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## Review: A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon by Neil Sheehan (New York: Random House, 2009)

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**REVIEW: *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon* by Neil Sheehan (New York: Random House, 2009)**

**Paul Bolt**

*A Fiery Peace in a Cold War* is a fascinating book that focuses on the life of Air Force General Bernard Schriever and his competition with the Soviets to develop an ICBM that would prevent a nuclear Pearl Harbor.[\*] The story is wide-ranging, covering development of the bomb in both the United States and Soviet Union; the dynamics of the Cold War; Soviet and American espionage successes and failures; defense politics in the Eisenhower administration; and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Sheehan dives into the personalities, military officers and scientists, who contributed to the research and development of American weapon systems, including the German Wernher von Braun and Hungarian John von Neumann. Heroes of the book are engineers, scientists, and visionary program managers guided by a clear strategic imperative.

*A Fiery Peace* recounts technological races driven by military necessity. One such race is the effort to develop atomic and hydrogen bombs. While the Germans were defeated in World War II before they could develop an atomic bomb, German scientists played a major role in weapons development in both the U.S. and Soviet Union after the war. After 1945, the Soviets raced to develop the bomb and succeeded more quickly than the United States expected, due in part to Soviet moles in the Manhattan Project. Other races include the struggle between the Air Force and Army to develop intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) first, and the ultimate competition between the United States and Soviet Union to field nuclear-tipped ICBMs.

Integral to these races is bureaucratic politics. Within the Air Force, Curtis LeMay attempted to undermine the ICBM program in order to protect the centrality of bombers in the Air Force mission. Schriever and his team constantly fought to overcome obstacles that constrained their work and limited their budgets. Eventually Schriever's allies maneuvered for him to give a direct presentation to President Eisenhower on the nascent ICBM project. Eisenhower's enthusiastic endorsement and the ensuing NSC Action No. 1433 cleared away numerous impediments, but even then, Schriever struggled for resources as Eisenhower tried to limit defense spending and competing priorities arose within DOD.

Sheehan pulls no punches in his assessments of the events and personalities of the time. Sheehan clearly believes American strategic luminaries such as George Kennan and Paul Nitze misread Stalin and Soviet intentions, leading to American excesses that made the Cold War rivalry more dangerous than necessary. He holds particular disdain for Nitze, calling him a "polished, articulate man with a knack for convincing himself and others that he had knowledge of a subject when he, in fact,

had little or none” (104). However, Sheehan also gives credit where he sees it is due. He admires Schriever for his leadership, vision, and ability to overcome major obstacles to achieve technological breakthroughs. His portrayal of LeMay as a Schriever foil is, as might be expected, complicated. Sheehan views LeMay’s wartime innovations in airpower as brilliant but sees him, later in his career, as turning arrogant and unwilling to listen to the viewpoints of others.

In covering Schriever’s personal life, *A Fiery Peace* is less even. While Sheehan discusses important elements of Schriever’s boyhood and upbringing, the focus then turns almost solely to Schriever’s career. Nevertheless, the book does allude to family sacrifice when someone in Schriever’s position is racing to achieve military-technological breakthroughs while under tremendous professional stress.

In sum, Sheehan tells a sophisticated story of missile development that is both constrained and enhanced by military operating procedures and national politics, all in the context of extraordinary Cold War pressures. The book has lessons relevant to today. One is that rivals do not always act as one expects from simple mirror imaging. For example, while many believed the Soviets would develop a bomber force during the early days of the Cold War that would rival SAC, the Soviets instead limited the number of bombers they deployed and focused instead on missiles. Another lesson emphasizes the importance of higher education for Air Force officers. Many of the heroes in ICBM development first earned higher degrees in science and engineering, particularly at California universities and MIT. Now, when the United States struggles in new technological competitions with military applications such as hypersonics, AI, and satellite defenses, it is worth noting some of these previously understood lessons of the Cold War.

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