

Never Look Back

by Tom Palaima

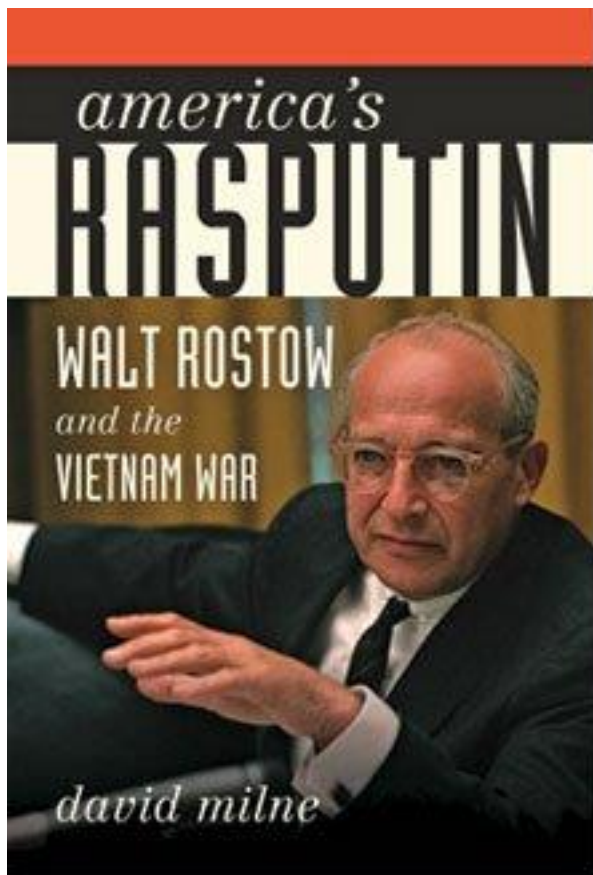
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On December 29, 1916, Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin, a mostly self-educated 47-year-old Siberian peasant, mystic, and adviser to Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra, was clubbed repeatedly, shot four times, wrapped in a sheet, and thrown into the icy Neva River. The Russian elite responsible for Rasputin's brutal murder blamed his influence over the Romanov rulers for Russia's economic difficulties.

On January 28, 1969, 52-year-old Walt Whitman Rostow, whose father had fled czarist Russia for the United States in 1904, vacated his White House office as special assistant for national security affairs and headed off to Austin, Texas, with, in his own words, his "wife, two teenage children, mother-in-law, [and] standard poodle."

Rostow had served for eight years in the State Department and in national security affairs under presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He strongly supported aggressive military solutions to Cold War conflicts in Laos, Vietnam, Cuba, and Eastern Europe. In regards to Southeast Asia, he pushed for intensive bombing and even pre-emptive American use of nuclear weapons. In military matters, we would now call Rostow a neocon.

Rostow's influence reached its pinnacle beginning in March 1966, when President Johnson appointed him special assistant to the president with primary responsibility for coordinating Vietnam policy-the position Rostow relinquished in January 1969 when Richard Nixon took office. By then, American troop deployments in Vietnam had nearly reached their zenith of 543,000, and the United States government was committed to Rostow's strategy of massive bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. Distinguished diplomat Averell Harriman, who during this period was charged by LBJ with making efforts toward peace, called Rostow "America's Rasputin," an allusion both to his father's Russian origins and to the harmful effects Harriman thought Rostow had on LBJ's Vietnam War policies.



In *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War*, David Milne, a lecturer in American foreign policy at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, makes a strong case that Harriman's view was correct, that Rostow's advice was a prime negative factor in American foreign policy decisions concerning Vietnam between 1960 and 1969. Milne gives us a good view of Rostow's background, his strengths, his flaws, and the accidents of fate that transformed an economic expert with no understanding of Southeast Asian political or cultural history into first a voice (from 1960 to 1966) and then, from 1966 to 1969, arguably the voice to which American presidents listened when deciding what to do in Vietnam.

Unlike Rasputin, Rostow grew up, as Milne describes, in middle-class comfort. He lived his teenage years, during the Great Depression, in "a series of increasingly spacious homes in pleasant parts of town in New Haven, CT." He received a first-rate education at Yale and Oxford, and then took up a series of prestigious academic appointments, interrupted by war service, at Columbia, Oxford, Cambridge, and finally, during the 1950s, MIT. During this time, Rostow used his gregarious charm and playful brilliance to get to know the people who would open doors for him into politics.

Rostow's eventual fate also differed from Rasputin's. Having become, as the violence of the Vietnam War escalated, an academic and political pariah for his unwaveringly hawkish views, Rostow entered a kind of intellectual exile at the University of Texas at Austin. There, he helped LBJ write his perfunctory presidential memoirs. Rostow was also involved in setting up the LBJ School of

Public Affairs, which admitted its first class in September 1970, and the LBJ Presidential Library, which opened in May 1971.

Again unlike Rasputin, Rostow long outlived the political leader whose career his advice helped destroy. After LBJ died in January 1973, Rostow continued to enjoy a privileged life of teaching and writing, voluminously, for another 30 years, until his own death in February 2003.

In UT's memorial resolution for Rostow, he is remembered by professor James Galbraith, of the LBJ School, as an "ideal academic colleague" who "never failed in courtesy or duty." One admiring student describes Rostow as a teacher "generous with his courtesy and respect" who "had strong opinions, but never was intolerant of the opinions of others." In the protected environment of Austin, where Lyndon and Lady Bird were so revered, and where Rostow and his wife Elspeth (who died in 2007) held prominent academic positions, the former national security adviser, who in David Halberstam's judgment "served the purpose of shielding the president from criticism and from reality," was himself shielded from having to confront, rigorously and systematically, the prevailing scholarly criticism of the military advice he had given to President Johnson. In 1986, Rostow declared of his crucial role in forming LBJ's Vietnam War strategies: "I don't spend much time worrying about that period."

As a young economic specialist, Rostow spent World War II in London in the Office of Strategic Services. There he helped select German targets for allied bombers. His analysis led him to conclude, according to Milne, that "destroying

Germany's oil storage facilities would wreak the most havoc in its war-making abilities."

Rostow argued in 1981 that Eisenhower's delay in bombing Germany's oil supplies had cost lives and given the Soviet army the opportunity to take so much of Eastern Europe that Stalin could "conceive as realistic the creation of a Soviet empire in Eastern Europe." In his 1972 book, *The Diffusion of Power*, Rostow argued that Kennedy's failure to invade Laos and North Vietnam in 1962, as Rostow had proposed, was "the greatest single error in U.S. foreign policy in the 1960s."

In Rostow's view, World War II would have ended sooner and better if the U.S. had used early air strikes to take out German "POL" (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) manufacturing capabilities. He retained a lifelong belief that by "destroy[ing] an enemy's energy resources, you critically impair its capacity for effective action." Rostow used this very rationale in support of the Rolling Thunder aerial bombardment of North Vietnam from March 1965 to November 1968.

A special national intelligence estimate concluded early on that Rolling Thunder's POL bombing campaign was not in fact creating the "insurmountable transportation difficulties, economic dislocation or weakening of the popular morale" in North Vietnam that Rostow had predicted. It never would, as Ho Chi Minh, General Giap, and North Vietnamese civilians remained resolute, thwarting

the objectives of Rolling Thunder by storing and moving POL and military weaponry and equipment in small and widely dispersed quantities.

Faced with preliminary evidence that contradicted his expectations, Rostow urged escalation of the bombing, precipitating a strong reaction from Harriman, who warned Russian Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that Rostow was “the administration’s most dangerous hawk” and that his attitude was “reckless and mistaken.”

It is one thing to be mistaken at any point in time. It is quite another never to reflect and change course. In Milne’s view, Rostow’s unshakable belief in his own ideas and his refusal to modify them based on alternative perspectives were almost pathological.

Milne believes the pattern was set early in Rostow’s career, when, for example, he declined to participate just after World War II in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey that evaluated “the effectiveness of American bombing in the Pacific and European Theaters.” Later critics of Rostow-advocated bombing in Vietnam, like George Ball, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., all served in the survey. Ball concluded that because Rostow refused to confront the consequences of his policies in World War II, he never grasped “the limited effect of bombing against a fanatical enemy.”

Indeed, the bombing survey’s conclusion with regard to Nazi Germany could and should have been applied to North Vietnam: “[C]ontinuous heavy bombing of the

same communities did not produce decreases in morale proportional to the amount of bombing.”

In this regard, Walt Whitman Rostow bore little relation to his namesake. Whitman’s appreciation of the horrific consequences of misused military might was gained as a volunteer nurse in Civil War battlefield hospitals, North and South. Rostow’s approach, by contrast, was, as Milne explains, “conceptual, and often brutal.” In an interview with Milne in 2002, discussing former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s book *In Retrospect* (1995), which acknowledged mistakes made in Vietnam, Rostow “questioned McNamara’s state of mind, implying that he suffered a nervous collapse that led to his unworthy work.”

The consequences, in human lives and suffering, of following Rostow’s advice grew to be staggering. Yet Rostow himself apparently never shared LBJ’s visible agony over the eventual loss of 58,000 American lives in Vietnam. The 2 million Vietnamese civilians, North and South, and the 1.1 million North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong dead were all, in Rostow’s own retrospective and highly debatable opinion, a necessary cost to “buy breathing room” to keep the rest of Southeast Asia free and economically viable.

In an epilogue, Milne relies heavily on historian Robert McMahon’s critical analysis of the reasoning in Rostow’s review of McNamara’s *In Retrospect*. Rostow’s review appeared as “The Case for the War” in *The Times Literary Supplement* of June 9, 1995. In McMahon’s opinion, “Rostow’s argument has a

veneer of intellectual respectability but is in reality compromised by dubious assumptions, doubtful logic, and significant leaps of faith.”

Rostow’s case is deeply troubling, indeed. He denies his own responsibility by advancing a perverse argument, namely that what geopolitical experts thought or advised did not matter; what presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy and Johnson thought did.

It is true that presidents, czars, and other heads of nation-states are responsible for making final decisions. But they rely on expert advice, especially in areas in which their own experience, understanding, or interest is limited. Rostow’s argument required him to assert, preposterously, that LBJ was well informed and interested in Asian affairs. He offers as evidence LBJ’s support of Hawaiian statehood in 1959 and his career-motivated whistle-stop in Australia during World War II.

Rostow also quotes public statements Kennedy made on network television in autumn 1963 about Vietnam and the domino theory as proof of Kennedy’s positions, despite the counterevidence of private discussions in which Kennedy expressed to advisers what he really thought—that Vietnam would turn into a quagmire. As Milne reports, JFK told Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that once the United States committed combat troops to Vietnam, “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 take another.”

Finally, Rostow gives no indication that he grasped the reason Kennedy removed him in November 1961 from his position in national security. Michael Forrestal, who was on the staff of the National Security Council, recalls Kennedy saying, "Walt is a fountain of ideas; perhaps one in ten of them is absolutely brilliant. Unfortunately six or seven are not merely unsound, but dangerously so. I admire his creativity, but it will be more comfortable to have him creating at some remove from the White House."

In forming his government after his election in 1960, JFK, after other options failed to work out, had taken the misguided step of appointing Rostow deputy special assistant for national security affairs, directly under National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy. As a senator, Kennedy had been impressed by Rostow's economic theories, formulated during the late 1950s as Rostow was writing his *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). Rostow's way with words was valuable to JFK as well. Kennedy borrowed the phrase "New Frontier" from Rostow's book, and Rostow provided the opening line for Kennedy's Democratic Convention acceptance speech: "The country is ready to start moving again and I am prepared to lead it."

But JFK remained wary of Rostow's penchant for "creative thinking." In fact, Milne argues that Kennedy appointed Rostow to team with Gen. Maxwell Taylor on their fact-finding mission to Vietnam in October 1961 so that Kennedy could maintain a cover of deniability. Kennedy, according to Milne, wanted "an aggressive report," but also to retain "latitude with regard to its implementation."

He would be more easily able to reject elements of the report by attributing them to “a maverick like Rostow.”

The Taylor-Rostow report led to an early expansion of American aid and American “advisers,” combat troops in disguise, in South Vietnam. It even put the idea of bombing on the table. Given that Rostow had advocated bombing North Vietnam and putting 25,000 troops along the North Vietnamese-Laotian border—a proposal to which the Joint Chiefs of Staff responded scathingly—this minimalist approach seemed cautious. But it was, to use Kennedy’s metaphor, “a first drink.”

The report also made Rostow’s extremist tendencies clear. In November 1961, Kennedy wisely decided to move Rostow out of the inner circle to a policy planning position in the State Department.

After Kennedy was killed, and as the political situation in South Vietnam grew more complicated, Rostow’s persistent, self-confident, and single-minded call for increased use of American military power finally bore fruit.

He appealed to LBJ as something of an outsider among the East Coast “whiz kid” advisers with whom Kennedy had surrounded himself, and whom LBJ inherited. When McGeorge Bundy resigned in early 1966, LBJ did not fill his position as national security adviser. Instead, he returned Rostow to the inner circle, eventually placing him at the very center of policy advising on Vietnam, with fatal consequences. From this time forward, Johnson relied heavily on discussions with a small cadre of advisers, including Rostow, at what was known as the

Tuesday Lunch. These meetings, conducted without a formal agenda or recorded minutes, proved a perfect environment in which an “American Rasputin” could exercise upon LBJ the very powers that JFK had warily kept at a distance.

Rostow’s contemporary Robert McNamara has achieved an almost tragic stature for coming close to an apology for his role in the Vietnam War. The tragic figures in Rostow’s life are the men, women, and children in the United States and Southeast Asia subjected to the terrible violence he advised two presidents to unleash. Unlike McNamara, Rostow never cared-or could never bring himself-to look back.

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