

In Memoriam: John Erickson (1929-2002)

by Mark Burdman

In October and December of last year, my colleague Michael Liebig and I had the honor of meeting Prof. John Erickson in Edinburgh, for two extended discussions. The density and intensity of these discussions was, for both of us, awesome. The range of themes was enormous.

Among those, was his constant stress, conveyed to us as an impassioned plea, that informed people in the West, have got to take the ideas of Russian military planners seriously, and reject the opportunism and linear thinking so characteristic of “Kremlinology.” Another theme that was striking, was his view of the events of Sept. 11. He was one of those rare individuals who had a real comprehension of what had happened on that date. He would frequently shake his head and say, “Someone shut down the system; they just down the system!” He was sure that an “inside job” was involved, that the “Osama bin Laden did it” line was a crude myth concocted to draw attention away from reality, and that the events of Sept. 11 were a decisive moment, in a “vast geostrategic re-configuration” that was taking place in the world.

Perhaps most startling, were his insights into the famous telephone discussion on Sept. 11, between Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia and George W. Bush of the United States. Erickson was one of the few people in the world with intimate knowledge of the nuclear command-and-control systems in both the United States and Russia, and was intimately aware of how sensitive and intricate such matters are, of how close the world could have been, that day, to an unimaginable strategic disaster, had the coup-in-process succeeded, and had such an unusual phone discussion not taken place.

I now grasp what an extraordinary privilege it was to have had such discussions with him. They were among the last in-depth discussions that he would have. On Feb. 12, we learned with immense sadness that on Feb. 10, Professor Erickson died in Edinburgh.

When meeting him, we were aware that he was struggling against monstrous health problems; he had nearly died over the 1999-2000 New Year.

We were also aware to what an extent, he was driven by a sense of *mission*: He would not “abandon the ship,” at his office at the Department of Defense Studies, at the University of Edinburgh. He knew that he was indispensable for making correct judgments and estimates on sensitive matters pertaining to Russia, and on other issues which are of great relevance to the future of humanity.

Making his sense of mission more urgent, was his justifi-

able alarm, that the generation of experts coming after him and others of the “World War II veteran generation,” is, to a very significant extent, *systemically incapable of thinking*.

One of his latter-day activities, he told us proudly, was an initiative to reactivate older academics and others who were languishing in retirement. His conviction was that these are the people who are now indispensable, for regenerating our corrupted society.

A Commitment To Truth

I think of John Erickson’s life and work on two levels. Most important, to me, was his ruthless integrity and commitment to *truth*, his refusal to compromise with cheap-shot fads. His student Christopher Bellamy summed up it in his Feb. 12 tribute to Erickson in the London *Guardian*: “John had little time for performance criteria, men in suits, political correctness, spin, or form over substance. . . . He once said that ‘good scholarship is good morality.’ ”

Having spoken to Erickson at least 200 times over more than two decades, I remember many occasions in which he lashed out at the recklessness, foolishness, and ignorance in much of what passes for “strategic thinking” in the Anglo-American realm, and in the policy of governments, particularly the British and American governments, today.

The other reality, is that over an academic career of close to 50 years, John Erickson became the leading Western expert on Soviet, and later, Russian military strategy. But his was not just an academic interest. With his in-depth knowledge of the Russian language and history, Erickson had, as Bellamy writes, “a unique insight into the heart, mind, and soul” of both Soviet Russia, and the nation of Russia that has succeeded it. He interpreted the Russians not only for the West, but most interestingly, often for the Russians themselves!

As several among the Feb. 12 obituaries document, and as various people, including Erickson himself, confirmed to me, he was perhaps the only Western academic/strategic interlocutor whom the Soviet military command *trusted*. The reason was not only his expertise in military engineering and his preference for seeing reality through the eyes of an engineer rather than, as he sneered, “a Kremlinologist.” More than this, they saw in him an honesty and integrity, and a commitment to tell the truth—even if that meant, on occasion, telling the Russians what mistakes they had made, or were making. They also knew Erickson to be somebody who absolutely rejected the nostrums of simplistic Cold War