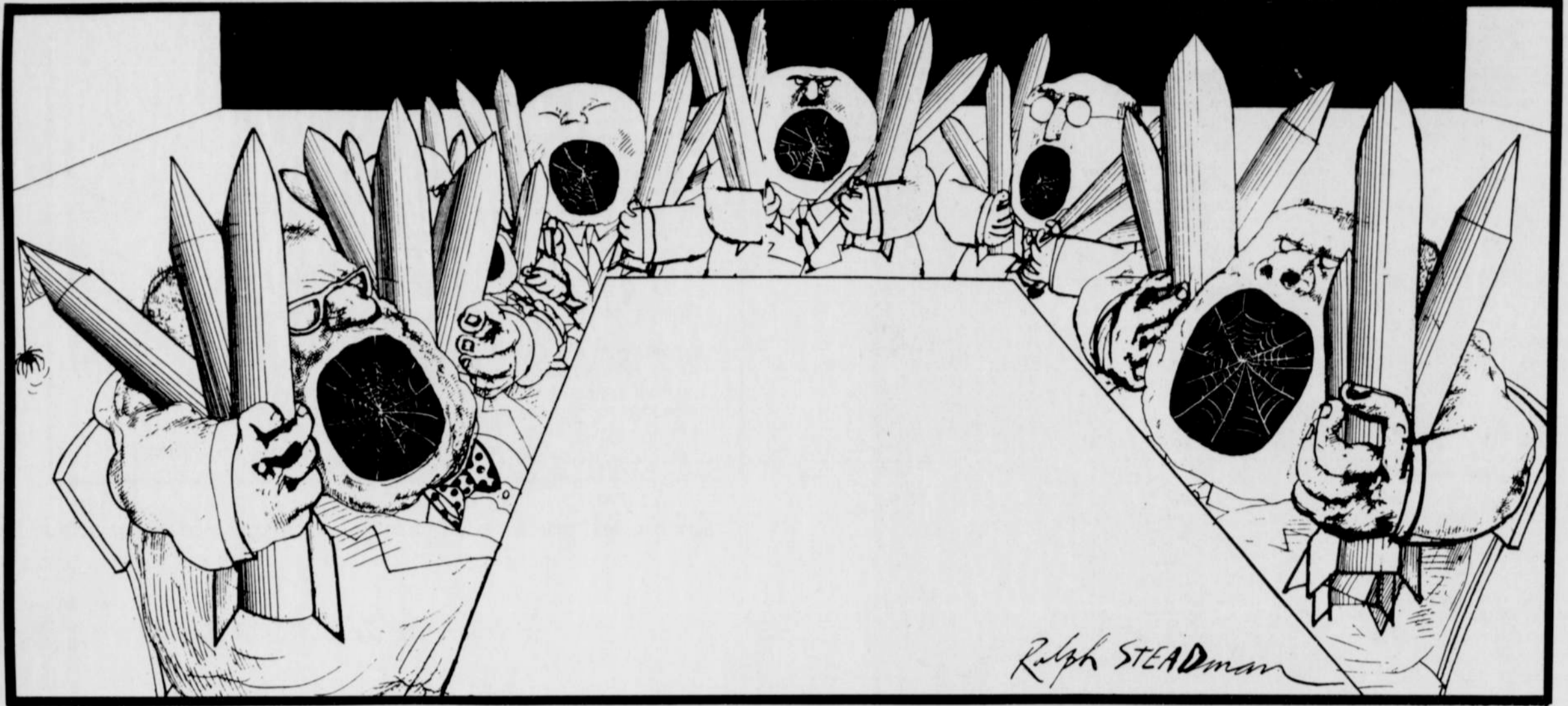


# SALT'S SAVOR LOST



RALPH STEADMAN, 'DISARMAMENT TALKS'

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

*"It would indeed be a tragedy if the history of the human race proved to be nothing more than the story of an ape playing with a box of matches on a petrol dump."*

—DAVID ORMSBY GORE

Wars are humanity's most compelling and dramatic business, and as a result arouse and disturb generations far into the future. Late summer marks the beginnings of three 20th century wars that continue to severely oscillate the United States. The first started 89 years ago in August 1914 when the armies of Europe clashed in an explosion that quickly stalemated into a four-year butchery known now as World War 1, but was then hoped to be the war to end all wars because of its unprecedented horror. Sixty-four years ago, on September 1, 1939, the mechanized army and air force of Nazi Germany started World War 2 with a blitzkrieg of Poland, Germany's second attempt in a quarter century to seize dominance of Europe — Europe's second Thirty Years War, in which millions died and great cities were bombed to rubble; the war spread around the world and involved every nation, "the largest event in the history of humankind," John Keegan has written. Perhaps less world shaking than the World Wars but more adverse to the personal matrix of American society, a few questionable attacks on U.S. destroyers by North Vietnamese patrol boats in early August 1964 led to the Tonkin Resolution, a fabrication blown up to Pearl Harbor proportions by the U.S. government to legitimize its escalating military role in Vietnam.

These wars (and a few others) combined to tear apart civilization and their aftershock schisms wrack its repair at the beginning of the 21st century, which is already two years into what might very well be a protracted and ultimately futile worldwide war against terrorism conducted primarily between the United States and what are euphemistically called "low intensity" forces. The great conflict at the heart of the 20th century produced the means to obliterate civilization entirely.

Then, at the origin of the nuclear age, could have been the opportunity — if there ever has been one — to put an end to warfare as a rational response to the real probability of human suicide. Instead rivalry between the victors of World War 2 produced a half-century supranational conflict by two competing superpowers and led to a nuclear arms race that more than once blundered the world to the margin of obliteration.

Even now, more than a decade after the end of the 50-year Cold War, at least half of all Americans expect a new war will end in nuclear devastation (not helped by the current desire of the Bush administration to amp up nuclear weapons development in the USA). Many Americans, especially since 9/11 fear something like the Holocaust of World War 2 could recur — millions gassed, starved or shot in concentration camps.

The mutual distrust and worldwide militant aspirations and competition that characterized the surging growth of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union spoiled virtually every opportunity for disarmament but caused a certain orderliness based on a hypothesis of assured mutual destruction. The scale and breadth of the nuclear arms race and magnitude of the nuclear arsenals that grew out of it can only be grasped by examining the prolonged, intense, perplexing and often mendacious process of hammering out treaties to prevent nuclear war while simultaneously expanding the quantity and lethality of nuclear weapons.

Sidney Lens wrote in *The Progressive* in 1982 that American and Soviet diplomats had met at least 6,000 times since the end of World War 2 to discuss nuclear disarmament but not a single weapon had been eliminated. On the contrary, he wrote, the nuclear arms race had escalated relentlessly with the superpowers in possession of firepower in excess of two million times all the bombs, grenades and bullets used in World War 2. By the time of that article the world had entered what was called the Second Nuclear Age, the age of plutonium and proliferation in which about 40 nations had the capacity to produce nuclear weapons — which essentially meant that the generally watered-down and self-serving agreements of the superpowers to limit nuclear weapons were a charade of titans who once had all the power and acted as though they still did, as if their decisions were the only ones that mattered.

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 foreshadowed the real possibility of devastating nuclear confrontation and led to the process of arms negotiations. It was the closest to nuclear war the superpowers came, and although it is now supposed humanity was not as close to obliteration as the participants thought, they were certain at the time they had lost control of their head-to-head encounter and all that was left to do was mutually push the doomsday button.

Beginning with Harry Truman, every Cold War U.S. President spoke of the need to achieve what Jimmy Carter and his successor Ronald Reagan called "zero nuclear weapons." Yet under each administration the numbers of nuclear weapons increased until the arms race with the Soviet Union became virtually self-propelling and might have been irreversible but for the sudden collapse of Russia's communist regime.

After the Cuban missile crisis attempts were made to at least slow the arms race down. In 1967 President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin were to begin discussions that would start a process of arms talks, but they broke off when the Soviets intervened in Czechoslovakia the following year. Eleven years later the U.S. refused to ratify a culmination of the restored negotiations, the second Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The presidential election year that followed gave the USSR no quarter: not even American liberals were in favor of restoring negotiations, and the victorious right wing campaigned on a ticket of nuclear superiority.

For most of its first year in office the administration of Ronald Reagan was disposed toward escalating the arms race, paying for it by scrapping most social programs and transferring

billions of dollars to the Pentagon: the highest defense bill in U.S. history was levied against the nation, \$1.5 trillion.

Previously discredited concepts of "winnable" limited nuclear wars gained popularity with civilian and military strategists who claimed the United States could absorb 20 million casualties and continue as a civilization. A scaled-down MX missile system was approved, which critics charged could serve no other purpose than for a first strike against the Soviet Union. During this period a high-tech antiballistic defense was proposed — called the Strategic Defense Initiative, it is usually known (derisively) as "Star Wars."

The Reaganites also planned to deploy more than 200 Pershing missiles in NATO countries, but hundreds of thousands of Europeans held demonstrations against the missiles as well as in rebuttal to remarks by Reagan and other administration members that indicated a willingness to wage nuclear war in Western Europe. Reagan felt compelled to make a nationwide speech in October 1981 calling for renewed arms negotiations with the Soviet Union, but used the imposition of martial law in Poland that December as a pretext to suspend them.

The first round of the renewed SALT talks began that year in Geneva in November. The American delegation was led Paul H. Nitze, a hard-line nuclear superiority advocate and opponent of arms talks. The Soviets were represented by Yuri A. Kvitsinsky.

Efforts to slow the nuclear arms race by freezing levels of intercontinental missiles and prohibiting defenses against them were keystones of the SALT talks. Both superpowers had first strike capabilities that would essentially devastate each other, and each was capable of equal retaliation. To restrain from mutual suicide, each superpower was to be prohibited from building an effective missile defense system to curb first-strike aspirations, which worked from 1972 until George W. Bush rescinded the treaty in 2002 in order to revive Star Wars.

The opening U.S. proposal called for the Soviet Union to dismantle its missiles aimed at Western Europe in exchange for canceling the NATO deployment. The Soviets rejected it. Other differences were conflicting assessments about the number of nuclear weapons systems in Europe. The Soviets claimed an approximate parity (the first concrete goal of all negotiations) but the U.S. insisted the Kremlin possessed a 6 to 1 superiority, the infamous "arms gap" the U.S. claimed throughout the Cold War.

Overall weapons discussions were suspended that December because of martial law in Poland for which the U.S. blamed the Russians: that talks continued at all afterward was probably due to conditions made by NATO nations which would only accept Pershing missiles in Europe if arms negotiations were resumed.

Suspensions, sanctions, thunderous denunciations and intense renewals of nuclear arms competition were not unique in the history of negotiations between the two superpowers during the Cold War. If anything, it was that sort of bellicose conduct that originated the SALT talks in 1969. At the same time the U.S. publicly sought arms negotiations with the Soviets in 1967 it was already embroiled in the Vietnam

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