

Szilard echoed Niels Bohr's wish for an open international covenant with nuclear weapons when he said "these decisions ought to be based not on the *present* evidence relating to atomic bombs but rather on the situation which can be expected to confront us in this respect a few years from now."

Niels Bohr understood that the bomb was a source of terror but also a source of hope, "a means of welding together the nations by their common dread of a menacing nuclear stand-off," wrote Richard Rhodes in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. "The problem was not exchanging information to improve America's moral standards; the problem was leaders sitting down and negotiating a way beyond the mutual danger the new weapons would otherwise install. The opening up (of knowledge about the atomic bomb) would emerge out of those negotiations, necessarily to guarantee safety; it could not in the real world of secrecy and suspicion realistically precede them."

Though Rhodes writes that no one "should presume to judge these men as they struggled with a future" that no one could "barely imagine," the future they created started off wrong. Instead of opening up to the world the U.S. denied information about the bomb to the Russians thereby guaranteeing a nuclear arms race. The arms race began when the U.S. attempted to impress Russia with its military might so that it might be more manageable at the Potsdam conference in May 1945, directly after the Nazi surrender, and withdraw its troops from Eastern Europe.

J. Robert Oppenheimer, who ran Los Alamos when it built the first atomic bomb, thought about "the implications for mankind for the thing we had created and the wall into the future we had breached." Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson might have had it right when he lamented, in Oppenheimer's recollection, "the appalling lack of conscience and compassion that the war had brought about...the complacency, the indifference, and the silence with which we greeted the mass bombings in Europe and above all, Japan." Oppenheimer said that Stimson felt, "as far as degradation went, we had had it; that it would take a new life and a new breath to heal the harm."

Or as General Curtis LeMay, commander of the B-29s firebombing Japanese cities, put it, "We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we roasted a town." Those firebombings were even used as a basemark for use of the atomic bomb that, in the words of one government official, the "number of people that would be killed by the bomb would not be greater than the number already killed in fire raids." Total death in total war, as Rhodes called it.

Paradoxically, it was the United States that initially offered a blueprint for the abolition of nuclear weapons, suggesting "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all major weapons adaptable to mass destruction..."

The U.S. plan was named after its representative to the United Nations Atomic Energy Council, Bernard Baruch, who said in 1946, "The search for the absolute weapon has reached fruition in this country. But she stands ready to proscribe and destroy this instrument -- to lift its use from death to life -- if the world will join in a pact to that end." Nations under the Baruch Plan would be barred from acquiring, developing and possessing nuclear weapons, and all nuclear materials and production plants would be placed under international control. The Soviets countered with their own ban of nuclear weapons, but the icy chill of the impending Cold War polarized discussions until, in 1949, the Soviets test exploded their first nuclear weapon.

The Cold War did not completely freeze out the idea of eliminating nuclear weapons. In September 1961, the U.S. and USSR issued a joint statement agreeing to the "elimination of all stockpiles of nuclear, chemical, bacteriological, and other weapons of mass destruction, and cessation of the production of such weapons; (and the) elimination of all means of delivery of mass destruction." This effort, however, was a victim of the increased heating up of the Cold War which culminated the following year with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest the world has so far come to nuclear war.

Still the worst moment of the Cold War (and perhaps the pivotal moment of human history, which might have ended there), it is now said that our planet and species were not as close to obliteration as the participants thought, and a number of other brushes with nuclear oblivion followed, most publicly unknown, others from well-publicized systems failures -- in particular a few frightening instances of computer malfunctions averted breathtakingly close to the point of no return. (A 13 cent part was at fault in one glitch, an interesting comment on the price of civilization.)

The Cuban crisis started when the U.S. discovered Russian nuclear missiles being emplaced on the island in late October 1962. The Russians claimed they thought the U.S. was about to invade Havana, which the U.S. has denied (though the previous year it sponsored the Bay of Pigs fiasco and attempted several times to assassinate Fidel Castro). President Kennedy and his advisors demanded the missiles be removed and a naval blockade was set up to prevent Russian vessels from delivering any more of the weapons. In a very short time the dispute reached for the doomsday button. The American myth is that the Soviet Union backed down from the brink of extinction and removed its missiles from Cuba. In reality U.S. and Soviet political leaders cut an 11th hour deal (the Soviets to withdraw their missiles from Cuba, the U.S. to remove some obsolete missiles from the Soviet border with Turkey) because the military juggernauts of both countries were moving inexorably toward nuclear confrontation.

The United Nations, which was born 50 years ago in the spring of 1945, helped prevent the Cold War from turning into a holocaust. The UN provided a valuable though often imitating forum for world opinion and was a center for secret crisis negotiations. The mere existence of the UN often helped diffuse otherwise unendurable pressures in the turbulent years that followed World War 2.

At a time when the U.S. and USSR were settling into a Cold War status quo and recognizing a balance of terror that made it absurd to initiate a nuclear war because both would be



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obliterated, communist China, which joined the nuclear club to the consternation of the two primary superpowers, was accepting the discarded notion that nuclear war was not only inevitable but winnable. This contradiction, and Maoist China's adoption of Stalinism just as Russia was abandoning it, produced an ideological schism which is considered more profound than any since Catholicism split between Rome and Constantinople.

The nuclear arms race quickened in the Reagan years. The U.S. readopted its formerly repudiated policy of arming for a winnable war. The balance of terror became a rapidly shifting teeter-totter during the early 1980s. New generations of horror were poked like chips -- and psychologically it seemed in the upper levels of government that denial matched the pace of reality: the more bizarre and dangerous the arms race got, so equally were official dismissals of the fears of holocaust their actions precipitated.

Though the Reagan policy was irresponsible and skirted oblivion, the renewed and more vigorous than ever arms race broke the Soviet Union which was already fatally strained by internal contradictions and ruptures. Russian Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's remarkable personal appeal might have been a singular factor that put the brakes on the virtually out of control rush toward nuclear confrontation. Attempting to save his crumbling empire, Gorbachev tapped into the great worldwide angst about nuclear weapons in order to slow down the arms race which was bankrupting the USSR. He succeeded in ending the Cold War but the Soviet empire imploded.

Although schoolchildren conducted "Duck & Cover" drills throughout the Cold War, Americans have been reluctant to teach their children about nuclear war while building ever more grotesque weapons. An example is an attempt by Oregon to establish a curriculum pertaining to nuclear war in the state's public elementary and high schools. The idea was to develop a program of the history of the Nuclear Age and the arms race that so quickly developed, the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, the effects upon national economies and ambitions, and alternate forms of resolving conflict short of war in general. The issue caused intense and heated debate. Supporters (mostly Democrats) said teaching children about nuclear war might be an important step toward averting holocaust. Opponents (mostly Republicans) said it would create fear in children and weaken the nation's resolve to defend itself. Essentially, the people who didn't want kids to know about nuclear war were those whose policies encouraged it. One state representative (a Republican) compared nuclear education to sex education, which he said produced more pregnancies, abortions and homosexuals than before it was taught.

(A 10 year old girl wrote a letter to an Oregon newspaper a few years ago. She had just watched a movie about

nuclear war and she was afraid for her future. "I don't want war to happen," she wrote. "If a bomb does explode now, I think I'd rather die than live. Now when I think of my future I think of nothing. I hope a war will never happen.")

International concern over skyrocketing nuclear arsenals finally prompted the United Nations to hold for the first time a special session on disarmament in 1978. Signed by all UN members, the conference called on nuclear weapons nations to focus their efforts on the elimination of nuclear weapons:

"Nuclear weapons pose the greatest danger to mankind and the survival of civilization. It is essential to halt and reverse the nuclear arms race in all its aspects in order to avert the danger of war involving nuclear weapons. The ultimate goal in this context is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The most effective guarantee against the danger of nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons is nuclear disarmament and the complete elimination of nuclear weapons."

Humanity will either obliterate humanity or preserve it. An indication that the species might be worth preserving will be its courage to try. A species' extinction might begin when increasing numbers of its members lose hope for themselves and their future; when they stop their inner clocks because they perceive life as unbearable or useless. Some lasting effect must be a result of this hopelessness, a decline, a loss of energy and will, and the cleverness indispensable for survival.

The human race is not unlike any other life form that has lived temporarily on Earth. Like its individual members the species must eventually die, and like a person it can die at any age or stage of its development. The richness of its past, its dreams or schemes, its successes and failures, none of these is a case against death. The very quality that forced human rule over the Earth, our ruthless and intelligent violence, is the obstacle to our continued existence. We differ from our extinct predecessors in that our threatened oblivion is from our own industry, and in the possibility that we might overcome our history and survive awhile longer.

Though it lasted less than a generation, the Armistice of World War 1 was a hope that humanity's addiction to warfare must finally end because war had become too horrible to bear. Ironically, that hope accompanied the larger fears of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War: that a balance of terror made war obsolete. That balance, horrible as it was, is considered preferable to the post-Cold War uncertainty of a wild card nuclear club that has been released from the restraints of collective oblivion; rogues are unfettered.

We cannot uninvent nuclear weapons. The knowledge of them is with us for as long as *homo sapiens sapiens* defies its own handicaps and dwells in the galaxy. If we are not smart enough to contain our atomic goblin our ruined cities will leave no trace that we once briefly and foolishly ruled Earth.

There is nothing more political than the wish of the human race to survive upon its home planet. Thomas Jefferson wrote that the care of human life and happiness and not their destruction was the first and only legitimate object of good government. The power of the vote was a recognition by his founder peers that the usual relationship between citizen and ruler is hostility. The question of whether the United States is any longer (or ever has been) an open government must not overshadow the real fact that it still must generally and eventually respond to essential demands of its majority.

A majority begins with one. It is the great mass of ordinary people who will and must prevent world suicide. It must be done by everyone, beginning with each one. Each of us will die, either privately or as part of the extinction of the species if we do not arrest the dangers of nuclear violence. There are good reasons we must each die, primary among them to make room and leave a few resources for our descendants. What is different now is that we must step outside our small fears and immediate prejudices and insure a world for our inheritors. There has never been a more personal or more universal struggle in our history.

HISTORY LESSON

Class,
I must apologize
for the film we are about to see.
If you would like to be excused,
I will give you a pass to the library.
If you have a weak stomach,
you may wish to be excused.
(I cannot be held responsible for any
sudden loss of innocence.)
I cannot be held responsible
after the rain, or when the skin slips
off like a glove, or when you see
the person without a mouth.

You will be responsible for anything I write
on the blackboard:

50,000 dead instantly,
within 10 miles of center.
100,000 died later,
within 50 miles of center.
Today's bombs: 200,000 x Hiroshima,
Nagasaki.

(And you will be held responsible
for the knowledge.)

~GERRY FOOTE



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