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Moral and political perspectives on nuclear weapons

By Jonathan Power

We were standing in Hiroshima looking at a stone wall. All there was to see was a shadow of a man. It had been etched into the wall at the moment of his obliteration by the blinding light of the first atomic bomb. Olof Palme, prime minister of Sweden, stared hard at it. An hour later he had to give a speech as head of the Independent Commission on Disarmament of which I was a member. "My fear," he remarked, "is that mankind itself will end up as nothing more than a shadow on a wall."

Charles de Gaulle once observed, "After a nuclear war the two sides would have neither powers, nor laws, nor cities, nor cultures, nor cradles, nor tombs." Nikita Khrushchev, who presided over the Soviet Union in the days of the Cuban missile crisis, later wrote, "When I learned all the facts about nuclear power I couldn't sleep for several days." And one of his successors, Mikhail Gorbachev, once recounted how during training to use his "nuclear suitcase," he never pretended to give the order to fire.

Yet against this sense and sensibility is arrayed popular inertia on one side and an extraordinarily deeply embedded culture of nuclear deterrence on the other. As former West German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, has analyzed it, "there is an enormous body of vested interests not only through lobbying in Washington and Moscow but through influence on intellectuals, on people who write books and articles in newspapers and do features on television." And, in a shrewd afterthought, he added, "It's very difficult as a reader or as a consumer of TV to distinguish by one's own judgment what is led by these interests and what is led by rational conclusion."

There are two main issues-moral and political-in any discussion on nuclear weapons. For some, nuclear armaments are so wicked, so evil, in their capacity to execute life as we know it that there can be no talk of modifying or controlling them; they must be banned, if necessary unilaterally renounced. Deterrence, even if it could be proved to have kept the peace, is profoundly immoral in concept and tone, for the threat to destroy is as wrong as the act itself.

This latter observation is true. But equally it can lead to the conclusion that we have to deal with the problem by multilateral means-by agreement between the antagonists. The means of getting rid of them is as important a moral issue as the means of deterrence. If a reduction of a part of the stockpile was done in such a way as to increase instability and the likelihood of war, this would be as reprehensible an act as one which provoked war by initiating a new round in the arms race.

Thomas Nagel in his essay, "War and Massacres," has suggested we are working between two poles of moral intuition. We know that there are some outcomes that must be avoided at all costs and we know that there are some costs that can never be morally justified. We must face the possibility, Nagel argues, that these two forms of moral intuition are not capable of being brought together into a single coherent moral system.

Yes, but. We have to be careful not to be carried away with the tortuous logic of such an argument. I suspect that John Mearsheimer, America's pre-eminent balance of power theorist, might find comfort in this rather fine moral balancing. He has called nuclear weapons a powerful force for peace. Today he advocates, well-managed proliferation, and he would like to see Germany and Japan armed with nuclear weapons.

The title of Herman Kahn's book on Cold War nuclear strategy, "Thinking the Unthinkable," captured the dilemma perfectly: that it is unthinkable to imagine the wholesale slaughter of societies, yet at the same time it appears necessary to do so, in the hope that you hit upon some formulation that will preclude the act. But then in the process you may wind up amassing forces that engender the very outcome you hope to avoid.

Nevertheless, I think Kahn would be amazed, if he still lived, to see how little enmity there is today between the old superpower rivals and indeed between both of them and the up-and-coming superpowers, China and India. Not since 1871-1913 has there been so little active hostility between the big powers or so few wars around the globe. This must be the time to get our grip on the urgent necessity for big power nuclear disarmament, for without that there is simply no credibility when dealing with would-be proliferators in the developing world.

Many of them are quite as capable as the original big powers of one day creating the shadow on a wall.

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