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BOOK REVIEW

Top Secret

Gregg Herken

The Jasons: The Secret History of Science's Postwar Elite. Ann Finkbeiner. xi + 304 pp. Viking, 2006. \$27.95.

There are, as every scientist knows, unintended consequences in scientific discovery. One unintended consequence of the Manhattan Project was briefly to convince a large segment of the American public that scientists—specifically, physicists—can solve just about any problem. The public attitude toward science and scientists is a little more cynical these days. But, fortunately, most scientists (especially physicists) seem to have retained a faith in their talent at problem solving.

The focus of Ann Finkbeiner's book *The Jasons* is a small and elite group of scientists—once consisting almost exclusively of physicists, but now more ecumenical—who since 1960 have helped the government find solutions to particularly difficult technical problems, mostly having to do with defense. During the Cold War, the Jasons were a hush-hush organization, much like the National Security Agency. Today, they labor not so much in secret as in obscurity—which, one learns from Finkbeiner's book, is the way most Jasons prefer it.

Fittingly, the origins of the Jasons were once obscure. Previous accounts have claimed that the organization was named for a member's dog or that the inspiration came from the late Senator Proxmire's annual "Golden Fleece" award, which he gave to the government-funded project he considered the most wasteful of federal dollars. Finkbeiner does a thorough and convincing job of tracing the Jasons back to their true beginnings, in prose that is always accessible and with stories that are often fascinating—in large part because the focus of the book is on the individual Jasons themselves. Finkbeiner interviewed roughly half of the current and past membership, 36 individuals altogether, although some—including a scientist identified only as "Dr. X"—were chary of being mentioned by name.

That reluctance becomes understandable in these pages. Although always operating behind the curtain, the Jasons have given each administration since Eisenhower's advice on virtually every expensive (and controversial) military procurement decision, including the anti-ballistic missile (ABM), Vietnam's electronic barrier (the so-called McNamara Line) and Ronald Reagan's proposed Strategic Defense Initiative, better known as "Star Wars."

Not surprisingly, Vietnam gave the Jasons their most traumatic moments, individually and as an organization. Although the aim of the electronic barrier was simply to use then-state-of-the-art sensors to intercept North Vietnamese troops and supplies headed down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam, the Jasons' involvement with the project caused some of them to be branded "baby killers" and others to be hounded off their own college campuses by protesters.

By focusing on some of the more colorful Jasons, Finkbeiner shines a spotlight on the activities of the group as a whole. However, her study also has the limitations of a spotlight, in that it leaves the surrounding countryside in relative darkness. And, in the history of the Jasons, context is key. The Jasons have traditionally and self-consciously stuck to giving strictly technical advice because of the fate of their predecessors—such scientists as Robert Oppenheimer—who strayed across that line into the political realm. Even though the object lesson is now more than a half-century old, the case of Oppenheimer—who, with his colleagues, advised President Truman not to proceed with the hydrogen bomb for essentially ethical reasons, because it was a "weapon of genocide" and "an evil thing"—remains no doubt fresh in every Jason's mind. Truman ignored those scientists, as many presidents since have ignored advice given by the Jasons; but the latter, at least, have not suffered the fate of Oppenheimer, who was pilloried by the government for having let political views trump his scientific judgment. It is a lesson the Jasons have learned well. There is a crucial difference between scientific advice and advice from scientists, as physicist Richard Garwin, a longtime Jason, is fond of saying.

The Jasons have been forced to change with the times, and most of them believe these changes have been for the better. Chemists and even biologists have joined the physicists, and at least a few current Jasons are women. Since the end of the Cold War, however, one senses that the Old Guard misses not having the fate-of-the-Earth sort of problems that used to be the Jasons' usual fare: problems like nuclear winter and ICBM "fratricide." Instead, the old-timers grumble that they are reduced to dealing with "dogs and cats"—minor, short-term problems—and fear that the organization itself will become a mere "job shop" for the Defense Department. But other, younger Jasons have already turned to the study of global warming and to finding ways of improving intelligence with the aim of preventing future terrorist attacks.

Ironically, the Jasons' greatest achievements, Finkbeiner concludes, are probably invisible: They are the weapons that the Pentagon didn't build, and the steps that presidents haven't taken. It is in some part because of the Jasons that there are no missile bases on the Moon and that tactical nuclear weapons were never used in Vietnam. These accomplishments alone are an invaluable contribution.

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