

The Review Of Politics

Founded in 1939

Read and Cited Throughout the
World for Over Three Generations

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review: Gonzo Biography

Reviewed Work(s): *The Worlds of Herman Kahn* by Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi

Review by: Ryan J. Barilleaux

Source: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring, 2006), pp. 347-349

Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452790>

Accessed: 01-10-2016 20:24 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics, Cambridge University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Politics*

with liberty. For all his attention to the actions of individuals, there is in DeGroot's history a whiff of the scholar's condescension, which regards men as generally foolish, especially for fancying themselves free. Today, we already know how to clone a human being. The question now is whether or not the technique will be perfected and the practice rendered routine, which is a political question rather than a scientific one. Is it inevitable? If so, then perhaps the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.

–Travis D. Smith

GONZO BIOGRAPHY

Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi: *The Worlds of Herman Kahn* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2005. Pp. 387. \$26.95.)

The single organizing fact of the Cold War was "the bomb." In our present age of unipolarity, globalization, and the clash of civilizations, it is useful to remember that our current complexities exist only because the previous age of stark simplicity has passed into history. The decades from the end of World War II until the fall of Communism were years shaped by a nuclear standoff. The threat of nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union framed the politics and culture of the age. This framing was especially apparent in the 1950s and 1960s, before arms-control agreements lent an air of manageability to nuclear politics.

In the era before arms control, it seemed that the only real question to ask about nuclear war was "When?" and not "What if?" In popular culture, that threat was the subject or point of departure for some of the period's most interesting works of imagination. Science fiction writers made stories of the world after a nuclear holocaust an established sub-category of the genre, and novels such as Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* still make for compelling reading. Political thrillers, today dominated by fighters against terrorism, were born as stories of nuclear crises; Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail Safe*, Fletcher Knebel's *Seven Days in May*, and (of course) Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* presented nuclear confrontation as politics with the highest stakes of all.

Political leaders seemed only slightly less dramatic than characters in the novels and movies that captured popular imagination. John F. Kennedy, bent over his desk during the Cuban Missile Crisis (in George Tames' famous photograph) seemed emblematic of the era. Not only was he movie-star handsome, but he went eyeball-to-eyeball with the Soviets and narrowly avoided the "shooting war" that everyone feared would escalate to mass annihilation. These leaders were surrounded and supported by the theorists, scientists, technocrats, and managers of the national-security apparatus that grew up in response to the nuclear-armed Cold War. Most of these national-security professionals were publicly anonymous, but some rose to national prominence.

One of the most famous—or infamous—of these professionals was Herman Kahn. Almost forgotten today, he was a well-known and controversial theorist of nuclear war. He engaged in and repeatedly made a case for thinking about the conduct of thermonuclear conflict and advocated strategies for surviving it. He made his case to government officials in briefings and to the public in books with thriller-like titles, such as *On Thermonuclear War* and *Thinking the Unthinkable*. First from a position at the RAND Corporation and later from his own organization, the Hudson Institute, Kahn pressed his case for considering the hard facts of nuclear destruction, radiation poisoning, and the need to defend the civilian population against them. It was Kahn who proposed the idea of a Doomsday Machine, parodied in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, as a critique of Eisenhower's policy of massive retaliation and an example of the need for a more complex and subtle nuclear defense strategy.

While Kahn himself may not have been the model for Dr. Strangelove, he certainly possessed a public image that was not too far from Kubrick's mad scientist. The fact that he had an irrepressible sense of humor, even when discussing megadeaths in a nuclear exchange, only added to his reputation as the "real Dr. Strangelove." In an era when serious people wrung their hands over the impending doom, Kahn was quick with a quip and a laugh. He was, as Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi writes in this book, "the only nuclear strategist who might have made a go of standup comedy" (43).

Herman Kahn's fame and infamy have faded. The Cold War is over, and although it is now Al Qaeda rather than Nikita Krushchev we fear wielding weapons of mass destruction, nuclear war no longer seems inevitable. We are more concerned about dirty bombs than first strikes, and the response required by terrorism is more police-like than exercises in nuclear war-gaming. But that does not mean that Herman Kahn should be forgotten or his thinking ignored. He explored mass destruction in a hard-headed way that still might illuminate thinking about problems of security in our own time. He and his work deserve our attention.

Unfortunately, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi's book is not the sort of attention that its subject deserves. *The Worlds of Herman Kahn* is a disappointing and frustrating book. It has many of the negative qualities of much of contemporary professional historiography, and it can be characterized as postmodern in all the negative connotations of that term. Its structure is so nonlinear as to render the book baffling even to readers familiar with Kahn and with American history in the 1950s and 1960s. It employs imaginary anecdotes as evidence. It takes detours into lengthy digressions that are supposedly fraught with meaning but apparently mean something only to initiates who share the author's point of view. (One anecdote about Billy Graham's 1957 crusade in New York City is apparently supposed to say something about American society at the time, but it leaves the reader repeatedly asking "So what?") The book has qualities of television docudramas and cultural commentaries that are meant to entertain more than inform.

Particularly troubling is the author's use of source material. In note 1 to chapter 1, the author states, "Throughout the book, wherever I offer quotes from Kahn's briefing transcripts, in order to transpose his comic delivery onto the page, I have omitted ellipses. While condensed, the transcript quotes do not change the meaning of his

original utterance" (322). The first major anecdote in the book, meant as an example of Kahn's style, is an "imaginary briefing from snippets of actual transcripts and published documents . . ." (322). Like other exercises in postmodern writing, the reader just has to take the author's word for it. The author owes it to the reader to do less editing of original words than Bob Woodward does for his readers.

Finally, the book contains too much self-indulgence on the part of the author. Ghamari-Tabrizi tells her readers too much about herself and her reactions to Kahn and his era. Like Edmund Morris in his unfortunate biography of Ronald Reagan, she even imagines herself in Kahn's home early one morning in 1962. Fortunately, she does not claim an imaginary meeting with Kahn (as Morris did with Reagan). Whether this personalization of the subject is inspired by Morris, postmodernism, or gonzo journalism, it is unhelpful and, ultimately, distracting. A reader opens this book to learn about the subject, not about the author.

Whatever one thinks of Herman Kahn, he certainly deserves better treatment than he receives in this book. Yes, he was a man with a playful intellect, but he employed his playfulness, creativity, and imagination much as G. K. Chesterton did: to explore serious questions. He took on some of the most serious questions of the twentieth century. He deserves a more serious book.

—Ryan J. Barilleaux

INSIDIOUS THREAT, EMERGENT RESPONSE

Maxime Schwartz: *How the Cows Turned Mad*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Pp. 228, \$35.00, hardcover; \$15.90, paper.)

How the Cows Turned Mad describes the centuries-long search for the cause of obscure and always fatal diseases that first apparently afflicted sheep and later were found to attack people as well. This search led to the discovery of prions, the paradoxical proteins that scientists now believe are the cause of mad cow disease, Creutzfeldt Jakob disease (CJD), kuru, and scrapie. Along the way, researchers earned two Nobel Prizes. Author Maxime Schwartz is a molecular biologist, former head of the Institut Pasteur, and director of laboratories for the French agency for food safety, among his other scientific achievements. He is also an exceptionally clear writer.

Schwartz's book is not written for students of politics. He is writing a historical account of how scientists in many countries, from several fields, and over centuries, and often limited by the technologies available to them, managed to crack the primary secrets of one of the strangest infectious processes ever encountered: an infectious agent that never provoked an immune reaction, was so powerful that an extract from one mouse could theoretically kill billions, was immune to high heat and formaldehyde, could last for years in the soil, and was dwarfed in size by a virus. Despite the author's technical sophistication, the volume can be readily