


March 2015

## Book Review The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security by Bartholomew Sparrow (Public Affairs, 2015)

Schuyler Foerster

Unite States Air Force Academy, schuyler.foerster@edu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/spaceanddefense>

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Aviation and Space Education Commons](#), [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), [Nuclear Engineering Commons](#), [Science and Technology Studies Commons](#), and the [Space Vehicles Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Foerster, Schuyler (2015) "Book Review The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security by Bartholomew Sparrow (Public Affairs, 2015)," *Space and Defense*: Vol. 8: No. 0, Article 9.

DOI: 10.32873/uno.dc.sd.08.01.1123

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/spaceanddefense/vol8/iss0/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Space and Defense by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

## Book Review

### ***The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* by Bartholomew Sparrow (Public Affairs, 2015)**

Schuyler Foerster

*A popular new biography pays overdue tribute to a living legend.*

Bartholomew Sparrow's rich and detailed biography of Brent Scowcroft—a still very active and now nonagenarian—has been on bookshelves since early this year.<sup>1</sup> Many, including those who have an intimate familiarity with some of the events and personalities in this book, have already offered thorough reviews of the work.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Schuyler Foerster is the Brent Scowcroft Professor of National Security Studies in the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies, Department of Political Science, U.S. Air Force Academy. The views expressed here are his own.

<sup>2</sup> As examples of some of the more substantive reviews of Sparrow's biography, see Hal Brands, "Bookshelf: Grand Strategy in the Real World," *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 January 2015, [www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-strategist-by-bartholomew-sparrow-1422053450](http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-strategist-by-bartholomew-sparrow-1422053450); Steve Donoghue, "Book Review: 'The Strategist,'" *Open Letters Monthly: An Arts and Literature Review*, [www.openlettersmonthly.com/book-review-the-strategist/](http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/book-review-the-strategist/); Roger Harrison, "Book Review: 'The Strategist' by Bartholomew Sparrow," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, [www.au.af.mil/au/afri/review\\_full.asp?id=746](http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/review_full.asp?id=746); *Kirkus Reviews*, "The Strategist," [www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/bartholomew-sparrow/the-strategist-brent/](http://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/bartholomew-sparrow/the-strategist-brent/); Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, "Sunday Book Review: 'The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security,'" *The New York Times*, 4 March 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/books/review/the-strategist-brent-scowcroft-and-the-call-of-national-security.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/books/review/the-strategist-brent-scowcroft-and-the-call-of-national-security.html); James Mann, "Book Review: 'The Strategist,' on Brent Scowcroft, by Bartholomew Sparrow," *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-the-strategist-on-brent-scowcroft-by-bartholomew-sparrow/2015/01/28/36794714-9a83-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-the-strategist-on-brent-scowcroft-by-bartholomew-sparrow/2015/01/28/36794714-9a83-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html); *Publishers' Weekly*, "The Strategist," [www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-58648-963-2](http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-58648-963-2).

The purpose of this review, therefore, will not be to shed new light on the biography but to focus on what this reviewer believes is the more enduring message of the narrative, and, indeed, the life of Brent Scowcroft.

Brent Scowcroft's life has been—and remains—one of commitment, hard work, and service to the nation above personality, political party, or personal preference. His legacy—as Sparrow details and with which others agree—is one of even-handedness and integrity. He has largely succeeded in managing the most difficult policy issues as well as some of the most difficult personalities in the policy world. Scowcroft is not, as Sparrow and other reviewers have noted, without error or misjudgment, but he nonetheless sets a standard for dedication to higher purposes, which Sparrow's biography celebrates.

Sparrow details Scowcroft's roots in a modest Mormon family, as well as Brent's own extraordinary work ethic as a young boy. His formative years were shaped by the run-up to World War II, and his instincts took him to West Point, from which he graduated in 1947. Too late to fight in World War II, he survived an almost fatal crash-landing in 1949 that ended his operational flying career and precluded a combat role for an individual ironically destined to play such an influential role in shaping national security policy.

The policy role that Scowcroft ended up playing began in academe under a formidable set of mentors—William T. R. Fox at Columbia and, in the famed “SOSH” (or “Social Sciences”) Department at West Point, Col Herman Beukema and Col George “Abe” Lincoln. This was not the academe of theoretical debates, but of application of theory to a profession whose *raison d’être* was national security. The coin of the realm was “realism”—for Scowcroft, not realism devoid of moral content, but one that defines the boundaries in which moral purposes can be prudently pursued.

On the one hand, that instinct for realism produced a determination that the national security establishment be structured to identify complex relationships of power and the strengths and vulnerabilities not only of others but also of ourselves. Such a structure should not serve narrow individual, political, or bureaucratic purposes; rather, it should serve the President in the exercise of his constitutional responsibilities. Sparrow describes in immense detail Scowcroft’s years of holding important staff jobs in the military, but which, for Scowcroft, was a world dominated by drudgery and bureaucracy.

In subsequent years—in restructuring the National Security Council (NSC) in the Ford Administration after Henry Kissinger left to be Secretary of State, and in rebuilding that structure as George H. W. Bush’s National Security Advisor after the Iran-Contra debacle—one sees Scowcroft’s concern for “process,” not for its own sake but to ensure that the best analyses and competing recommendations find their way to the table, and are not shut out because of ego, stove-piped structures, or muzzled staffers. Issues need to be seen as they are, not as one wishes them to be; the best policies are often a mix of seemingly contradictory proposals (as in the Scowcroft Commission’s delicate balancing of arms control and strategic force modernization to fit political realities of the early Reagan Administration). The policy apparatus—not just the ‘guru’ at the center—must be equipped to visualize both the realities and the opportunities.

That instinct for realism, of course, can also cloud one’s vision. This reviewer recalls an interview on the *Today* show in spring 1989, when a major

review of national security policy that Scowcroft had launched was coming to an end. When asked if the review was producing any new insights, Scowcroft replied, “We’re not quite done, but it looks like the future will look a lot like the past, on a more or less straight line of projection.” Sparrow highlights this period, and other reviewers note that Scowcroft’s conservative instincts reinforced skepticism that Gorbachev was genuinely interested in effecting a major change in the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Then, when it became clear Gorbachev was so inclined, Scowcroft remained less enthusiastic about the opportunities and increasingly concerned about whether such changes could be managed.

*Managing a “world transformed”* (in the words of the memoir that Scowcroft co-authored with George H. W. Bush)—the end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany in NATO, and the demise of the Soviet Union—represented the consummate accomplishment of that Administration, one that subsequent generations can easily underestimate. The Bush national security team may not have envisioned the possibilities these changes might bring. Indeed, in later years, Scowcroft was openly skeptical about some of them, including the enlargement of NATO (a view he shared with George Kennan, who had been Ambassador to Yugoslavia when Scowcroft was Air Attaché). But that team was enormously effective in anticipating how these changes could be inherently destabilizing to the international order and in focusing on how to preserve as much stability as possible.

Scowcroft is the first to say that he is not a visionary. In 2011, at an Aspen Institute event in his honor, Scowcroft was asked about the secret of his success. Without hesitation, he replied, “I have always tried to surround myself with people smarter than I.” If “smarter” means expertise, then Scowcroft did indeed focus on bringing people into his net—whether at the NSC or in his post-government consulting business—who were “smarter” than he. If “smarter” includes instincts about how ego and presumption can get in the way of a better outcome for a higher purpose, then there are few who are “smarter” than Brent Scowcroft.

Although Scowcroft's career quickly shifted from the military academic world of West Point and the Air Force Academy (where he served from 1962 to 1964, including as Acting Department Head in 1963-64) to the cauldron of policy making, a substantial part of his legacy will remain in the world of education. Sparrow details how Scowcroft's consulting business produced significant wealth, and Scowcroft has contributed substantially to a host of institutions, not all of which bear his name. At a dinner in his honor to inaugurate the Scowcroft Professorship in National Security Studies at the Air Force Academy, this reviewer asked him how he would charge the incumbent in that position. Without reservation, and in his typically understated way, he said, "Teach them *how* to think, not *what* to think." In Sparrow's biography, Scowcroft recalls a mentor many years prior who did just that for him. It is a value that transcends expertise and instills both perspective and an antenna for complexity.

Brent Scowcroft is a "heroic" figure in large part because he has endured and survived. On a personal level, Sparrow's biography tells the little-known story of how Brent provided home care for his wife, Jackie, during her 25-year long and burdensome illness, even while his time in government demanded all of his energy. No complaints; indeed, few even knew. Professionally, over the last half century, Scowcroft has worked with—and been buffeted by—some of the largest figures in national

security policy. He has been at the center of countless key foreign policy decisions, for which he was the man in the background rather than the man out front. He challenged orthodoxy, but rarely people. He garnered respect from all sides of the aisle. He worked, it seems, harder and longer than anyone else. That reputation also enabled him to "speak truth to power," as when he warned publicly in August 2002 about the dangers of a precipitous invasion of Iraq—a position for which he was spurned by many but ultimately vindicated by history.

Sparrow quotes Scowcroft as saying there is "nothing better than to be working for something greater than you are." Many commentators have suggested that Scowcroft will not be remembered for the policies he shaped or the structures he reformed. In that respect, as one reviewer noted, he is a "transitional" figure. This reviewer suggests that this misses the broader point. We hope he will be remembered for the moral compass that underscored an unrelenting commitment to service, a determination to base policy on national interest grounded in the best analysis that can be brought to bear, and—most of all—an unwavering sense of his own humanity, and the modesty and compassion that comes with it. While we await Brent Scowcroft's own memoirs, we can thank Bartholomew Sparrow for introducing us to the man and reminding us of this all-too-rare legacy.