



WAR & PEACE



Rumors Of War

by Ellen Goodman

I don't know how Jimmy the Greek would figure the odds, but Americans are wagering that there'll be a war.

Two out of three of us believe it is likely — very likely, somewhat likely — that we'll be involved in a war in the next few years.

The poll taken a few weeks ago, even before Sadat was killed, didn't say exactly what kind of war we expect — nuclear or conventional, here or over there — but it chronicled the march of our darkest expectations. Fifty-nine percent in February, sixty-eight percent in October.

The figures occupied just a small piece of space in the paper. They were not accompanied by alarm bells, or even surprise. Rather, the opinion was gathered and greeted with the emotion of a people already numbed for war.

It's possible that our current attitude is short-term, that it peaks now because of all the war talk, the war charts, the war papers that have become standard issue from a Defense Department trying to sell us a new outfit of nuclear weapons. Their checklists of "Us Against Them," "Ours Against Theirs," are written as if the United States and Russia were already in combat. If the enemy is here, can the war be far behind?

But it's also possible that this expectation of war grows out of causes more permanent than the current defense of Defense, even the current crisis in the Middle East. It may come rather from this long-term deepening pessimism about the possibility of any lasting peace, ever.

Once there was a generation that believed in wars to end all wars. The very phrase is now a symbol of the deadly scam of World War I. Today we have a generation that believes in a war to end all life.

Once there was a generation that saw a line of progress in history. Today we have a generation that looks back and sees ever more destructive cycles. We see centuries pulsating with war and peace, war and peace.

Like history students who study the human saga using war as the highlight, the dateline, the climax of each era — peace seems sometimes in our despair, like nothing more than the setup for another war.

So today we even wonder whether there is an intrinsic flaw in the human character, whether we are all like nursery school children who keep building towers and destroying them to build and destroy again.

This season, I know very few people who think Russians or Americans can win a nuclear war. But I know many who fear we could wage one. "We are living," said Eugene Rostow, "in a pre-war and not a post-war world."

The most dangerous aspect of our deepening depression is that it comes now with a sense of impotence.

Sixty-eight percent of us — an enormous number — may expect war, but few of us want it. Still we feel defeated in the face of "forces for war." So, a potential peace constituency is trapped by a self-fulfilling belief in its powerlessness.

Not all of us are paralyzed by what Doctor Helen Caldicott calls this "psychic numbing." Some people have broken through this by joining the new peace groups of the nuclear age, from Physicians for Social Responsibilities to the Committee for National Security. Others have begun by shattering the illusions of survivability. In Cambridge, Massa-

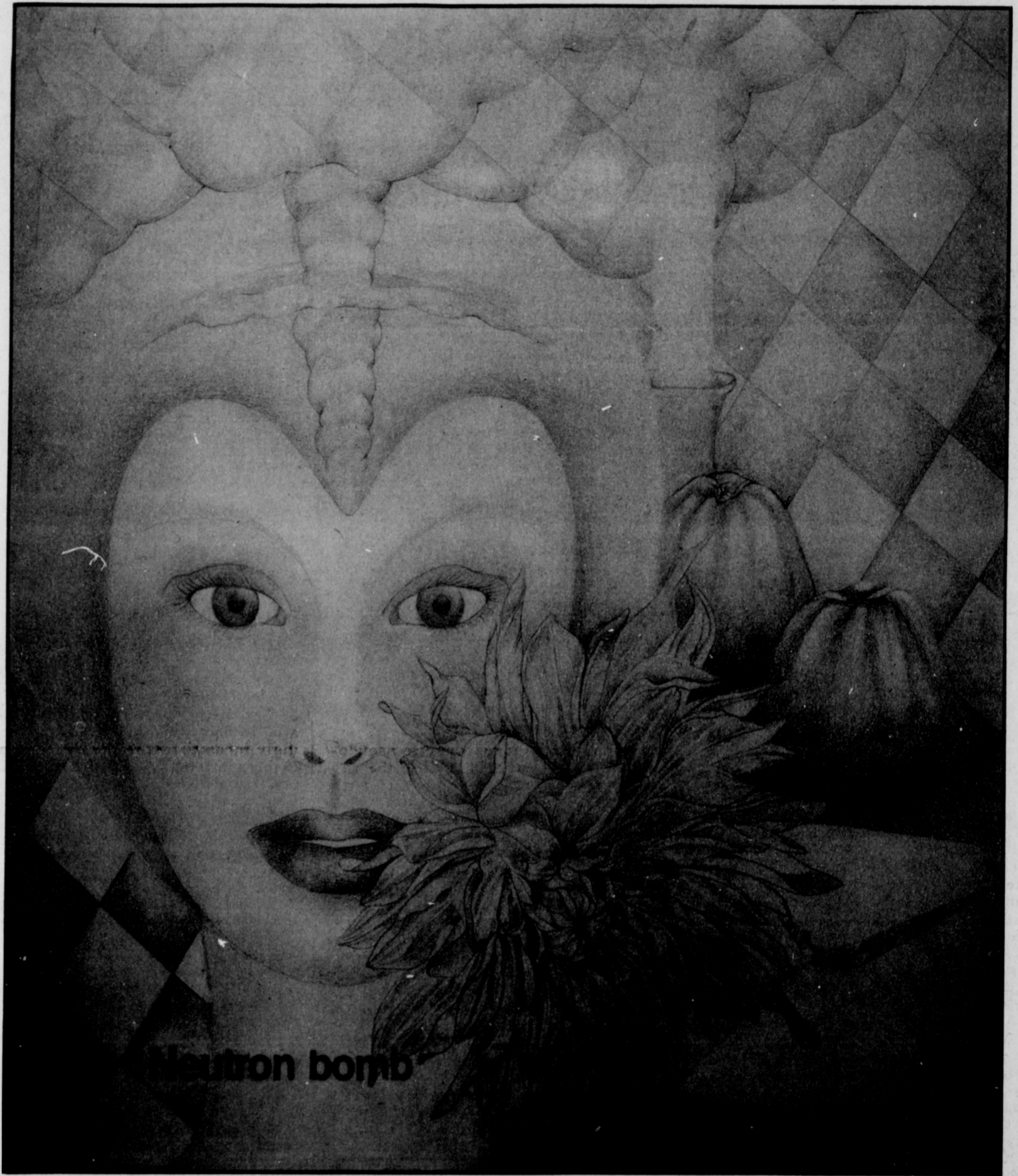
chusetts, the city leaders have taken funds allotted for the myth of civil defense and used them for educational projects for "waging peace."

Still others are trying to shake young people out of their fatal futility by teaching them how people make decisions, how people make a difference. In a pilot project, called Facing History and Ourselves, students in Brookline, Massachusetts, and elsewhere are taught about the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide and nuclear war. They learn that crises are not merely the result of these "forces," but of decisions people make — including the decision to stand by passively, expecting and experiencing the worst.

But most of us are still passive. It's always hard to think about the unthinkable. It's hard even to give up the sense of fate and exchange it for struggle.

But if sixty-eight percent of us expect the worst without fighting it, we will also be responsible for the worst. We will end up helping to fulfill Einstein's worst prophecy: "The splitting of the atom has changed everything save man's mode of thinking. . . thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe. . ."

Ellen Goodman's article is reprinted from the Washington Post.



Drawing by Lee Marcus

In Some Dark Region

There was a poll conducted in California last spring in which a random sample of people were asked two questions: Do you believe that there will be a nuclear war and do you believe you will survive it? To the astonishment of these particular pollsters, eighty-four percent of those responding said that yes, they believed there would be a nuclear war and no, they did not believe they would personally survive it.

I was so shocked and so doubtful, so skeptical about that poll, and it bothered me so much, that a few days later, I tried it on one of my classes at Harvard. I picked a class which was as representative as possible with Harvard undergraduates, divinity students and students from other divisions of the university, about a hundred students in all. To my shock and chagrin, roughly the same percentage responded the same way. About eighty to eighty-five percent said yes, they believed there would be a nuclear war and no, they did not believe they would personally survive it. . . .

Perhaps a bit provincially, I was

skeptical of California, wondering what California people are thinking about when such a poll is taken. However, my skepticism had to be set aside when my own students responded the same way. These are not people who are living for the moment. These are not people who are living today as though there will be no tomorrow. We like to think of Harvard as one of the last bastions of delayed gratification, as a place where people work now with the thought that at some future moment they will be able to give leadership in the various sectors of society. There were students there from the medical school, the education school, the law school, divinity school. These were people who are staying up late nights working on projects and term papers and yet, in some dark region of their hearts, they don't believe there's any future that they are really preparing for.

— Harvey Cox, from the September, 1981 issue of "Fellowship," a publication of the Fellowship of Reconciliation