and other such factors... it would be a mistake to allow any major asymmetry to develop between the United States and the Soviet Union in the basic technologi-

cal and other factors that shape force effectiveness."

In short, one of the most fundamental military objectives of the United States seems to have been redefined—without any public debate worth the name—to suggest that America must now deploy intercontinental strategic systems in the total numbers that are authorized under the Vladivostock agreement, and that it must therefore match—equal—the capabilities of the Soviet Union, weapon by weapon, throw-weight by throw-weight, lest an "asymmetry" might develop.

The word "asymmetry," which has all the smell of the Rand Corporation about it, conceals a whole range of assumptions: that the United States must reach the force levels authorized by the Vladivostock agreement, even if its present force levels are sufficient; that there is some rational way of determining when "essential equivalence" has been reached, and so further new deployments are unnecessary; and that it is possible to measure the effectiveness of one system—say, bombers—against that of another system—say, ICBMs.

Beginning at the End

Only if the fundamental assumption, that sufficiency must be replaced by parity, is clearly debated is it possible then to turn one's attention to the actual proposals for "force modernization and improvement" in the annual report. These include continued improvements in the Minuteman III missiles, silo up-grading, advanced ICBM technology, development of advanced ballistic re-entry systems, B-52 modifications, conversion of Poseidon configuration and the procurement of Poseidon missiles; *plus* the development of new systems, such as the B-1 bomber and the Trident submarines and missiles; *plus* the development of other weapons and systems, such as short-range attack missiles, advanced cargo/tanker aircraft, remotely piloted vehicles

(RPV). And that does not exhaust the list.

The emblem of the top-heavy Dodo begins to seem appropriate, and the Dodos will of course give their overall approval to so over-plumed a bird, while the Platypuses will perhaps nibble at one system here, or one weapon there.

But the point from which the debate should be raging in the public mind, not least in an election year, is whether it is a sensible military objective for the United States to allow its procurement and development of systems and weapons to be dictated by the Soviet Union, for that is really what the doctrine of "essential equivalence" and "asymmetry" ultimately means: that the decisions of the Pentagon will be made in the Kremlin.

The point I am hammering at is that the Platypuses begin at the end of this sequence of argument. They begin by questioning some (obvious or apparent) wastefulness in systems or weapons, while the basic military objectives are by and large unexamined, and so become the ground from which both the Department of Defense and the Dodos who are its defenders—the very letters in the emblem are appropriate—can justify every expenditure. It is after all a political decision—as a Bismarck as well as a Clausewitz would have understood it—to allow the deployment of one's national defense to be dictated by the anticipated enemy.

Without some clearer statement of the military objectives, how can the public mind debate such questions as: the emphasis that is presently given to antisubmarine warfare by the Navy; the role of the expensive and vulnerable aircraft carriers and indeed of all surface ships; the role of the amphibious forces which are relatively expensive and whose military usefulness is limited—and so one could continue through every part of the defense budget.

If, for example, a conventional war in Europe would be so short that it would not be necessary to keep open

the sea lanes, if in fact it can be reasonably shown that no effort to keep them open would be likely to succeed, then the function and cost of the entire surface fleet of the United States Navy is open to critical examination. But once again the answers depend on the strategic assumptions that are being made.

Skeptical But Friendly

Perhaps it will now be seen why I began by suggesting that the will of the United States may be incalculably weakened in the next ten years by ignorance more than by any other factor. The public mind of the country—by which I mean its "informed" opinion in fruitful tension with its "public" opinion—is simply in no position to know how its forces may be used most effectively, or even to know (this is the danger) that it has the forces by which it may effectively exert its strength in situations when it is necessary, and in ways which will not lead to disaster.

The United States has never given its armed forces the social prestige which they used to have in European countries. Perhaps the Marines in the past, and the Strategic Air Command in the first 15 years after World War II, had something of the status of elite forces. But generally the armed forces fight at home against a severe public and especially intellectual indifference and distrust; and even hostility.

Up to a point, that is healthy. But it also leaves the armed forces, on the one hand, without the benefit of intelligent criticism that is skeptical but friendly, and it leaves the public, on the other hand, with much too little understanding of the effective military strength which is available to the country in situations of varying danger and different requirements. If this mutual indifference, of the armed forces and the public mind to each other, is not corrected, the ability of the United States to secure its interests and meet its responsibilities will steadily and quickly evaporate. ■

The Honey and the Source: Reporters and Their Status Taboo

by Tom Bethell

The response to Barney Collier's book, *Hope and Fear In Washington (The Early Seventies): The Story of the Washington Press Corps*, has been so immoderately hostile all round that you know he must have put his finger on an exposed nerve. It can't just be a bad book that everyone is so upset about; bad books are published every day of the year, and if they are as bad as this one is supposed to be, they are ignored. Collier's book, by contrast, has been hissed at venomously for months.

One's immediate suspicion is that there must be some Hidden Meaning here. I have now read the book and read the reviews, turned back rather puzzled to the book, glanced over the reviews again, and concluded that, yes, there is indeed an Interesting Question worth examining. En route we will encounter a number of Burning Issues.

The story so far: In 1973 Barnard Law Collier, a journalist formerly with

the New York *Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*, but by then a free-lance writer (he left the *Times* under circumstances he does not precisely elucidate, but which seem to have had something to do with an over-stuffed expense account; the book includes an amusing description of Foreign Editor Seymour Topping's arrival in Buenos Aires to talk to Collier about "expense accounts that make people laugh"), decided to write about the Washington press corps. He already knew most of the people he was going to write about, and so he called them up, chatted on the phone, had lunch, dropped by their offices. The first inkling anyone had of what was to come was a piece in *[More]*, the journalism review, about Sander Vanocur, formerly a correspondent for NBC-TV, but by then down on his luck and looking for a job. Vanocur and Collier had lunch at Jean-Pierre's, one of Washington's better restaurants:

Sander entered Jean-Pierre's in an obvious hustle, waving a newspaper in one hand, while the other patted the maitre d's

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