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Book Review: Martin Sixsmith's Brilliant 'The War of Nerves'

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At some point in every calendar year I re-read Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane's 1981 essay, "Fear and Loathing In the Soviet Union." A recap of his visit to the communist country, it astounded for its description of a destroyed country with a distinct communist "scent," along with hunched over, miserable people.

Crane's conclusion at the time was that the USSR's wrecked state indicted American liberals and conservatives alike: for members of the Left who claimed the country's economic system had achieved growth commensurate (or even half the size) with the United States, they had exposed themselves as hopelessly dense. There was little "economy" there to speak of since the people weren't free to produce. The latter, of course, exposed hardline members of the Right eager to pursue a massive military buildup as protection against the Soviets, as equally dense. The simple truth was that the Soviets lacked any kind of economy necessary to stage a war. Crane was clear that the failed country's days were numbered.

All of this and more came to mind while reading Martin Sixsmith's fascinating new book, *The War of Nerves: Inside the Cold War Mind*. In this remarkable history full of wildly interesting analysis and anecdotes, Sixsmith makes a case that more than a war of weapons, the battleground of the Cold War was, "to an unprecedented extent, the human mind." From there, it's no reach to suggest that Crane and Sixsmith would have agreed. Alarmism rooted in misplaced fear got the best of both sides. Arguably fearful of each side's true military intent, "regimes in east and west deployed psychological means to keep their population – and sometimes the enemies' population – convinced of their superiority." But also at times, they strived to convince their people of their own inferiority. If the masses were fearful of the enemy's superiority, they would support all manner of government action (and spending) meant to keep up.

One could make a case that this was made most apparent with the space race. To this day it's hard to figure what was to be gained for a country from it, and what might be. Which is why a private race for understanding the great beyond is so much more appealing. But that's a digression. When the Soviets launched the first Sputnik satellite into space, Americans were stunned and fearful while the Soviets were proud and confident. Evidence that history always repeats itself in some form or fashion is that in the 1950s, there was a growing fear that

“American youth was in decline,” and that “urgent action was needed” to correct a growing “muscle gap.” Where have we heard this before? From old people from every generation describing “these kids today.”

Responding to the Soviets reaching space first, Sixsmith cites President Dwight Eisenhower as noting that the launch was but a “small ball in the air,” but even he was secretly nervous. Edward Teller of hydrogen bomb fame chose to play up the Soviet development for well more than it was worth, declaring that the U.S. had lost a battle “more important and greater than Pearl Harbor.” Sixsmith is clear that Teller’s comment was “a blatant exaggeration” of which Teller was aware, but “he knew what he was doing.” By appealing “to the collective memory of America’s military humiliation,” he would ensure abundant funding for the work of people like himself.

This is important mainly because a consistent thread throughout *The War of Nerves* is that the Soviets knew they were the weaker of the two powers. Sixsmith himself writes that even after having won the European portion of World War II, the Soviets were still weak. In his words, “By any objective measure, the USSR was no threat to the U.S.; its industrial base had been ravaged and its population decimated. Three hundred thousand Americans had died in the war, but the Soviets lost over 20 million people.” Sixsmith cites Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad as observing that “The Soviet Union was never the *other* superpower.” To which skeptics will respond that Sixsmith and Westad are and were both armchair analysts, and we can’t or couldn’t just blithely accept their insouciance.

Fair enough, but it wasn’t just individuals outside the proverbial arena. Consider Nikita Krushchev’s analysis. Krushchev wrote that Stalin “trembled” at the prospect of war with the United States because he “knew that we were weaker than the United States.” And when Eisenhower suggested an “Open Skies” arrangement “whereby each side would grant the other access to its airfields, long-range bombers and missile factories,” Sixsmith reports that Krushchev rejected the offer since it would have revealed “that the true state of Soviet forces was far weaker than Soviet propaganda claimed.” Soviet Minister of Defense Marshal Georgy Zhukov told Eisenhower in 1955 that “the Soviet people were ‘fed up to the teeth with war.’”

To all of the above, some will still say that it’s easy to find clarity in retrospect, particularly as readers of today know the result of the Cold War. Conversely, in the 1950s the world was a dangerous place, and the free world had perhaps learned the hard way in the 1930s and beyond that there are (James Forrestal) “no returns on appeasement.” It all makes sense while at least raising an obvious question: where was the proper *economic analysis* explaining why the Soviets couldn’t possibly pose a real threat? Indeed, the view here is that an ongoing failure among economists to understand their chosen line of work blinded economists and those who take credentials seriously to reality. Think about it. As Sixsmith makes plain, by 1945 England “was bankrupted by war.” Yes it was, and by extension so was the Soviet Union.

Really, how did serious people think a country that was foisting more communism on a nation destroyed much more profoundly by war (again, 20 million dead, industrial base destroyed, etc.) than England could ascend to superpower status anytime soon? The simple truth is that per Crane, the Soviet Union never had anywhere close to the economy to fight a war with a nation backed by the world’s most dynamic economy.

Of course, what seemingly held wise minds back from making foreign policy conclusions rooted in common sense was that economists believed then, and still believe today, that World War II was what pulled the United States out of the Great Depression. On its face, it would be hard to find an economic viewpoint that's more absurd than the previous one, but also a view more horrifying. Yes, economists near monolithically believe that the maiming, killing, and destruction of wealth actually had an economic upside. If we ignore that *people* are the source of all economic gain, and that *work divided among people* powers staggering economic advance (war exterminating the former and eviscerating the latter), we can't ignore that government only has money to spend insofar as the people within the country are prospering.

Again, England was bankrupted by the war, along with the soft socialism that followed. How then, could serious people believe that a nation strongly wedded to communism could represent a military threat? The speculation here is that what is and was laughable was rooted in a Keynesian belief that government is the instigator of economic growth through spending, as opposed to the beneficiary of growth. Since economists believe in backwards fashion that government spending is the source of economic vigor, they naturally believed that an authoritarian nation shaped by the State and its military would be an economically strong one. Again, economists believe to this day that the military buildup to fight the 2nd World War is what revived the U.S. economy, as opposed to a revived U.S. economy (remember, the failed New Deal ended by the late 1930s) making the military buildup possible. Hopefully readers see where this is going, and what it says about the abject confusion of the economics profession. And it wasn't just economists. There was some kind of odd belief that a lack of freedom enabled great national leaps. Sixsmith cites broadcasting legend Edward R. Murrow commenting about Sputnik that, "We failed to recognize that a totalitarian state can establish its priorities, define its objectives, allocate its money, deny its people automobiles, television sets, and all kinds of comforting gadgets in order to achieve a national goal." Utter nonsense, of course. But that's what the wise believed then, and to read Thomas Friedman and others of his ilk today, that's what the "wise" still believe.

Back to reality, free people create wealth and do so in abundance because free people aren't controlled by politicians who are controlled by the *known*. Crucial here is that free people are left alone to take us to the *unknown*. Put another way, freedom ensured victory in a Cold War that, if the expert class had possessed a clue about economics, would never have taken place. On its face, and with all the money wasted on a war that was won by virtue of the U.S. being free, it's interesting to contemplate the unseen; as in what progress would have been achieved absent all the resources wasted on a Cold War that the Soviets certainly could never have afforded had it become an actual battle. Yet there's more.

Think about the lives lost. Here Sixsmith writes that the "spectre of the domino theory dragged the superpowers into debilitating conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan." All based on fear of one ideology winning over the other. Why, in particular, were Americans so nervous?

The question cries for an answer simply because economic common sense or none, it was well-known by the late 1950s that the American way of life was far superior. During Krushchev's "kitchen debate" with then Vice President Nixon, it was well-known to the Americans and the Russians that Krushchev was lying when he claimed Soviet dwellings resembled the growing norm in the U.S. In 1959 there was an American Exhibition in Moscow that revealed common

U.S. standards. Here Sixsmith cites musician Alexei Kozlov as saying “We were stunned and couldn’t believe that people lived like that.” This wasn’t the first time. Sixsmith writes that in 1814, when the Russians briefly took control of Paris, their soldiers “glimpsed a world their rulers would have preferred them not to see – a world of liberty and prosperity.” More broadly, one obvious reason communist countries wouldn’t allow their people to visit the West had to do with the staggering contrasts that would reveal themselves upon witnessing Western plenty.

All of which raises the question yet again, why? And in asking why, this isn’t an expression of wonderment that the U.S. didn’t fully disarm. Sixsmith is clear fairly early in the book that *confirmation bias* whereby humans have a “tendency to interpret the mind of others according to the preconceptions of our own” is dangerous. Peaceful or not, the Americans must arm as though others don’t have peaceful intentions. Applied to the Soviets, they weren’t “like us,” nor are the Russians. This is a nation forged by endless invasions over the centuries. Russian acceptance of authority is at least partially a consequence of the latter. Security from invasion means more to these people than material security, but the fact remains that a society defined by rampant consumerism is logically one defined by even more rampant *production*. The Soviets weren’t consumers because they weren’t free to produce, and since they weren’t free to produce or be creative in their production, they were never going to have the economy to fight a war with us. In other words, the U.S. could have kept its military strong and well advanced because that’s what rich countries do, only to “fight” the Cold War with endless reminders transmitted to the Soviets with our much greater technology of just how superior our lives were.

Some will say that if the outcome of the Cold War was obvious, why Sixsmith’s book? The response here is that the book is essential precisely because it so ably exposes how wasteful the Cold War was, and because it was, readers need to be reminded of what governments do in pursuit of perpetuation. It should be added that Sixsmith conducted the remarkable research exposing what some Soviets *and* some Americans (Henry Stimson wanted to share atomic secrets with the Soviets to avoid “a secret armament race of rather desperate character,” Ike as mentioned desired mutual viewing of armaments and airfields, while Reagan wanted “Star Wars” given his disdain for mutually-assured destruction) either thought about the Cold War, or about the military build-ups in general. It didn’t need to happen, but since it did, this book is similarly essential precisely for it showing how perilously close the U.S. and USSR (think Cuba, think post the Korean Air tragedy, etc.) two countries that secretly didn’t want war, came close to actual war of the nuclear variety.

After that, Sixsmith’s anecdotes are endlessly fascinating. While it’s well-known that Stalin was of mixed feelings about the rise of Mao, it’s perhaps less well known that to establish superiority vis-à-vis the Chinese murderer, Stalin made him wait six days for a meeting during Mao’s visit to the communist motherland. At Stalin’s deathbed, mass murderer Lavrentiy Beria initially “sobbed fitfully, but immediately after seemed full of glee.” Beria eventually got what was coming to him. In addition to his murderous ways he “was in the habit of raping and murdering young girls.” At Stalin’s funeral, 500 attendees were sickeningly and tragically crushed to death. A dictator who kept on killing, even from the grave it seems. And while he was painted as vigorous and powerful in life, his actual bearing was “far from beautiful. Scarred by smallpox, with yellow, bloodshot eyes, a withered arm and even shorter than Vladimir Putin (5 feet 5 inches), the Soviet leader presented a challenge to those Soviet artists charged with making him appear heroic.”

Regarding John F. Kennedy, he was “physically and mentally shattered” after meeting with Khrushchev for the first time, and told Bobby that interacting with Khrushchev is “like dealing with dad.” About Vietnam, JFK skeptically told Arthur Schlesinger that “The troops will march in, the bands will play, the crowds will cheer... Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It’s like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to have another.” And when a journalist told him he was writing about a book about his presidency, JFK quipped “Why would anyone write a book about an administration that has nothing to show for itself but a string of disasters?” To read Sixsmith is to want to read more Sixsmith. He delivers, and not just about JFK, Khrushchev and Stalin. He has interesting insights on all the big players in what’s a fascinating history regardless of one’s ideology.

All of which brings us to an ending that we all know. Near book’s end, Sixsmith is clear that a battle of nerves that enabled massive military buildups became too expensive for the Soviets. “Washington could afford” the Cold War, while “Moscow could not.” Well, of course. How fitting then, that when Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to sign the document that would make official his resignation, “his Soviet-made pen wouldn’t work.” Which was the point, and should have been the point all along. A nation so economically backwards thanks to a lack of freedom didn’t stand a chance against the freest, most economically advanced country on earth. The “unseen” counterfactuals that Martin Sixsmith’s essential book unearths are endless.