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John Rosenberg’s article on Eugene V. Rostow and the anti-détente movement provides a valuable insight into the political and ideological formations of a leading neoconservative voice. Rostow’s story is of interest to diplomatic historians both because he served as Under Secretary of State for political affairs during President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration,¹ and because in 1976 he founded the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a conservative think tank whose members influenced and populated the Reagan administration. In official and civilian capacities, Rostow’s ideas informed policy in different eras.

The structure of the article is coherent and well laid out, chronologically moving from Rostow’s return to private life in Yale law school in 1969, through the defining effects the 1973 October War had on Rostow’s attitude towards détente, as well as his correspondence with likeminded figures such as Paul Nitze and Albert Wohlstetter. Rosenberg then inspects Rostow’s efforts to debunk détente through the Coalition for a Democratic Majority in 1974, concluding with an assessment of how Rostow’s mid-1970s views of U.S. foreign policy compared to those of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

The crux of Rosenberg’s argument focuses on Rostow’s quick change of heart from terming détente as a “basically hopeful situation” (720) as late as October 1st 1973, to declaring that détente had brought about “the most dangerous moment since 1945” (720), less than a month later. This shift, Rosenberg shows, can be explained through Rostow’s understanding of the Arab-Israeli October War of 1973. Rostow saw the eruption of the October War as the “breakdown of Nixon and Kissinger’s foreign policy.” (722) He paid little attention to the Egyptian claim for the Sinai Peninsula which was lost to Israel in the June War of 1967. Instead, Rosenberg demonstrates, Rostow saw the October War as an occasion in which Soviet masterminds caught the Americans unprepared, and sought to “upend the balance of power in one fell swoop.” (744) For Rostow, the October War was not a conflict between Middle Eastern actors, but the culmination of a

¹ His brother Walt Rostow was also part of the administration, serving as Special Assistant for National Security Affairs from 1966–69.
successful Soviet attempt to use détente to fool the Americans into a false sense of security, before unleashing war and creating havoc in the West.

Rostow saw the clash between Egypt and Israel merely as an extension of the superpower struggle. While the U.S. mistakenly took the Soviet promises of détente literally and let their guard down, Rostow’s logic said, the Soviet puppeteers engineered the Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel, calculating that it would spur reverberating disturbances throughout the American sphere of influence. Ironically, whereas even the Israeli government recognized Israel’s failure by establishing the Agranat Commission to investigate the army’s low level of preparedness, Rostow could find no fault in Israel, refusing to see the Middle East in anything but Cold War terms. As Craig Daigle’s work has shown (and Rosenberg rightfully emphasizes), Rostow was wrong. The October War was not a Soviet plot. Détente contributed to the eruption of war not by Soviet design, but since it convinced Egyptian President Anwar Sadat that engaging in battle would be the only way to force Israel to negotiate and bring the superpowers to recognize Egypt’s claims for the Sinai Peninsula.

Rosenberg’s examination reveals that the mismatch between Rostow’s outlook and reality originated from his Orientalist perception of Arabs as inherently incompetent. The article successfully applies a cultural lens to the study of a political shift, building on the works of Edward Said, Melani McAlister, and Michelle Mart. Using Rostow’s recently available personal papers at Yale University and taking language seriously, Rosenberg shows that “race has profoundly influenced Eugene Rostow’s reaction to the October War” (723). Conceiving of Arabs as “feminine, emotional and childlike,” (723) Rostow, was thus never quite able or willing to credit them with the initiative and calculation that launched the surprise attack on the Israelis. Rostow contrasted a supposedly rational, Western, and white Israel with what he saw as “the state of psychological disorientation in the Arab mind” (729). Instead of allowing the October War to change his perception of Arab states, Rostow strove to pretend that he had known all along that détente would backfire. For him, the October War was the painful result of a longstanding Soviet ploy to “lull the West into a false sense of security” (722).

Interestingly, Rostow’s initial approval of détente was rooted not only in his convictions that the strategy brought stability to the international sphere, but also that it would bring stability at home. Rostow was disturbed by demonstrations against the Vietnam War at Yale, defining protestors as “the most immature students I have ever seen in their emotional responses to situations” (726). Rostow, Rosenberg elegantly clarifies, was not above emotional or impulsive behavior himself. From tearing down anti-war posters, to terming students who criticized his work in the Johnson administration as “unruly mob of legionnaires” (727) who behaved in a way incompatible with “the civility of academic life” (726), Rostow’s writings revealed deep frustration. Since Rostow’s support for détente up to the October War stemmed in part from his quest for domestic stability, it would be interesting to know whether domestic social considerations played any part

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in Rostow’s quick adoption of an anti-détente agenda, too. This issue is beyond the scope of Rosenberg’s already rich study, but it might deserve further consideration within an effort to grapple with the emergence of the right wing critique of détente.

In the final section Rosenberg is careful to clarify that the differences between Kissinger and Rostow should not be overstated, as they “were more tactical than strategic” (743). This is particularly true when considered within the broader arena of foreign-policy thinkers of the mid-1970s, which knew substantive strategic differences as well. The period between 1973 and 1976, when Rostow, as Rosenberg says, “made his claims seemingly in vain (721),” coincided with the ascension of Columbia university professor and soon-to-be President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. 4 Recent studies show that Brzezinski’s ambition to abandon a Soviet-centric foreign policy grew in the mid-1970s. 5 Given that Brzezinski’s ideas about the Middle East turned him into the target of accusations from the right, Rostow and Kissinger (both of whom favored Israel, as Rosenberg highlights) indeed seem like-minded by comparison.

In conclusion, Rosenberg’s fine article will prove instructive to historians interested in the development of neoconservative politics in the 1970s, the role of emotions and cultural perceptions in foreign relations, as well as American attitudes towards Israel and the Middle East as a whole. As a microhistorical study that focuses on a particular historical figure and assesses the implications of its changing attitudes over time, it could also provide a useful model for researchers who are working on the place of the biographic mode in diplomatic history.


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4 Brzezinski established the Trilateral Commission in 1975 together with David Rockefeller, and participated in the writing of the Brookings Report on American policy in the Middle East that same year, which supplied blueprints for Carter’s initial policy in the region.