A Way Between Hope and Despair

On War by Raymond Aron. Doubleday. 163 pp. $3.50.

by Michael Harrington

Raymond Aron is an extremely provocative and brilliant French intellectual. In his own country, he is well known as a critical supporter of American policy, an incisive antagonist of Communist myths, and an opponent of various neutralist and "third alternative" tendencies. Now in his brief provocative and brilliant French porter of American policy, an inimical to myths, and an opponent of various neutralist and "third alternative" antagonists of Communist intellectuals. In his own country, Raymond Aron is an extremely influential figure. He is well known for his reflections on international ownership and control of atomic plants and raw materials failed to reach the Russians (it would have "frozen" the status quo, i.e., guaranteed that America was the only nation with the technical knowledge to manufacture bombs in case war did break out). And there is also a tone of French pride which is directed at American policy for its refusal to develop a real Atlantic community within NATO.

Yet these remarks are part of the detail of Aron's argumentation. His central thesis is not a simple insight; it is a developed point of view. Aron opts for limited war as against total war and consequently sees the continuation of a policy of deterrence (or even its extension) as in the interest of America, France and the world. He rejects the fears of those who believe that atomic apocalypse is now inevitable, but he also distrusts those who feel that the suicidal dangers of a nuclear holocaust are so apparent that no power will risk it under any circumstances.

- Aron is quite clear about the immediate political implications of his general perspective. He opposes the unilateral withdrawal of conventional American troops from Europe, and probably even if the Russians would pull back to their borders. He favors an American policy of sharing its nuclear weapons information with its allies and also calls for the building of rocket sites in the NATO countries. Ultimately, he is even willing to consider a joint American-Soviet "condominium" of the world as a good, though unlikely, means of achieving order and stability.

All of this is argued with an obvious sincerity and great skill. Yet it is marked by a curious flaw: Aron's insensitivity to unexpected movement and change, particularly to popular movement. Or, to approach it from a different direction, On War is a book marred by a strangely passive and static conception of world politics.

An excellent example of this unfortunate tendency is contained—almost accidentally—in this study and it offers an illuminating point of critical departure. Apparently, the original manuscript was written prior to the Hungarian Revolution, for Aron notes, "The bloc of Communist states, from East Germany to North Vietnam, possesses regular armies which, at virtually every point of the periphery would be capable of crossing frontiers and decisively defeating the troops with whom they came in contact" (my emphasis). In the new edition, a footnote inspired by the Hungarian and Polish Octobers completely cancels out this judgment.

- This slip is not, to my mind, one of those inevitable accidents which will happen to any journalist dealing with the furious world of the twentieth century. It goes deeper than that. For Aron seems to be caught in a fatalism which, though it may well be a healthy reaction to the optimism of the unrealistic, is quite dangerous. Thus, he deals with the various proposals for disengagement (Kennan's specifically, the Rappacki Plan and British Labor Party proposals by implication) almost completely on the military level. The decisive criterion is: how will these withdrawals effect the Balance of Terror? There is no conception of moving, if carefully and tentatively, toward the political offensive.

- For one thing, Aron's passivity is now becoming difficult precisely because of the developments of military technology upon which he concentrates. The emergence of the intercontinental missiles is fast making the whole strategy of foreign bomber bases quite questionable. On this level, Aron really fails to answer Kennan's remark that the precise degree of terror on the two sides becomes irrelevant when both can annihilate each other. He is forced back on the "psychological" significance of the proximity of the Russians to Europe in the case of bilateral withdrawal, but cannot cite, in his own terms, any real military advantage to the presence of American troops and bases.

But there is an even more significant level on which Aron's
views are flawed by his passive Realpolitik. He argues that the Hungarian Revolution, demonstrating that the Russians would not allow a satellite to achieve real independence, is proof of the futility of troop withdrawal on any basis. Yet this is an evasion of the real question: in October, 1956, would an American announcement that we were going to take up the Russian propaganda offer for mutual withdrawal have made it more difficult for the Russians to decide to intervene in the first place?

This kind of thinking (though not this specific proposal) grants great value to George Kennan's recent utterances. For it seeks a positive policy aimed at creating a new political situation, one in which the Russians will be forced to act differently in their own self-interest.

One wonders what Mr. Aron would say to the Berlin crisis. As I read On War, its logic points to a single response, that of simply refusing the Soviet offers and holding firmly to Berlin because of its political and psychological value. Any positive answer would require action which goes beyond Aron's categories. But what of the political impact of an American counter-offer to explore the Rakovski plan and to seek disengagement in central Europe as the first step in a more general program?

Perhaps the Russians would never agree to withdraw, out of fear of the inevitable debacle which would overtake the Communist regimes of East Europe once they left. But, on the other hand, perhaps the political pressure for such action would be intolerable. And as long as the latter case is even possible, there is a very real responsibility to break through habit and pessimism and to move in a new direction.

All of this is rather sharp criticism of On War. Yet my disagreements with Mr. Aron should not be interpreted as a judgment that this book should be ignored. On the contrary, everyone, friend or opponent of Aron's views, will find in this study stimulation and challenge. In our unprecedented crisis, such seriousness, intelligence and sincerity with regard to foreign policy can suggest new points of departure even if one takes exception to the conclusions.

“We have lived through a revolution in both senses of the word—a military innovation, in that the Hiroshima bomb has given birth to atomic shells and thermonuclear bombs, but an innovation which has restored, in an entirely different form, the initial problem: the West has failed to find a substitute for total war other than peace itself.

A symbol of this failure is the Pentagon's proposal to cut the Army and Navy in order to concentrate on building up the Air Force. Once again, the press and common sense alike protest against this military doctrine which threatens, on each occasion, to force the West into a choice between capitulation or suicide. Once more the peoples of the West, rulers and public alike, are alarmed at a reduction in traditional forces, even though these are reputed to be anachronistic and useless.

Men persist in attaching value to the number of soldiers under arms, although the experts continue to harp on the futility of these evidences of a bygone age. Men refuse to follow the experts' logic to its ultimate conclusion. There is no alternative to peace, reiterates President Eisenhower, who agrees with his advisers that a war between the great powers would be a thermonuclear war. But the chorus of the backward or the wise echoes in reply: should we not maintain a substitute for thermonuclear war?

So runs the dialogue in which each speaker, according to the day and the mood, feels ready to play either part, so strongly is each opposed to the other, so weak within himself.” (Raymond Aron in On War.)

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