

worldview

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THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

In an address delivered before the United Nations, Bernard Baruch said that in deciding the issues of disarmament and control of atomic weapons, the nations must make a choice "between the quick and the dead." Now, a decade later, this choice has still to be made. And each year that it is delayed, the choice becomes more immediate. The question of life or death for mankind hangs more precariously in the balance today than it did ten years ago.

Faced with this choice, a number of influential Europeans are arguing for "life" at all costs—through the West's unilateral disarmament and even surrender if necessary. In Britain, Bertrand Russell, the atheist philosopher, has joined with L. John Collins, the canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, in a "Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament." The campaign insists that, if the present situation continues much longer, the nuclear annihilation of the human race is sure to result. To avoid this ultimate catastrophe, the West must be willing to risk temporary dominance by the Soviet Union now.

This argument carries weight. Who, really, can make a choice for death over life? But Irving Kristol, the American co-editor of *Encounter*, says that the very choice is a sentimental one. In a recent issue of *The Spectator*, Mr. Kristol tells the neo-pacifists that the *real* question always has been and is now, not between life and death, but rather "are the values we die for worth dying for? Is there anything in life to be treasured more than life itself?"

The Bomb, he claims, has not really changed this. "The dead praise not the Lord" . . . neither do they care about the H-Bomb . . . Those who died in past battles are quite dead, even if we are alive . . . And if we in our turn are wiped out by the Bomb, we shall be neither more nor less dead than they." The real question, now as in the past, is "whether it is *ever* possible that no world should be preferable to some worlds. Are there in truth *no* circumstances [in which] the destruction of human life presents itself as a reasonable alternative?"

If—a dreadful thought—one had really to take sides either with Lord Russell or with Mr. Kristol, any sane man would rush to join the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Because neither mortality nor common sense need puzzle over Mr. Kristol's questions. It is *never* possible that no world should be preferable to some worlds, and there are in truth *no* circumstances in which the destruction of human life presents itself as a reasonable alternative.

A man may choose death for himself, but he can do so only for the sake of life for others. He cannot take part in the suicide of the human race. This would be the final madness, and this is why the Bomb *has* brought a radically new situation into human history, why the old alternative between liberty and death has lost its plausibility. As others have pointed out, five hundred or a thousand years from now, it will not seem very important whether the United States or the Russians had won. What will seem important—if there is anyone around—is whether the United States and the Soviet Union had managed not to destroy the world as soon as they had found out how to do it.

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But though the sword still hangs over us, the immediate issues are not the simple ones set forth either by the neo-pacifists or by the exponents of pure power. (If they were, our decision might be easy.) While we continue to exist through a balance of terror, it is quite possible—even likely—that we will never be forced to make the final choice between life and death. The military balance of power is frozen in a mutual fear, and if nuclear war should ever occur, it would probably occur through some accident. But in the meantime a new balance of power is waiting to be decided, and this new balance also involves life and death issues for the West. But this is a balance of economic and political, rather than military, strength.

We hear much, in this country, of "frozen"

Soviet attitudes, and we despair over Russian "inflexibility." But we have our own modes of inflexibility, and the great danger we now face—the life and death danger for our civilization—is that we will continue to be so preoccupied with the challenges of a decade ago that we will fail to meet new challenges facing us now.

No nuclear bombs may ever be dropped—no armies, even, may ever meet—and the West may go down to total defeat. Some weeks ago Premier Khrushchev "declared war" on the Western powers." But the "war" he declared was a political-economic war, and he declared it from a situation of strength.

The Soviet power is continuing to make political and economic gains in the Middle East. It is continuing to identify itself—however falsely—

with the hopes of millions of men for a better life. But in the United States, at this very writing, such minimal programs for survival as the Reciprocal Trade Act and the President's foreign aid program may be killed, or at least emasculated, by an "economy-minded" Congress. The American people—and their elected representatives—have yet to learn, it seems, that it is not only the Bomb that can destroy them.

There are other, more subtle but no less dangerous, threats. The choice for our civilization is not the relatively simple one of war or surrender. It remains a choice "between the quick and the dead," but it is a choice more likely to be resolved by imaginative diplomacy than by arms. In this contest, in May, 1958, *our* side has yet to begin to fight.

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in the magazines

There is a moment in Sheridan's eighteenth century play, *The Critic*, where the characters suddenly freeze, finding themselves about to be impaled upon each other's swordpoints. Such a farcical image of the balance of terror may not be compatible with the gravities of the world situation today, but Raymond Aron's article in the Spring issue of *Partisan Review*, "Coexistence: The End of Ideology," calls it repeatedly to mind. "Coexistence," declares Mr. Aron, "is neither a doctrine nor a desire: it is first and foremost a *fact*." Reviewing the present international scene, he sees reason to suggest that the era of "ideologies," of the clear conflict of principles, may be coming to an end. Our own "ideological aggressiveness," he believes, is limited for the most part to a reactive posture—limited "to the extent that [the Soviet Union] seeks the destruction of our free societies." And the conditions of what we have come to call the Cold War ("a form of coexistence") grow ever more equivocal in nature:

" . . . A definitive or even a relatively definitive settlement of the Russian-American rivalry . . . is excluded for four basic reasons: a clash of ideologies prevents the two Great Powers from simply accepting each other or legitimizing the status quo; the division of Europe constitutes a permanent cause of insecurity; the anti-Western revolt in Asia, Africa and the Middle East works to the advantage of the Soviets (even when they play no role in it) and threatens to isolate the white minority of Europe and America; and finally, the technological weapons race seems to rule out any stabilization or limitation of armaments."

Considering each of these factors in turn, Mr. Aron finds that East and West are working at cross-pur-

poses: "The simple truth is that the West wants a military status quo and Moscow wants a political one." In their choice of "cold" over "total" war, the United States and the Soviet Union seem unable to agree on the terms of a tolerant coexistence. One thing seems certain in the impasse that prevails: the balance of terror as a probably permanent fact of the international situation. As long as Communism possesses the H-Bomb, ideological crusades are irrelevant. "The West cannot dispense with the threat of collective suicide, and the intellectuals can neither reject nor acclaim such a strategy."

• Coexistence perceived as an end to ideology is also the guiding thought behind the lead editorial in *Christianity and Crisis* for April 28. Described as a "trial balloon to initiate discussion rather than to proclaim a position," the editorial makes a plea for a new attitude to the Communist regimes of Russia and China. While we should continue to "help other nations find constructive alternatives to Communism," we should "avoid the perpetual official moral diatribe against Communist countries" and accept the fact that Communism "is irreversible but it is not unchangeable." Signs of change in certain of the satellite nations and in Russia itself are evidence that the ideological construct is failing and that hostilities based upon its claims are of small significance. "We, as well as the Communists, have been thinking too ideologically rather than humanly about the problems of the 'Cold War,' in terms of a *priori* stereotypes rather than in terms of changing, concrete human realities."

PAMPHILUS