

The Age Of Anxiety

WAR AND PEACE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

By John Newhouse
Knopf. 486 pp. \$22.95

By Gregg Herken

THOSE WHO have read *Cold Dawn*, John Newhouse's first book on superpower arms control, or his essays on the subject in *The New Yorker*, are already familiar with Newhouse's talent for making this intimidating and acronym-strewn subject both accessible and interesting to the average reader. As Newhouse writes, "nuclear arms control is made to seem more complicated than it is. . . . What obscures the subject is dissonant voices." Newhouse's Tolstoyan focus upon this dissonance is what gives this book its general appeal.

As one learns from Newhouse's account, the atomic age—which began 50 years ago this September, with the discovery of nuclear fission in a German lab—is not so much a story of good versus evil as a different kind of struggle: one of bureaucratic inertia losing out to rampant technological change, of fair deals sacrificed to temporary advantage and of blind fate confounding the calculations of armchair nuclear strategists. The strategists come out particularly badly in Newhouse's book. PD-59, the presidential directive that laid out the Carter administration's nuclear targeting policy, is described as a "terminally bad joke" by one of Carter's own experts. Had they been looked at more closely by the public over the years, Newhouse argues, "topics like protracted nuclear war or limited nuclear war would have been lost in ridicule."

Newhouse hopes to make such an inspection possible with his book, which is the companion volume to the 13-part series of the same name that debuts on public television this month. While *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* is not the first, the last or even necessarily the best word on the subject—Richard Rhodes' *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* is more complete on the early atomic age; McGeorge Bundy's recent book, *Danger and Survival* is more scholarly—it is probably the most comprehen-

sive and easily the most readable account of where we are almost 45 years after Hiroshima, and how we got here. To his credit, Newhouse also deals with controversial nuclear issues—like the important role that pre-emption, or striking first, has had in the nuclear planning of both superpowers—that the television series downplays or ignores.

Much of what is new in the book comes from interviews done for the PBS series, and from Newhouse's own conversations with scientists, generals and policymakers in the United States and Russia—another little-appreciated benefit of *glasnost*. We learn from a Russian, for example, that a translator's error led Nikita Khrushchev to believe that John Kennedy was accusing him of not being able to add at the tense Vienna

Gregg Herken, chairman of the space sciences department at the National Air and Space Museum, is the author of "The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War" and "Counsels of War."

summit of 1961. A secretly recorded meeting of U.S. advisers during the Cuban missile crisis reveals that Robert Kennedy, whom many scholars credit with defusing the crisis, was in fact both hawkish and "mercurial," Newhouse writes. "Not for some days did his dovish plumage appear."

Other insights, although they involve events now safely in the past, are nonetheless disturbing for what they might say

about the future. One recurrent theme is the stunning degree to which both the United States and the Soviet Union have fundamentally misperceived the other's intentions. Khrushchev's decision to put missiles in Cuba in 1962 not only caught Kennedy by surprise, but the Soviet leader himself did not expect the prompt and firm response he got from the American president. In 1981, the KGB—evidently anticipating that Ron-



BY FRANCES JETTER. © INK

ald Reagan might be serious about beginning the bombing in five minutes—warned its agents in the West to be on the lookout for signs that the United States was preparing to attack the Soviet Union. Fortunately, as Newhouse points out, the actions of leaders in both the United States and the Soviet Union have generally proven to be far more prudent than their rhetoric when it comes to the bomb.

THE MOST fascinating—and depressing—part of the book is Newhouse's detailed account of superpower arms control. There is an almost Attic sense of squandered opportunities and fateful might-have-beens in the SALT I negotiations of the early 1970s, for example, where Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger "ignored the opportunity to kill MIRV"—the multiple warhead technology that proved to be, in Newhouse's description, "a chicken of truly historical size" when it came to roost in the SALT II negotiations a few years later. By then, bolero-like, the themes that would dominate subsequent arms negotiations had already begun to emerge. A fleeting technological advantage on one side becomes the nemesis of a solution equitable to both. Minor issues left unresolved in the last treaty become major sticking points in the next round of negotiations. Ultimately, the field of arms control is strewn with deployed weapons that started out as bargaining chips. By the time what Newhouse calls "the cabal"—SALT's opponents in Washington from Nixon through Carter—is put in charge of arms control in the Reagan administration, even optimists had begun to despair.

Following Reagan's re-election in 1984, however, a "whiff of change hung in the air," Newhouse writes. The author blames the president's irrational attachment to the Strategic Defense Initiative—and those members of his staff who aided and abetted that fantasy—for the fact that a wonderful opportunity at the Reykjavik summit to reduce the nuclear arsenals "fell off a cliff": "In return for a small and probably meaningless concession on Star Wars, Reagan could at one time have had a strategic arms agreement of a scale that no predecessor would have ever tried for."

Nonetheless, Newhouse ends his book on a note of guarded optimism, holding out the hope that "nuclear history"—an awkward and oxymoronic term—may someday be just that. ■