

Available online at:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Protected/Articles/000/000/013/171kcloi.asp>

ONE MIGHT BE tempted to think of Roberta Morgan Wohlstetter as simply the wife of the late nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter. However, it would be just as accurate to think of Albert as Roberta's husband—she did, after all, get him a job in 1951 at a relatively new defense think tank where she worked called the RAND Corporation. In the following decade there, both would do work that continues profoundly to influence thinking about intelligence and nuclear war.

At RAND, the Wohlstetters leveraged their diverse educational backgrounds—Albert had studied mathematical logic, law (briefly), economics, and the philosophy of science, and Roberta, English literature, law (briefly), and criminal psychology—to tackle the nascent nuclear age's most pressing strategic puzzles. Working with a number of sharp-minded colleagues, they transformed the way national security types think and talk—with concepts like “first-strike” and “second-strike” nuclear capability, “signal-to-noise ratio” in intelligence analysis, “fail-safe” bomber operation, and “hardened” missile silos.

Their research helped inspire the Swiss-born political scientist Fred Iklé to design a way of preventing the accidental and unintentional use of nuclear weapons (“permissive action links”), and a Polish/Belarusian-born engineer named Paul Baran to think of more survivable ways of communicating information (“hot-potato routing,” known today as “packet-switching,” and “distributed networking”—the building blocks of the Internet). For all this, and a host of other things they did after they left RAND in the early 1960s, Albert and Roberta were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Ronald Reagan in 1985.

Although a lot has been written on Albert, comparatively little attention has been paid to Roberta, who died on January 6 at the age of 94. Her best-known work is *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (1962), a Bancroft Prize-winning study of the U.S. intelligence failures that preceded Imperial Japan's surprise attack. Through interviews and a careful examination of the historical record (e.g., 39 volumes of congressional hearings on the attack), she concluded that American forces were so completely surprised on December 7, 1941, not because of some dark conspiracy by the Roosevelt administration to drag the United States into World War II—but because U.S. military intelligence analysts and decision-makers, despite the best of intentions, had collectively failed to distinguish the few, faint warning signals from the much larger, louder mass of background noise. Only in retrospect, she stressed, were all the disparate dots so easy to connect.

Published at a time when the Soviet-American nuclear competition was intensifying, *Warning and Decision* concluded by offering lessons—in retrospect, enduring lessons—about the uses and sober limits of intelligence analysis against the threat of surprise attack. “We cannot *count* on strategic warning. We *might* get it, and we might be able to

take useful preparatory actions that would be impossible without it,” Wohlstetter wrote. But “if we accept the fact that the signal picture for impending attacks is almost sure to be ambiguous, we shall prearrange actions that are right and feasible in response to ambiguous signals, including signs of attack that might be false.” In the aftermath of 9/11, Roberta Wohlstetter’s insights in *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* have become all too relevant.

Roberta’s concern about the need for intermediate responses to ambiguous warnings dovetailed with her and her husband’s work on stemming nuclear proliferation. Indeed, governments rarely acquire the capability to build nuclear weapons in one fell swoop, but rather quietly and cumulatively, as India’s surprise 1974 detonation of a nuclear explosive device demonstrated. (As the United States now prepares to finalize a controversial nuclear cooperation deal with India, American policymakers would be wise to revisit *The Buddha Smiles: Absent-Minded Peaceful Aid and the Indian Bomb*, Roberta’s 1977 history of U.S.-India nuclear cooperation.)

In the mid-1970s, the Wohlstetters and their colleagues completed *Moving Towards Life in a Nuclear Armed Crowd?*, a 400-page study for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency that drew attention to the growing “Damoclean overhang” of virtual nuclear-weapon states that the international spread of fissile material and nuclear fuel-making would encourage. In response, this study (later published as *Swords from Plowshares*) called for concerted efforts by the U.S. government to assure the security of America’s non-nuclear-armed allies, to strengthen nuclear export controls at home and abroad, and to promote a clearer and more sustainable interpretation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and related agreements in which “close approach to the manufacture of [nuclear] weapons” by non-nuclear-weapon NPT states would be counted unambiguously as “a violation.” On this last point, the intransigent cases of Iran and nuclear-armed North Korea—both of which, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), refused to comply with their NPT and IAEA safeguards obligations—come to mind.

For much of the 20th century, national security strategy was a male-dominated field. Roberta Wohlstetter proved to be a glaring—and brilliant—exception. Her published and unpublished writings continue to speak directly to many key challenges facing the United States in this age of increasing disorder. It’s high time we rediscovered their wisdom.

*Robert Zarate, a research fellow at the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, D.C., is writing a book on Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter.*

© Copyright 2007, News Corporation, Weekly Standard, All Rights Reserved.