Books

NATIONAL DEFENSE
by James Fallows
(Random House; 204 pp.; $12.95)

John B. Keeley

Though this is the “in” book on the current problems of our national security establishment, it is much more than a conversational cocktail canape. James Fallows, formerly a speech writer for President Carter, has made a substantial contribution to the growing public debate about the utility of present defense programs and their appropriateness to our real security needs. In the face of the massive Soviet military buildup there is increasing national realization of the need to improve our military capabilities; in response, the present administration is expanding defense programs that lack internal logic and suffer from questionable rationality while the nation suffers an economic crisis. Though the defense debate has spluttered along for years, the coincidence of these factors has served to refuel it. It will sputter more angrily in months to come.

“Three themes run through this book. The first and most important is that our national defense is in constant danger of being so borne away by theory that it loses touch with facts, historical experience, and simple common sense. A second theme is that the conduct of war, and the preparations to avoid it, are basically different from other things that human beings do and that the only way to think about them seriously is to understand them on their own terms. The third theme is that the truly urgent military questions have little to do with how much money we spend. Indeed, more money for defense, without a change in the underlying patterns of spending, will not make us more secure, and may leave the United States in a more vulnerable position than before.”

Fire off rockets! Ring bells! Declare a holiday! Finally, someone has been able to distinguish cause from effect. Fallows acknowledges that war has its own peculiar logic and that those who create weapons, forces, and systems in ignorance of this logic will surely build a defense establishment that is not congruent with the realities that war will impose upon it. It is often easier, of course, to state premises than to support them. Fallows, starting by his own admission with little knowledge of national security issues, has done a remarkable job of breaking into the murk that surrounds our national security policies and of coming out with coherent, manageable, and understandable analyses.

Three chapters merit particular mention. “Employees” sensitively describes the unique nature of military life. The inherent loyalties, affections, sacrifices, frustrations, and deep satisfactions that distinguish a military career from any civilian occupation are described with rare understanding. Beyond providing an interesting description of the cultural mores of the military tribes, this chapter provides a thoughtful analysis of how the All Volunteer Force has confused the military value system and, perhaps more importantly, degraded our military capabilities. Then there is “Theologians,” with the best and most understandable explanation of nuclear strategic doctrine I have ever read. If the concept of the “window of vulnerability” has puzzled you, this chapter will clarify all; a truly superb piece of analysis.

Finally, in a chapter called “Weapons,” Fallows discusses the M-16 rifle and the F-16 fighter plane. This is the section that has elicited the greatest controversy in the defense establishment. The story of the development of the M-16 illustrates how the military bureaucracy can take a fine weapon, the civilian-developed AR-15, and turn it into a less effective, more expensive, and, for a time, dangerously unreliable weapon. The documentation is taken largely from congressional hearings. It is a horror story, but it is true.

In his analysis of the F-16 fighter plane, however, Fallows stubs his toe. He attempts to show how the Air Force gold plates its weapons systems by pushing toward the technological state of the art. The results are oversophisticated weapons, increased costs, fewer weapons, and decreased performance and reliability. The F-16 started out as a relatively unsophisticated and highly maneuverable clear-air (rather than all-weather) fighter costing less than $20 million. When the Air Force had finished, the fighter was more sophisticated, more expensive by $5 million, and, according to Fallows, less capable. The difficulty with this argument is that the “simple fighter” does not exist and no comparisons of flying performance can be made. The present, sophisticated F-16 is the finest fighter of its type in the world. It outperforms comparable aircraft dramatically. Though I am not alone in agreeing with Fallows’s premise, the F-16 is a poor case to use in evidence. It is unfortunate that controversy over this issue has clouded the book’s value.

Those who argue that Fallows is a novice in defense matters and that the defense debate is better left in the hands of those who “understand” the special nature of our national security systems are wrong. Fallows thinks clearly and well. He writes superbly. He has made a most important contribution to what one can only hope will be a continuing and intelligent public discussion of the nation’s defense policies for the 1980s. To understand this debate you must read National Defense.