REAL SECURITY

RESTORING AMERICAN POWER IN A DANGEROUS DECADE

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Other Books by Richard J. Barnet

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WHO WANTS DISARMAMENT?

For Gordon Cosby and Bill Price

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CHAPTER 1

What Happened to the American Century?

Americans' perceptions of their nation's power have changed radically in the last five years. Until the withdrawal from Vietnam and the collapse of the Nixon-Kissinger vision of détente, it scarcely occurred to anyone that the United States was declining in influence. "We are the number one nation," President Lyndon B. Johnson told the National Foreign Policy Conference at the State Department at a crucial moment in the Vietnam War, "and we are going to stay the number one nation." Today it is commonplace to hear that the "military balance" is shifting to the Soviet Union. The "Vietnam Syndrome"—a reticence about using military power abroad for fear of becoming bogged down in another divisive war—is widely regarded as the reason other nations, including allies, former allies, and adversaries, are becoming increasingly bold in opposing our interests or pursuing their own.

Since 1975 a number of U.S. ambassadors have been kidnapped or murdered. Embassies have been sacked. A handful of Iranian students managed to humiliate the United

States for over a year by holding fifty-two of her diplomats hostage. "The spectacle of a Mexican President lecturing the President of the United States," as U.S. banker S. A. Constance characterized Jimmy Carter's encounter with López Portillo in February 1979, epitomizes the "erosion of American power." The judgment that the U.S. has become a "crippled giant," to use Senator William S. Cohen's phrase, is widespread. For such observers, the decline in American power is symbolized by the battles the nation refused to join: the victorious fight of left-wing forces in Angola, Nicaragua, and Ethiopia, the overthrow of America's "friend," Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. "The overall military balance is shifting sharply against us," Henry Kissinger told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 1980.

In the mid-1970s, in the wake of the Indochina War, it was fashionable to talk about the need to respect the limits of military power, the necessity of coexistence with the other nuclear superpowers, and the urgency of "global concerns" that transcended the Cold War. The Carter Administration came in with a new post-Vietnam agenda that included normalization of relations with Hanoi and the withdrawal of ground troops from Korea. There were "festering sores that had to be dealt with—Vietnam, Cuba, the Panama Canal," as Secretary of State Vance put it in a *New York Times* interview in May 1977. "The day when we were obsessed by security commitments is over and that strengthens us because it frees us," explained Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs. But as the new decade opened, the Carter Administration proposed to spend $1 trillion in five years to redress the military balance. At their convention in Detroit, the Republicans proposed spending a good deal more to restore again the "military superiority" on which U.S. national security rested in the Eisenhower-Kennedy years.

The decline of American power is real. To a considerable extent it is a consequence of inevitable world political and economic developments some of which we encouraged ourselves. To a regrettable extent America's loss of power and loss of confidence is a direct consequence of self-inflicted wounds.

In 1941 Henry Luce coined the term "American Century"; four years later the United States emerged from the Second World War the preeminent power on earth. The catastrophe that brought Hitler's Reich and the Empire of Japan to their knees also brought devastation to America's principal allies. On the day of victory England was bankrupt, French and Italian society had dissolved, and the Russians were still burying their twenty million dead. The catastrophe that had destroyed most of the rest of the industrial world left the United States richer and stronger than ever before. The number-one nation was the world's banker, the sole possessor of the weapon that revolutionized politics, and the only nation capable of projecting its military power to the most distant points on the globe.

The American Century lasted about twenty-six years. Since 1945, three world historic forces have been at work which have over a generation fundamentally altered the power position the United States briefly enjoyed at the end of the war. The first was revolutionary nationalism which brought about the end of the European imperial systems. Decolonization, a process which the United States encouraged at the end of the war, has led to the emergence of a hundred or more new nations. Power has been widely diffused. The world is less neat and much less manageable than in the brief period of the "bipolar" world when reading the newspapers suggested that nothing happened in the world unless the United States or the Soviet Union was behind it.

The second force was the triumph of capitalism in the two defeated Axis powers. The United States played a major role

in the recovery of Germany and Japan, and it did so for sound economic and political reasons. Our market-oriented economy could not grow in a world in which the rest of the industrial world was stagnant. A permanently demoralized Germany and Japan would have been a breeding ground for war even if the Soviet Union had not existed. When the Cold War began, the economic and political reintegration of Germany and Japan into the industrial West appeared especially urgent. But the consequence of German and Japanese revival is a loss of American power. Their very existence as economic superpowers limits the autonomy of the United States. We are no longer free to manage our own economy as if other powerful industrial nations did not exist. The world monetary crisis of the 1970s and the decline of the dollar are evidence that we are no longer the sole impresario of the world economy.

The third force that changed America's power position was the arms race. It was inevitable that the Russians would acquire the atomic bomb and that once they did the enviable position the U.S. enjoyed in 1945 would be lost. The Soviet military buildup began in earnest after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. At some point in the late 1960s the Soviet Union achieved the capacity to destroy the United States in a nuclear war even if the United States struck first. The new reality has produced a qualitative change in the relationship between the two superpowers. As Henry Kissinger once put it, the notion of "superiority" now had no meaning. The threat to make nuclear war to advance political interests has become equally absurd for both nations.

There is a widespread view that the decline of American power is attributable to our flagging efforts in the arms race. Alarmist speeches about the "present danger" suggest that if only the U.S. would spend more on the military and use military power more aggressively, the decline in power could be reversed. Yet there is something unconvincing about the

argument. The United States has spent almost $3 trillion on national security since 1945. We are less secure today than we were then. Our military expenditures exceed those of all other nations for this period. We are the only nation in the world with a string of hundreds of bases far from our shores. We have more destructive power than any nation on earth has ever had. But we seem unable to translate this awesome array of lethal hardware into political power.

As the 1980s begin, the debate about national security has degenerated into a numbers game. We test reality to see if we are secure by counting all sorts of things. The United States has more bombs than the Russians. But the Soviets have more missiles than the Americans. U.S. missiles are more accurate; Soviet missiles are bigger and more destructive. If you take the last five years, the Soviet Union may well have "outspent" the United States. If you take the last fifteen years, it is clear that the United States has invested far more in the military than has the Soviet Union. What does it all mean? Does it matter?

In looking at national security in the 1980s one must to an extent look at numbers and try to understand what the military forces of the two sides are, what their purposes are, and how they might affect each other. But the larger questions have to do with the nature of military power itself. We are entering an era in which unprecedented limitations on military power now seem to apply. It is not that military power is useless. By no means. Organized violence is still the most persistent and obvious mechanism of political change around the world. But the "hypertrophy of war," as the military writer Walter Millis once put it, has fundamentally altered the relationship between war and politics. The very size and uncontrollability of military operations has seriously undermined their usefulness in the promotion of traditional national-security goals. War itself has become an uncontrollable chain reaction.

Our historical moment is punctuated by the atomic bomb, but it did not begin with the bomb. In 1910 Norman Angell, a British journalist, published *The Great Illusion,* a vastly popular book with a simple and appealing thesis: the interdependence of nations had rendered war obsolete and hence "improbable." The debris of modern war—"commercial disaster, financial ruin and individual suffering"—would so obviously fall on victor and vanquished alike that major military action was now unthinkable.

Scarcely four years later Europe was in flames; in just one month, August 1914, almost 300,000 Frenchmen died. *The Great Illusion* was itself an illusion. Or so it seemed. In fact the World War disproved one part of Angell's thesis and confirmed the other. As prediction it was a piece of naiveté. The prospects of catastrophic war did not turn out to be "pregnant with restraining influences," because the statesmen of Europe resolutely refused to face them. As Barbara Tuchman has so brilliantly shown in *The Guns of August,* they did not mean to go to war at all, and when they did they assumed that the war would be short because no one could afford a long one.

But the financial and economic interdependence of nations, it turned out, defined the new international reality even more decisively than Angell had suggested. The fruits of victory were scarcely distinguishable from the fruits of defeat—the bleeding of a generation, severe economic crisis, and the setting of the stage for a second round. One world war later, Angell's point was even clearer. The nations that started it were in ruins, as indeed were all the victors save one, and that nation, with a monopoly of world power unequalled in all history, was forced for its own economic survival to invest billions in the restoration of the nations that had attacked her, thereby creating formidable commercial rivals.

In the era of nuclear war there are no winners. According

to a 1980 study of the Office of Technology Assessment, a single nuclear weapon landing on Detroit could produce two million casualties immediately and "many" additional deaths from injuries. An attack limited to ten missiles on oil refineries could cause five million immediate deaths plus "cancer deaths in millions." An attack on a range of military and economic targets using a large fraction of the existing arsenal would cause up to 160 million immediate deaths plus tens of millions more who would die because the economy could no longer support them, and millions still more from long-term radiation effects. The happy outcome for the United States in the Second World War cannot be repeated. The circle Norman Angell described in 1910 has now been closed.

CHAPTER 2

In Search of the Military Balance

In the United States, surges of military spending traditionally follow the discovery of gaps between Soviet capabilities and our own. In the early 1950s it was the "bomber gap"; in the Kennedy era, the "missile gap." In the 1970s the discovery of three gaps has dominated the debate on national security: the spending gap, a new and different sort of missile gap, and a "doctrine" gap.

The dollar gap was discovered in 1975 when Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger announced that the Soviets were "outspending us by 50 percent." The following year, the CIA estimates of Russian military spending were doubled overnight because, as a recent Air Force study prepared by the U.S. Strategic Institute puts it, previous estimates had "been in error by as much as 100 percent." In fact the annual growth in Soviet expenditures continued to be steady and relatively modest. Between 1964 and 1974 the annual rate of growth in Soviet military expenditures averaged 2.7 percent. According to a 1980 CIA estimate, Soviet defense activities in the 1970–79 period "increased at an average annual rate of 3 per cent." From 1964 to 1968, U.S. military