clear weapons

THE PACIFIST'S CHOICE

Stephen G. Cary

Ever since the time of Constantine, Christian theologians have been trying to find a way to wrap up the gospel of Christ and the institution of war in the same package. Sometimes they have enjoyed moderate success. When war was the private monopoly of various princes and was conducted according to well-defined rules with limited objectives, it was possible to rationalize it. But as the institution has grown in scope and ferocity, and its weapons in destructive power, the task has become more difficult. The ethic of love and the ICBM are simply not compatible, regardless of the theological garb in which they are presented.

Yet the Church, rightly concerned with the problem of justice, cannot let go of the notion that the only way justice can be assured is through the amassing of military power. This being so, it must continue the struggle to justify it, however tortuous and winding the road may be. None but the most hardy attempts any longer to bless full-blown, full-megaton nuclear war. The more manageable concept of limited war appears to offer some way out, and Father John Courtney Murray's article in the December Worldview represents a brilliant attempt to establish it. His pleas for a restatement of the traditional position of the Church regarding the conditions under which it can support war is an appealing one, and his delineation of the role of the moralist in providing the necessary framework of restraint is admirably logical.

But it seems to me that even Father Murray fails in his task. Dr. Hartt, Rabbi Schwarzschild and, more recently, Walter Millis, have all raised grave doubts about his thesis, and they are doubts that I share. To talk of limited war in the atomic age is to try to turn back the clock. When survival is at stake, as it would be in any major war, it appears the height of folly to talk of applying reason to the situation. War's necessity is terrible and, once released, its course lies almost wholly beyond the compass of those who seek to make it the servant of their ends. To suggest that it is possible to control it requires a rosier view of human nature than I am able to support. One is therefore driven to the conclusion that limited war offers no hiding place for the moralist; if so, there seems to be no other course for the Church but the final rejection of war as an instrument for achieving justice.

One other possible escape hatch does, however, remain: the concept of armament as a deterrent. Can the Church justify the amassing of military power on the ground that the threat of its use will prevent the greater evil of Soviet aggression? There is no doubt that a strong moral case can be built for accepting the necessity for military power if it prevents war and if the time thereby gained can be used to work for the achievement of justice. Politically too, the deterrent concept has solid support. George Kennan, the father of containment, leaned heavily on it in suggesting that the United States develop a shield of strength to deter aggression at the same time that it sought through various positive approaches to eliminate the sources of conflict and lift the level of human life and dignity. This dual concept has in fact been at the root of our foreign policy ever since 1947.

Finally, there is good historical precedent for such an approach. The British employed a similar policy with striking success during much of the last century, using their navy as a shield (and occasionally as an instrument of conquest) at the same time that they advanced democratic freedoms and human welfare at home and, to a certain extent, abroad. Pacifists could inveigh against this use of power, but they were hard put to it to support their case on grounds other than the pure teaching of the gospels. Logic and history were on the side of the realists, and the theologian could answer convincingly that the benefits to man outweighed the evil that might be involved in the application of military power.

Unfortunately, however, we are no longer living in the nineteenth century, and this historical precedent, as well as the theological and political framework that sustains its modern counterpart, rests on assumptions that in my judgment are no longer valid. The whole case depends on the possibility of simultaneously providing military security with one hand while we work for the achievement of peace and justice with the other. I suggest that this cannot now be done. The advances in science have changed fundamentally the nature of security demands, and in a world in which power is both polarized and limitless the old rules and the old assumptions no longer apply. Military and strategic considerations will not stay neatly compartmentalized as they once would. Their demands are becoming pervasive and all-engulfing, to the point where every important national decision must be taken in their terms.

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This is what has been happening during the past decade. Where, during this period, has the United States been able to make its important foreign policy decisions on the basis of justice or human welfare? Where is the limited use of power that George Kennan counseled in advocating his twin-pillar program? In area after area—Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia, Japan, China—we have been driven by the relentless demands of the Cold War to make our choices in strategic terms. Economic policies, involving aid programs and world trade, have been dominated by military considerations. So has our policy toward the United Nations. The image of America in the eyes of the world has unhappily changed from that of champion of the oppressed to military giant, and we are bewildered because we have meant only to serve the ends of justice.

This is our dilemma, and it goes much deeper than the intentions or the competence of our leadership. It goes to the question of choice—choice between continuing to seek security in our capacity to destroy, or seeking it through developing our capacity to change. It is perhaps a reflection of our times that the choice is forced on us by logic and history rather than by morality, but the theologian no less than the rest of us must face it, for there appears to be no refuge in deterrence any more than in nuclear war, limited or otherwise.

It is a hard choice, involving the ultimate rejection of violence; but it is the only way to be free of the crippling limitations imposed by commitment to the bomb. Once made, it provides a new basis for day-to-day decisions, and adds another voice to a minority calling for a new approach to foreign relations. This is its political relevance, for change in America is not produced by fiat but by the ever-shifting interaction of diverse interest groups. The pacifist minority, like any other, is politically important because it serves as a pole of discussion through which it has a voice in the ultimate determination of policy. Obviously its influence is modest, but the vigor and depth of its commitment provide a dynamic for change that is lacking in middle-of-the-road approaches. Is it possible that the bankruptcy of liberalism today is due at least in part to the fact that the liberal still clings to the idea that defense programs and welfare programs can be carried on together, with the result that he contributes not to change but only to the schizophrenia of our times?

Of course, a rejection of violence does not in itself release us from our problems. We must still recognize the reality of evil, and discover how to deal with it in a way that preserves our values. It is somehow assumed that these questions do not concern the pacifist, that his position represents abandonment of values and abject surrender to evil. Father Murray eschews both nuclear war and pacifism because "these desperate alternatives [mean] either universal death or complete surrender to Communism." The pacifist does not propose to surrender, and he is well aware that power is necessary in this world, but he seeks to develop a conception of power appropriate for our Christian purposes and our nuclear times. He believes that organized, disciplined good will can be both a massive instrument for justice and a potent weapon of defense, as indeed it has become in the hands of a Gandhi or a Martin King. Men are not saints; neither are they devils. To suggest that they could rise to the challenge of non-violent resistance on the one hand or be moved by it on the other is not to look through rose-colored glasses. Is it so impossible to conceive of man, still nasty to his neighbor, still on occasion beating his wife, but reacting with horror to the suggestion that he launch a missile to destroy a million lives? Our problem lies in the ironic fact that today the general rule is just the opposite.

My plea for men of conscience to face at last the necessity for a personal rejection of war is made without any hope that it offers a panacea. The pacifist must recognize the possibility of invasion, just as the non-pacifist must recognize the possibility that he may have to use the bomb—and both must decide how they would face these ultimate failures. The pacifist must admit that he has no answer when the fire breaks out, but he can logically argue that no one else has either.

These arguments only emphasize the fact that the pacifist, like other men, can only see a little way down the road. Politically, he insists only that there is more creative potential and less risk in massive efforts to secure justice than in massive efforts to secure military power, and since he believes a choice must be made between them he is compelled to throw his individual weight on the side of justice. He rests his case there, with the suggestion that the time to start making a new approach is now, and the place to start is with ourselves. He thinks the Church would more adequately fulfill its mission in these tragic times if it abandoned the impossible search for a moral justification for militarism, and turned its attention to discovering alternative sources for national security. When a society reaches the kind of impasse in which ours finds itself today—when it talks about "safety as the twin brother of annihilation" and would betray its values in the name of protecting them—salvation is not to be gained by mere calculation of expediency but by rebirth.