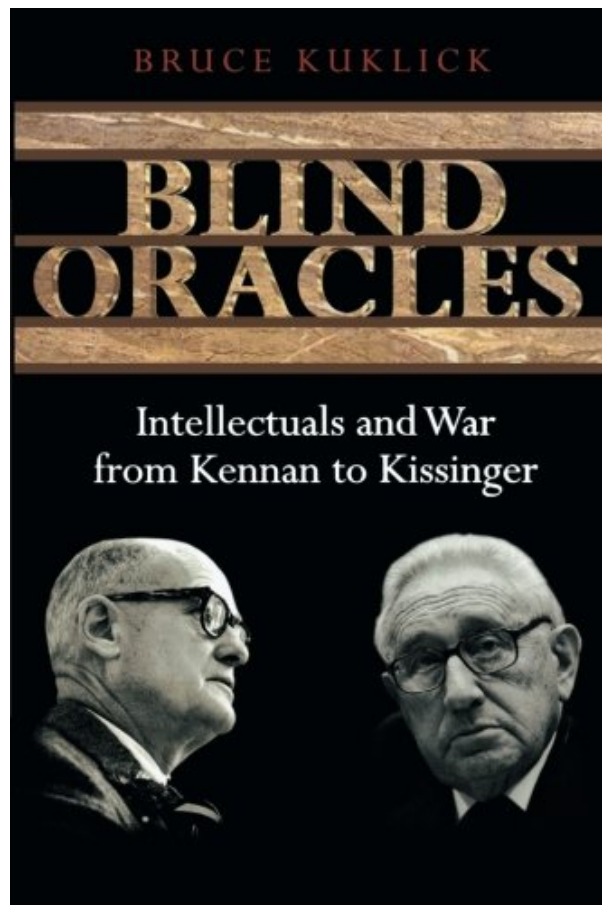
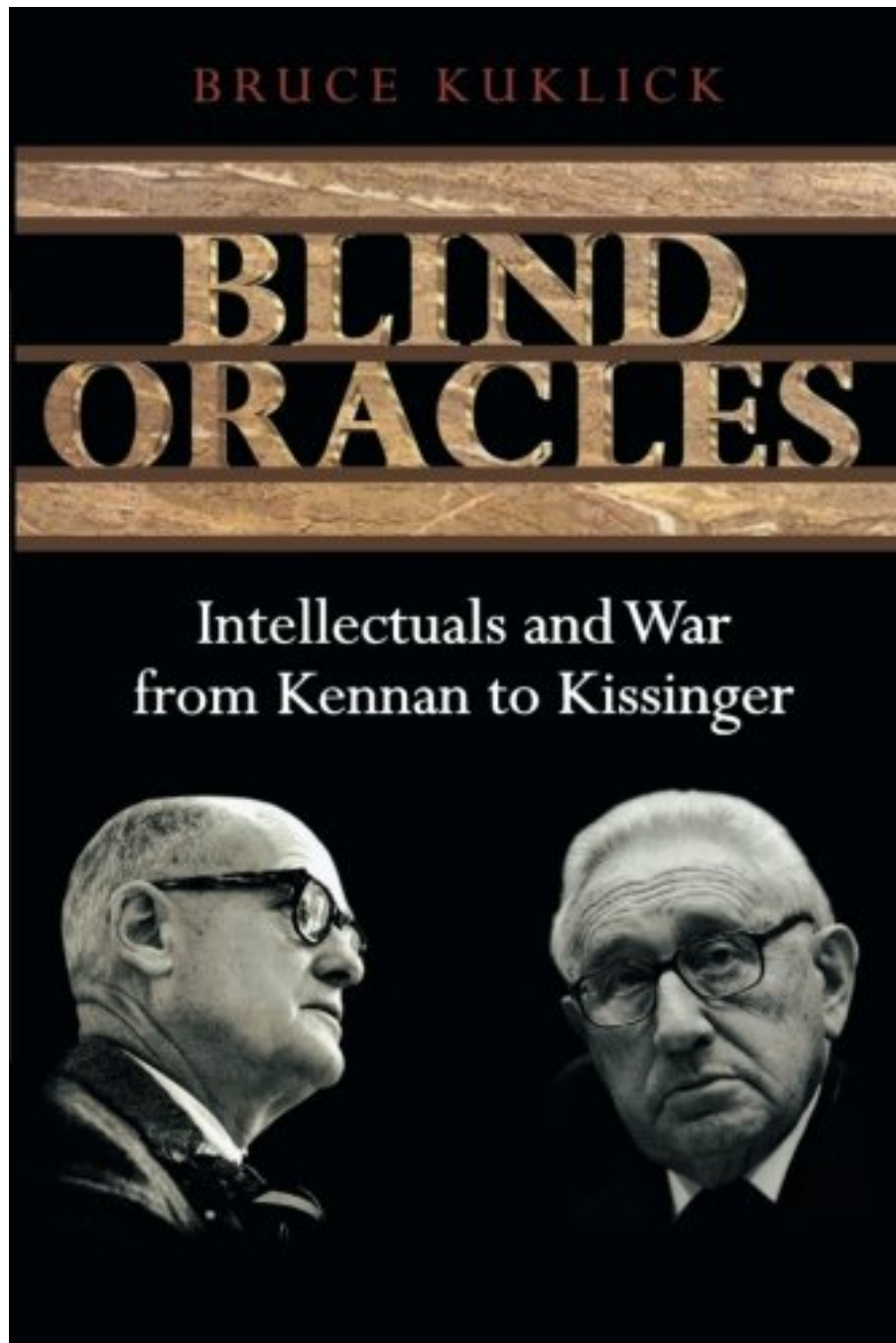


**BLIND ORACLES: INTELLECTUALS AND  
WAR FROM KENNAN TO KISSINGER BY  
BRUCE KUKLICK**



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In this trenchant analysis, historian Bruce Kuklick examines the role of intellectuals in foreign policymaking. He recounts the history of the development of ideas about strategy and foreign policy during a critical period in American history: the era of the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The book looks at how the country's foremost thinkers advanced their ideas during this time of United States expansionism, a period that culminated in the Vietnam War and détente with the Soviets. Beginning with George Kennan after World War II, and concluding with Henry Kissinger and the Vietnam War, Kuklick examines the role of both institutional policymakers such as those at The Rand Corporation and Harvard's Kennedy School, and individual thinkers including Paul Nitze, McGeorge Bundy, and Walt Rostow.

Kuklick contends that the figures having the most influence on American strategy--Kissinger, for example--clearly understood the way politics and the exercise of power affects policymaking. Other brilliant thinkers, on the other hand, often played a minor role, providing, at best, a rationale for policies adopted for political reasons. At a time when the role of the neoconservatives' influence over American foreign policy is a subject of intense debate, this book offers important insight into the function of intellectuals in foreign policymaking.

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## From Publishers Weekly

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Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

When intellectuals wage war

By viktor\_57

Prof. Kuklick has written before about both philosophy and politics in America, and in his latest book, "Blind Oracles", he brings the two together in the most extreme of all political acts, the waging of war. Beginning with the theoretical underpinnings of the ideas about war in the aftermath of WWII, "Blind Oracles" follows the birth and increasing influence of the RAND corporation from the beginnings of the Cold War, through the Cuban Missile Crisis, and up to the Vietnam War, when a new breed of intellectual-adviser, many from Harvard's Kennedy School, came into prominence, attempting to transform their philosophies into policy. Finally, Kuklick ends with the realpolitik of Kissinger who was "supremely gifted in translating ideas into politics," even if some of those ideas may be considered abuses of American power.

Besides portraying the dangers of attempting policy in the vacuum of the ivory tower or the blinders of rigid ideology, "Blind Oracles" also shows how foreign policy thinking has not changed in its essentials since Clausewitz, whose famous dictum, "War is the continuation of policy (politics) by other means," underlines the motives and decisions of men who tried to conceptualize state-sponsored violence in ways to justify its bloody costs.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

A fascinating study of self-delusion

By William Podmore

This fascinating book looks at the influence in government of intellectuals such as George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Walt Rostow, Robert McNamara and Henry Kissinger. It also examines their shared myths, for example that US interventionism is necessary, that the USA is uniquely virtuous, and that war only comes from malevolent surprises by others.

Kuklick shows that their basic function was to provide politicians with justifications for doing what they were going to do anyway, to give them cover and act as defense counsel. He judges, "The accepted wisdom of the era fell short of what we might want." Their assessments of Soviet strengths and motives were 'simplistic'. "Much of what strategists 'knew' was wrongheaded or muddled, if not mistaken."

He notes that these civilian strategists showed an acute distrust of democracy and were committed to 'a select management that would lead by exaggeration'. Proximity to power brought arrogance and ignorance.

After the US war against Vietnam, McNamara organised a conference at which he tried to make the Vietnamese participants accept that the war had been due to 'mutual misunderstanding'. But Nguyen Thach, a former foreign minister, responded, "I would say, with all due respect to Mr. McNamara, that the U.S. mindset, as he says was incorrect, but that the Vietnamese mindset - our assessment of the U.S. - was essentially correct."

General Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's chief military strategist, said, "I don't believe we misunderstood you ... Excuse me, but we correctly understood you ... you are wrong to call the war a 'tragedy' - to say that it came from missed opportunities. Maybe it was a tragedy for you, because yours was a war of aggression, in the



neo-colonialist `style', or fashion, of the day for the Americans."

Kuklick concludes, "The men of knowledge did well by their societies, yet their actual knowledge was minimal while their sense of self-regard and scholarly hand-waving was maximal. They did their best work in constructing ways of thinking that absolved leadership of liability, deserved or not. Undoubtedly there was a symbiosis between the defense specialists and the nonintellectual elite that wanted their services in places of power, but the culture paid a pretty penny for the expertise, especially when so many intellectuals disdained a democratic republic."

6 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Only half right

By Seth J. Frantzman

This book examines the role of men who transitioned from academia to politics and had great influence on America's wars and foreign policy. It includes such luminaries as McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan and Kissinger. But it also fails to give enough attention to others such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Madeline Albright. Is this because the book is mostly a critique on what it sees as 'republican' intellectuals who influenced 'right wing' administrations. Every administration however relies on academics, partially because foreign policy pashas tend to transition back and forth from politics to business to academics (see for instance Macnamara or Lawrence Summers, Wolfowitz, Elliot Abrams, Condi Rice).

This is how politics works for Republicans and Democrats and they are not all 'blind oracles' and they are not all ignorant of the reality on the ground. Senior Administration members from other sectors, such as Dick Cheney, have proved equally problematic and un-realistic. In the final analysis George Kennan's prognosis about containment proved correct and Kissinger will be remembered for being one of the most influential secretaries of state in the 20th century.

Seth J. Frantzman

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