

acknowledge that “the old idea of government-mandated mingling” has been one of the great routes to integration—as for instance, in the volunteer career-track army. But a few suggestions on how to renew this crucial federal role would have made this book a far more useful addition to the current debate on race.

Still, *Someone Else's House* is a powerful reminder

of what went wrong in the struggle for racial equality, and an inspiring call to put it right. It will draw fire from those who believe a white woman must not speak openly about the flaws of black culture or leadership. But it's refreshing to see someone flout this liberal shibboleth, and it's impossible to question the civic spirit with which she does it. ●

Red Army Blues

The untold story of the Russian Army's disintegration

By Ralph Peters

The *Collapse of the Soviet Military* is a marvelous tombstone of a book. Set over the grave not only of the Soviet military, but of the Soviet empire, it is about much more than missiles and tanks. Here, the failure of a system of government is examined through a military prism, and it is high drama.

This is an unexpectedly interesting and readable book, not least because the author, William E. Odom, is a former general who headed Army intelligence and then directed the National Security Agency. He now keeps a desk at the Hudson Institute. Each of these jobs should have prevented him from writing such an incisive, vital book: Generals, terrified of false steps, do not say anything of interest; NSA believes that anything not highly classified is worthless; and it is a code among think tanks, right or left, that originality of thought and lucidity of language are for amateurs. A career Russia specialist, Odom has risen above his environment to crown his career with a book that is true in detail, clear in expression—and worthwhile.

The Soviet Union was a state based upon economic theory in which no one understood economics. Its early successes were based upon the clarity of its needs, upon bullying, and upon a willingness to waste massively in order to achieve demonstrably. Initially, with Russia and its ravaged conquests stripped to the

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET MILITARY

By William E. Odom
Yale University Press,
\$35.00

bone by war and civil war, it did not require sophisticated analysis to determine the new state's needs—it needed everything. Massive projects lent themselves to multi-year planning. In the 1930s, the U.S.S.R. looked pretty impressive to the outsider who was not too

inquisitive, and even during our Eisenhower years, with the United States undertaking the greatest planned infrastructure project in our history, the Soviet Union appeared dangerously competitive.

It was not. The U.S.S.R. was a blacksmith shop that built satellites. During the “years of stagnation” under Leonid Brezhnev, the relentless cancer within the Soviet system was its military-industrial bloc. There were some similarities to the U.S. military system—a uniformed leadership often out of touch with strategic reality, and an industrial lobby able to force unneeded and even unwanted weapons upon the military (with the support of co-opted men and agencies within the government). But the differences were more profound. Throughout the Brezhnev years, the Soviet military received a wildly disproportionate share of the state's resources. (As Odom makes clear, it remains impossible to measure exactly how much because the military-industrial cancer had spread so pervasively.) Moscow's military, pledged to defend the Motherland, ended by consuming so much of the state's wealth that it destroyed the system, the economy, and the last social integrity.

The Russian generals resembled their political masters in their conviction—and such it was—that theory ruled the world. One of the many services rendered by Odom's book is its cool insistence on the importance

RALPH PETERS is a former Army officer who specialized in Russian affairs and a best-selling author. A collection of his strategic and military essays, *Fighting For The Future*, will be published in early 1999.

of Marxist-Leninist analysis to the Soviet view of international events. We mirror image and declare, "They didn't really believe that crap—it was all lip service." But, as Odom convincingly demonstrates, it was not. Those old men did believe in the dialectic and in an inevitable victory. Even Gorbachev sought to renovate, to rejuvenate—but not to fundamentally change the system. His tragedy, if such it was, was that he recognized only the symptoms of decay and missed the causes. He and his fellow reformers unleashed demons beyond their control, and the history of the last years of the U.S.S.R. is one of bewildered men rushing to keep up with events that constantly outpaced them.

Odom is hard on Mikhail Gorbachev. He sees him as a limited man, an irredeemable bureaucrat. So much is true. But even the small reforms with which Gorbachev began—and which he hoped would suffice—required courage and great skill at infighting. It need not amaze us that Gorbachev could not see into the future, or that he did not comprehend the full sickness of the Soviet system, or that he failed in his own designs (which appear modest, in retrospect). What should amaze us for decades to come is that Gorbachev—a vain but blessedly rational man—avoided a cataclysm as one of the world's great empires raced to self-destruction. Odom's weakness in this regard is his failure to accept that history, in most cases, is not made by towering heroes, but by the men and women who just happen to be there. We were lucky to have Gorbachev, a capable and industrious bureaucrat, at the top of the Soviet heap in those dangerous years.

And it seems unfair to ridicule the Russians for their inability to grasp and cope with the pace of change in the late '80s. It was no easier for us. In the latter half of 1985, shortly after Gorbachev had come to power, I was an officer-student at the Army's Intelligence Center and School. A pundit who now dines out on his prescience came to Arizona and informed us that Gorbachev was no different from his predecessors, except that he was better dressed. Lacking suitable humility, another officer and I argued with the voice of Washington—instinctively, we sensed that a real change had arrived with Gorbachev. The speaker slapped us down, with all the viciousness of the sedentary man empowered.

The spirit of that "expert" lives on. Well into the 90s leading analysts resisted acknowledging the stunning decline—indeed, the decomposition—of the Soviet military. During the Russian Federation's Chechen bloodbath, Defense Intelligence Agency analysts insisted, against all evidence, that the Russian military could not be that inept, that they had to be sending in the B team (in fact, Moscow deployed the

best it had). In 1998, Washington intelligence officers and defense contractors still insist that Russia is on the comeback trail. We might as well expect a resurgence of the Hittite Empire in our lifetimes.

But what were the mechanics of breakdown below the macro-economic explanations? Corruption was the key, and Odom describes it in a controlled voice that is far more effective than burning prose would have been. He catalogs folly and consequent suffering. At the troop-unit level, shady deals, from black marketing of military fuel to local commanders renting out soldiers for factory or farm work, had become the norm. At the upper echelons, the generals lolled in perks, rejecting any analysis that did not conform to their prejudgments and prejudices (one more similarity to our own flag officers). Officers at all levels grew remote from the troops. Barracks life became savage and even deadly—while the higher-ups drugged themselves with theory. In Afghanistan, soldiers sold weapons to their enemies, and living conditions were so bad that nearly half a million Russian officers and men contracted serious illnesses, ranging from dysentery to cholera.

The great army that withdrew from Eastern Europe withered on the way home. Even before the Soviet dissolution, the families of many officers lived in tents or makeshift shelters. Suicide rates soared. Later, after the events described in this book, the once-mighty Russian military drove to its slaughter in the streets of Grozny with swollen egos and empty medical kits. Generals blithely moved symbols on a map, with no sense of the butchered, charred meat to which their soldiers had been reduced. The only significant achievement of the Russian military in Chechnya was the massacre of tens of thousands of unarmed, often aged, Russian citizens (an event that our State Department, enchanted by dreams of Muscovy redeemed, ignored). And the generals and colonels in Moscow continued to churn out theories.

Those theories were impressive in their prime. As a young officer, I dutifully plodded through Soviet military texts in which five pages of brilliant ideas would be buried in 500 pages of writing so turgid it would be rejected by a university press. Underneath the cant, the Soviets were convincing in print. Gare'yev, Larionov, Lobov—they sounded smart enough to beat us. My own analytical maturation came when I finally grasped the difference between our military systems: The Soviets could articulate stunning battlefield theories, but their brittle forces could not begin to execute them; we Americans were inarticulate, but we had the wherewithal to conduct complex modern warfare. The two systems converged curiously in Operation

Desert Storm, where our war-winning construct, "Air-land Battle," was based upon the writings of Red Army theorists from the 1920s and '30s.

All of Russia is like that—has been and will be—which is why it so confuses young journalists and old believers: The Russians talk a good fight. When you listen to them, in their council chambers or kitchens, it's dazzling at first. They seem like brilliant, superior creatures, spinning visions and quoting poetry. Then you get up and go to work in the morning while they're still snoring off their drunk or vomiting self-pity. The core of the Soviet Union was a people of fabulous imagination and practical fecklessness.

That Russian fecklessness comes through in the climactic portion of Odom's narrative. His portrayal of the comic-opera coup of August 1991 that brought the fleshless Soviet skeleton crashing down into a pile of bones is nothing short of splendid. Odom has used his long experience and superb connections in today's Russia to tell the coup (or non-coup) story from the General Staff's perspective. It is a story of small men waiting to see which way the wind would blow, of profound distrust, fear, and bureaucratic maneuvering, redolent of the human dankness of Dostoevsky and the absurdity of Gogol. The tens of thousands of tanks, the paratroop divisions, the vast Air Force—it all came down to mediocre men in uniform probing timidly for personal advantage. Yeltsin came out on top because he was the only figure willing to risk anything.

In the early '90s I spent the depths of a cold winter in Moscow, working out of the U.S. embassy on

one of those bizarre projects that skittered through the Soviet wake. Thanks to a Russian friend, I was able, frequently, to go backstage at the Bolshoi Theater. The distance between the then-still-sumptuous spectacle for the audience and the filthy, creaking apparatus, the acne-faced, makeup-caked ballerinas, and the grubby pettiness in the labyrinth behind the backdrops seemed immeasurable. For me, that will always be the perfect metaphor for the Soviet Union—a great display for the world, built upon shabbiness, misery, and lies.

In his fine book, Odom has turned Soviet methodology on its head. Where the Moscow bureaucrats sought to turn art into statistics, Odom has taken the Kremlin's dusty statistics and drab texts and produced an artful work. Describing those frantic years when painfully negotiated treaties were overtaken by reality in a matter of months (or even before they were signed), and when hard, sour men were stunned by history into inadvertent acts of virtue, the author has fashioned a history that makes sense of confusion and rings true.

For those interested in Russia's future, knowledge of the Soviet past is essential. Russia's current fiscal debacle is not a novelty—failure runs in the family, and the story of the collapse of the Soviet military is the very paradigm of Russianism. Russia has not been born anew; rather, it is the shocked and crippled victim of a monstrous experiment, and it will remain a bitter convalescent throughout our lifetimes.

A work of integrity and conviction, this book will be equally infuriating to apologists for Moscow and to conservatives desperate for a strategic threat. ●

Lost Solutions

What we've forgotten about what worked in the War on Drugs

By Timothy Noah

IT'S OFTEN THE CASE THAT social problems fail to get solved not because we don't know how but because the country lacks enthusiasm for the most effective solution. The social havoc wrought by the epi-

THE FIX

By Michael Massing
New Press, \$22.50

demic of hard-core drug abuse in the inner city is among the more depressing examples. Since the early 1970s, two lessons from the nation's war on drugs have been clear. The first is that even the most successful law enforcement efforts to block illegal importation, distribution, and consumption of illicit drugs can reduce these activities only temporarily; alternative sources

TIMOTHY NOAH is a contributing editor for *The Washington Monthly*.