
Albert Wohlstetter's Legacy

The Neo-Cons, Not Carter, Killed Nuclear Energy

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

The conventional wisdom in the nuclear community and in general is that President Jimmy Carter drove the nail in the civilian nuclear coffin when he stopped the reprocessing of nuclear fuel in 1976. But this is wrong. The dishonor does not belong to Carter. The policy that ended nuclear reprocessing was first promoted under the Ford Presidency, in a 1975 policy paper written under Ford's chief of staff Dick Cheney. And long before the Ford Administration, the idea that civilian nuclear power was bad, and that reprocessing should be stopped, was extensively argued by Albert Wohlstetter, one of the most ghoulish, secretive, and influential of U.S. nuclear strategists, from the late 1950s to his death in 1997.

Wohlstetter was a University of Chicago mathematician-logician and a RAND consultant, who kept himself in the shadows as he mentored some of the most public of today's neo-cons—Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Zalmay Khalilzad, to name a few. In Wohlstetter's circle of influence were also Ahmed Chalabi (whom Wohlstetter championed), Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-Wash.), Sen. Robert Dole (R-Kan.), and Margaret Thatcher. Wohlstetter himself was a follower of Bertrand Russell, not only in mathematics, but in world outlook. The pseudo-peacenik Russell had called for a preemptive strike against the Soviet Union, after World War

II and before the Soviets developed the bomb, as a prelude to his plan for bullying nations into a one-world government. Russell, a raving Malthusian, opposed economic development, especially in the Third World.

Admirer Jude Wanniski wrote of Wohlstetter in an obituary, "[I]t is no exaggeration, I think, to say that Wohlstetter was the most influential *unknown* man in the world for the past half century, and easily in the top ten in importance of all men." "Albert's decisions were not automatically made official policy at the White House," Wanniski wrote, "but Albert's genius and his following were such in the places where it counted in the Establishment that if his views were resisted for more than a few months, it was an oddity." Wanniski also noted that "every editorial on America's geopolitical strategy that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* during the last 25 years was the product of Albert's genius."

Like Bertrand Russell, Wohlstetter saw the world in terms of a bounded chessboard of U.S. and Soviet nuclear missiles, where his clever gaming strategies would ensure that more of "them" were killed than of "us." His strategic policies were madder than MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction), which he found too juvenile in concept. Instead, he supported flexibility—the preemptive strike, high-precision weaponry with precision targetting, and "nimble" military units. This is precisely the thinking behind Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's revamping of the U.S. military, which was designed by longtime Pentagon consultant Andrew Marshall, another Wohlstetterite.

Wohlstetter rated his scenarios in terms of their death tolls, with the aim of allowing America to come out with the least damage. And, like Russell, while he loved playing with nuclear weapons, Wohlstetter hated *civilian* nuclear energy: He saw that it had the potential to allow unlimited population growth, which was impermissible in his worldview.

Unlike other nuclear strategists and Dr. Strangeloves, Wohlstetter writes relatively clearly, though tediously and exhaustively logically, often using statistical arguments to "prove" his points. He has no understanding of physical economy or of development, just crude cost-benefit analyses. His view of human beings in all this is that of a grade-B cowboy film—good guys versus bad guys, where everything possible



*Albert Wohlstetter
in a university
photo from the
1960s.*

Courtesy of the University of Chicago



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis



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EIRNS/Stuart Lewis



Wohlstetter's Weenies: Although Wohlstetter kept to the shadows, his protégés are very public. From left: Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Ahmed Chalabi.

must be done to keep control in the hands of his good guys: the financial oligarchy or, as President Eisenhower labelled it, the “military-industrial complex.” It is no surprise, therefore, that his prize student, Paul Wolfowitz, wrote his doctoral dissertation under Wohlstetter (published in 1972) arguing at length that nuclear desalination for the Mideast was a very bad idea—costly, unnecessary, and dangerous.

A Delicate Balance of Insanity

Wohlstetter’s first acclaimed paper, published in 1958, was “The Delicate Balance of Terror,” which reportedly so enthralled Richard Perle, then a high school chum of Wohlstetter’s daughter, that it got Perle started on his “Prince of Darkness” career as a Wohlstetterite.

While Wohlstetter was working on Pentagon contracts, calculating kill-ratios of missiles and chessboard missile moves, he developed the argument that civilian nuclear power was no good in itself, that it would only lead to the ability to make nuclear bombs, and that nonproliferation had to be enforced to make sure that bad guys didn’t get any nuclear bombs. To put this policy across, he used his mathematical skills to scare people, in classified briefings with military and other government officials, and Congressmen, which trickled down to the general public.

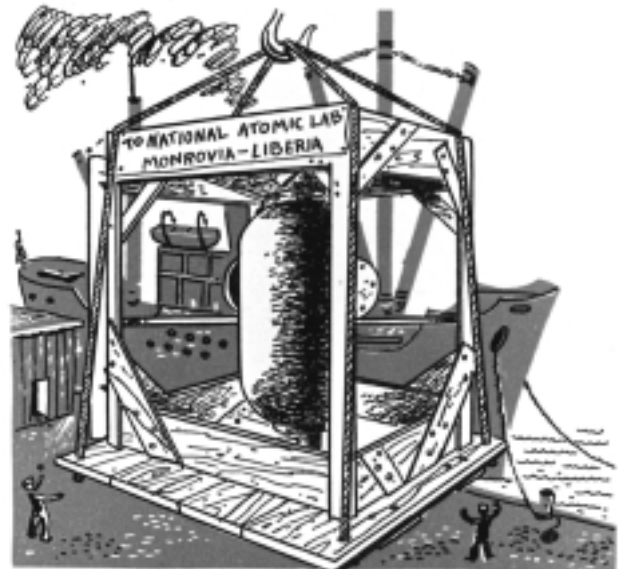
One of Wohlstetter’s last public articles, published on April 4, 1995, by his longtime neo-con friend Robert Bartley, editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, argued that the Non-Proliferation Treaty was bad, because it makes it easier for nations without nuclear weapons to gain access to them—using plutonium produced in civilian nuclear reactors. He wrote: “It has long been plain that plutonium for electric power has a large negative value. The civilian benefits are a myth. The military dangers are real and immediate.”

This is the essence of what Wohlstetter promoted in the 1960s and 1970s. He created the myth that civilian benefits of nuclear energy “are a myth.” As the *Wall Street Journal* identified Wohlstetter in the 1995 op-ed, he “headed the 1975

study that led the U.S. to abandon the use of plutonium fuel for civilian power reactors.”

Atoms for War

In the 1960s, when the civilian nuclear program was still moving forward under the philosophy of Atoms for Peace, launched by President Eisenhower in his famous 1953 speech at the United Nations, Wohlstetter pushed his “atoms for war” policy. While FDR Democrats and Republicans were elaborating visions of what the atom could do for peace in the world, providing energy, desalinated water, and process heat



Nuclear energy will be brought to less advanced countries.

The nuclear optimism that scared Wohlstetter: This illustration is from a children's book in the 1960s, describing the benefits of nuclear energy.



Wohlstetter was even stranger than the “Dr. Strangelove” depicted in the 1964 movie of that name. An early draft of the film was titled “The Delicate Balance of Terror,” the same title as Wohlstetter’s best-known unclassified work. Here, a still from the film.

for industry, Wohlstetter marshalled his math to stop civilian atoms.

In 1967, Wohlstetter was the invited luncheon speaker at a Manhattan Project 25th anniversary event at the University of Chicago. He told the assembled nuclear scientists that there were no short-term civilian benefits to nuclear energy. The scientists who created the bomb, he said, wanted to find compensatory benefits for humankind for their wartime creation of destruction. But, he said, “Some of these civilian uses have a large war potential. . . . [T]here is a massive overlap between the technology of civilian nuclear energy and that of weapons production. The good military atom therefore doesn’t displace the bad military one. Expanding civilian use in general makes it easier, quicker, and cheaper to get bombs. . . . An essential trouble with nuclear plowshares, therefore, is that they can be beaten into nuclear swords. . . .”

Wohlstetter noted that the nuclear energy forecast in 1967 envisioned that by 1980, nuclear would supply 25% of U.S. electricity, with large reactors at costs competitive with electricity from fossil fuels. And then this “genius” informed the nuclear scientists: “Nonetheless it has been clear that such important benefits fall short of ushering in the golden age. They will not abolish want and are unlikely to reduce the great

inequalities between rich and poor countries.” As to why this was the case, Wohlstetter noted that energy costs are just a small percentage of the gross national product, and “cheap energy can help, but is not the key to economic progress.”

Wohlstetter was particularly concerned that the Middle East remain free of nuclear power plants to desalt water, and to convey to his scientist audience that poor countries would not be able to gain from capital-intensive power reactors. As for breeder reactors, Wohlstetter’s view was only negative. Instead of seeing the benefit of a reactor that produced more fuel than it consumed, he said that if breeder reactors came into operation as the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission expected by 2000, “there may be a million bombs worth of civilian plutonium in the world, doubling every ten years.”

Incessantly Negative

As negative as was this 1967 speech, it was short, and at least mentioned that in the long-range future, nuclear energy might have some benefit. In Wohlstetter’s 1975 report, “Moving Toward Life in a Nuclear Armed Crowd?” the message is incessantly negative—for 286 pages. This report was prepared for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency “to provide a clear definition of trends in the spread of nuclear technology, and a precise analysis of the problems (political, military, and economic) that these trends pose for policy.”

Wohlstetter and his coauthors presented a statistical Mickey Mouse economic analysis of nuclear energy, which was designed to prove that civilian nuclear power is too costly, that reprocessing spent nuclear fuel is not essential and a money loser, that breeder reactors are too dangerous even to be seriously considered, and that nuclear energy retards development in the developing sector. In these pages is everything the anti-nuclear environmentalists and lawmakers could draw on to make sure that Wohlstetter got his anti-nuclear way. The overriding argument for Wohlstetter was that civilian nuclear energy can only be meaningfully measured in bomb-production capacity.

The report particularly targetted the Less Developed Countries (LDCs). “Investment in nuclear energy is a poor choice among alternatives for the economic development for the LDCs,” the report stated. “It diverts capital from more productive uses. . . . [I]nstead of speeding economic development and slowing the spread of military technology, as we had hoped for decades, the subsidized transfer of nuclear technology has slowed development and may speed the spread.”

For Wohlstetter et al., the benefits of nuclear energy were “exaggerated” because of the emotions connected to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “In fact,” the report stated, “if we could have detached ourselves” from these emotions, “we might have more easily questioned that

The Inside Job Against Nuclear Energy

While Albert Wohlstetter's nuclear report put a hold on nuclear development from the top down, other forces were squeezing nuclear development from the bottom and middle levels of policy-making. Such a squeeze required the right sort of bureaucrat and the right bureaucracy to carry out the anti-nuclear thrust, and so the Ford Administration at the end of 1974, removed Dixy Lee Ray, the pro-nuclear chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission; and Congress abolished the agency, and reorganized energy policy into a mishmash agency known as the Energy Research and Development Administration.

(Dixy Lee Ray, who had been brought into the Atomic Energy Commission by President Nixon in 1972, was a scientist and an FDR Democrat, who fought to expand nuclear and educate the public about every aspect of nuclear technology. She went on to become governor of Washington state, and she continued to fight for nuclear energy expansion.)

Under the Carter Administration, nuclear energy was squeezed again, into just another energy office in the new Department of Energy, headed by "energy czar" James Schlesinger, a Wohlstetter colleague at RAND who was then, and still is, anti-nuclear. The regulatory oversight for nuclear energy was given to the newly created Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

In this same time period, 1975, the Ford Foundation released a 450-page tome on nuclear energy, "Nuclear Power: Issues and Choices; Report of the Nuclear Energy Policy Study Group," purporting to be "fair" but arrived at by a group of Establishment academics, many of whom had the same Russellite credentials as Wohlstetter. As the overview to this report states, "We believe the consequences of the proliferation of nuclear weapons are so serious compared to the limited economic benefits of nuclear energy that we would be prepared to recommend stopping nuclear power in the United States if we thought this would prevent further proliferation." The overview went on to say, however, that such a course of action could "increase the likelihood of proliferation, since the United States would lose influence over the nature of nuclear power development abroad."

The most striking aspect of the Ford Foundation study is that it has the same Mickey Mouse approach to economics as Wohlstetter et al. There is no concept of physical economy or a "science driver." Everything is measured in strict cost-benefit terms, without any idea of development.

On the ground level in this period, was a growing swarm of environmentalist groups, hatched by the counterculture and the campus turmoil during the Vietnam War period. These were the most visible of the anti-nuclear forces, in the media and on the street. But the policies they carried out came straight from the neo-con pen of the shadowy Albert Wohlstetter and the lower-down Establishment figures who conducted the Ford Foundation study. The environmentalists and the so-called "left" were the legs, not the head of the anti-nuclear movement.

subsidizing civilian nuclear energy was the way to stop the spread of the military technology. Since civilian and military nuclear energy programs overlap so extensively, a more plausible course might have been to subsidize research and development on the improvement of fossil fuels or of more exotic non-nuclear alternatives such as solar electric or geothermal power."

Taking note of the nuclear optimism still in operation, the Wohlstetter report listed the projections for civilian nuclear plants in the 1990s, and then offered suggestions of how such growth could be derailed—exactly what occurred. "This large growth is not inevitable," the report stated. "It presumes the carrying through of plans, negotiations, and constructions not yet committed and of varying degrees of firmness; some have had setbacks. The growth, moreover, is open to influence, a subject for the elaboration of policy of supplier as well as recipient governments."

Wohlstetter's pessimism was unflagging. The report reiterated in every section how "nuclear power promises very limited economic benefits to less developed countries." "In

all likelihood," the report wishfully stated, "history will reveal that once again the nuclear optimists have greatly overestimated the future growth of nuclear power." And another favorite theme: "Every time a new country obtains a nuclear power reactor, it is moving significantly closer to a nuclear weapon development capability, since the plutonium produced by all nuclear reactors can be made into nuclear weapons."

Like Wohlstetter's tediously exhaustive strategic analyses, this report reviewed every aspect of how every country might be able to make bombs with their civilian nuclear reactors, and what might be done to constrain this. The main constraints from the Wohlstetter point of view were simple: stop nuclear technology, stop reprocessing, don't even think about breeder reactors, load on the statistics equating power plants with bombs, and don't mention any new technology development. His constraints worked. From this evil-minded Russellite neo-con, who remained in the shadows, came the anti-nuclear policies that have kept nuclear technology suppressed for 30 or more years.