WAR AND THE ABSOLUTISTS

Moral Insight Demands of Us both Discrimination and Restraint

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No problem facing contemporary world leaders tests political intelligence and moral imagination more severely than the issue of nuclear weapons. The awesome question of what is a viable armaments policy perplexes men no less in 1960 than it did in 1945. What are responsible governments to do with instruments of lethal destruction? What programs can international institutions devise that will broaden the narrow spectrum of security that nations have enjoyed since World War II? Who is prepared to gamble on another's restraint with the growing stockpiles of ever more deadly weapons that nations possess?

If there is no security in national weakness can states find safety in national strength? If so, what has happened to criteria of national power when thermonuclear devices can in fatal strikes wipe out whole populations, armies and industrial potentials? How is the moralist to find his way between the shoals of a heedless compassion that asks too much of collective virtue and a harsh cynicism that denies the prospect of national suicide and mutual annihilation? What are the points of convergence of justice and security and how can they be kept in balance when technology continually alters crucial elements in the equation?

To approach the armaments field through a set of baffling questions is hardly reassuring, for no other realm of international relationships more desperately requires clearcut answers and solutions. We reassure one another that reasonable men can find a way out of the present impasse if they but contrive more imaginative policies. Those who admit stalemate or protracted uncertainty in political, economic, moral or social conflicts instinctively prefer more precise designs and overall blueprints for the armaments problem.

For example, many who see no abatement in political tensions between Moscow and Washington affirm that one action or another will assure an early end to the arms race, for failing this all men will perish. Disarmament commends itself as a sensible way out when the problems of Berlin, For-
fate. What has happened to his sense of moral revulsion to war, to a renunciation of the acts and means of violence, or to the compelling lesson that man should love, not seek to destroy, his brother? Moreover, doesn't the student of international conflict move unconsciously and imperceptibly from describing the facts of international life as he sees them to a posture of belaboring those who condemn him for his callousness and immorality? Then too, the further risk is always with him that he develop a vested interest in the status quo with all its tragic failures and shattered hopes. The more he observes the cancerous state of affairs brought about by such profound divisions as the rift between East and West, the more he comes to accept it, at least in the short run and barring fundamental changes, as a permanent condition to be relieved, temporarily alleviated, but never—at least in his vision—fully eliminated or cured.

Yet the moral risks of facing reality cannot excuse the diplomatist any more than the doctor from accepting the distressing burdens that are inherent in his task. If all patients were free of disease at all times, the doctor's place could appropriately be filled by someone else with other training and skills. If the international stage were not plagued by rivalry, distrust and suspicion, negotiators who have learned to take conflict in stride would quickly become obsolete. Incidentally, no diplomatist worthy of the name believes that warfare is inevitable. It is conflict and rivalry, particularly among those who contend for influence and authority, that is taken for granted, and the search is unremitting for ways and means to limit rivalries and prevent the struggle for power from crossing over into open strife and war.

The vocation and the commitment of the negotiator compel him to believe that war is not inevitable. When the inflammation caused by tension and rivalry grows too intense, he must apply a poultice to relieve the infection until time and circumstances can restore health to the body politic. If he were to act as if the infection were imaginary or could be "reasoned" away, he should have failed in his calling however humane and civilized his motives might be. The doctor can hardly assume that health will supplant disease once and for all; neither can the diplomat proceed as if virtue were obliterating sinfulness or cooperation had superseded conflict.

I accept the fact that for any sensitive conscience the need to recognize the dual reality of good and evil can be profoundly distressing. Few liberal Christians and humanists deny the reality of imperfect virtue and they labor faithfully in social reform and aid to the oppressed to reduce, not eliminate, human suffering. They accept the necessity of charity even within blatantly oppressive and unjust social systems whose purposes they must ultimately condemn. Here liberals and particularly pacifists link the "incompatible" forces of an ethic of love and coexistence with tyrannical regimes.

Because I believe they are right in striving to bring aid and comfort to victims of an unjust political order even at the expense of strengthening that order, I am puzzled by their austere rejection of ethical pragmatism in confronting the armaments problem. Surely limited war is morally superior to total war and the Cold War is to be preferred to a shooting war. Yet moral relativists who see some justice in the most tyrannical regimes become moral absolutists in the claim that there is "no other course for the Church but the final rejection of war as an instrument for achieving justice." I would not ask men to form an unholy alliance with evil nor justify what is wrong, but I would hope they might consider that cooperation with evil in the interests of the good cannot be defended in political and social relations and utterly condemned in the military realm.

I suspect the source of this illusion rests in the belief that men can draw an absolute distinction between strategies of violence and non-violence. Non-violent resistance is often equated with the pure gospel of love. Sometimes indeed, it may be morally superior to violence. Yet the Holy Gospel has nothing to say about strategies of non-violence through which one group seeks to impose its will on another. The seeds of evil group themselves around a man's desire and necessity, as he sees it, to have his way with someone else, restricting thereby the self-fulfillment of human personality. The basis of wrongdoing would seem to be the encroachment of one will on another and the denial of self-realization and individuality. Violence is a more egregious form of this evil but is not fundamentally a thing apart.

I fear moral absolutism in the face of the nuclear problem partly because the resources of Christian ethics are so desperately needed in the proximate decisions of military policy. I must agree with the statement of the British Council of Churches that "restraint is a major Christian objective." Yet if Christians can only condemn military programs, as some have traditionally denounced all forms of politics, who will defend that objective? Who will speak for reason, self-limitation and restricting the build-up of defenses to proportions that will deter and inhibit a reckless enemy without endless striving to surpass him in every weapon within a vast armory of destructiveness? Who will hold the reins on policies of unconditional surrender and programs
aimed at liquidating an opponent? Who will pursue the goal of limiting conflicts both in scope and character?

If Christians or Jews restrict themselves to condemning and denouncing all politics and military measures, they leave to others, as we must sadly confess has too often been the case, the pursuit of Judeo-Christian objectives like restraint. I say this not to condemn those who hold honestly and sincerely to another viewpoint but because this issue seems fundamental to me, as apparently it also does to the British Council of Churches.

If moral certainty in the control and elimination of nuclear weapons exceeds the wit and attainment of man, no one who would responsibly serve his nation and the world can abandon the search for more viable policies for limited problems. The irony of the nuclear age is that all-out war has lost its inner logic but no major power across the vast chasm of mutual distrust can afford to be the first to found its policies upon this premise. However, the first level at which moral compulsion properly takes the stage is at the point where man's necessity to control and eliminate warfare conflicts with his insufficiency to do so. Those who assert that the practical man must “accept war in the abstract as a fact of life” are doubtless correct as are those who point out that most choices the statesman makes are practical ones at several stages removed from the moral issue. Yet moral man faced with mankind's extinction has an obligation by virtue of common humanity to resist in every practical way the unfolding of a chain of events that are leading to disaster.

Moral responsibility for others no less than himself requires him to act with moral and political discrimination to prevent war from breaking out, to restrict its spread once it erupts, and to bring it to an end as promptly and decisively as possible. Moral discrimination is an unending process and those who would restrict it to outlawing war and the instruments of warfare confine it within too narrow limits. The compulsion to seek moral distinctions across a wide spectrum of war and peace is generated by a morality comprehensive enough to embrace both means and ends.

Secondly, the moralist for these reasons is entitled to speak not merely about war in the abstract but about particular wars and the military and political conditions that either increase the likelihood of war or threaten to carry a struggle beyond the point of self-defense or legitimate national or international interests. We know enough about the tendencies of men and nations, so we can assert that great weakness has almost always invited expansion and aggression by those possessing great strength. The duty of statesmen is to reduce the temptation for dynamic expansionist movements to spread their influence and their cause. At the same time, under circumstances of present-day technology, nations can ill-afford to build defense systems capable alone of wars of last recourse. Despite repeated claims that conventional wars had been rendered obsolete, outbreaks since World War II have all been conventional in nature. Military conflict and the threat of conflict in Korea, Hungary, Suez, Vietnam and Lebanon have followed the conventional pattern. Nor is the argument convincing that the West has no practical alternative. A leading military analyst writes: “Many of the assumptions regarding the impossibility of conventional defense and of the ‘hordes’ of Communist manpower, are either fallacious or exaggerated. Both in total available manpower and in its industrial potential the free world still is superior.”

Neither national necessity nor military logic excuses American diplomatic and intellectual leaders from considering principles defining the limits of military preparation and conduct. An armaments program aimed at overwhelming nuclear superiority must be questioned both on military and ethical grounds, for the purpose of thermonuclear strength is to confront an adversary “with the certainty of severe retaliation, sufficient to make the adventure too costly.” The goal under present-day conditions cannot be organizing the means of victory since “the real defeat is the war itself, for it involves a common fate which will be visited on all who have anything to do with it.” Yet reasonable prudence in establishing limited nuclear strength may prove a deterrent to those who might otherwise dare to use weapons they monopolized. Even a great and humane people succumbed to such a temptation, and we are constrained to speculate over what course we might have followed at Hiroshima if others had possessed the bomb.

The United States cannot afford to reject cavalierly “the principle of proportion.” Whatever the difficulties of enforcing restraint, the ancient truth holds good that grave injustices may not be repressed by means bringing greater injustice than the perpetuation of the injustice. I am not convinced that a re-examination of the classic texts on the conditions of a just war or of defensive war are outmoded in our time. The great publicists of the past were more inclined than some of our latter-day international lawyers to view law and justice in context. They searched their souls and the practice of states to ascertain when and how states and princes could be expected to keep their commitments. Circumstances led them to write less of enforcement systems and more of conditions of self-interest and mutual trust. They talked of levels and orders of justice and were not above accepting the compromises
absolute justice was compelled to make if a tolerable order was to be preserved. I find in such writings and in much of the historic Catholic literature, partly because its precepts are rooted both in heaven and earth, a greater sense of moral discrimination and attention to proximate orders of justice than in the writings of many Christian or Jewish perfectionists.

A brilliant philosopher viewing the contemporary scene asks, "Where are the ethical principles to fix the appropriate limits?" If he had broadened his question to read "where are the ethical and political principles" he might have obtained an answer. Any system of limitation must serve the national interests of both parties. We are told that an armaments agreement will be self-enforcing if compliance serves such interests better than evasion or violation. The underpinnings of every international arrangement are, of course, moral in character. There must be a minimum of mutual trust. The basic problem in East-West relations has been and remains the conspicuous absence of such trust.

If this trust is to be created, however, it must grow from the discovery of mutual interests so overpowering as to transcend sharp ideological cleavages. Do Russians and Americans have a common interest in attacking the problem of wheat-borne virus? Do they share a mutual interest in restricting the spread and diffusion of atomic weapons among the smaller powers? Should they both cut off the risk of contaminating the atmosphere by ending nuclear tests? Do they have an equal stake in restraining buoyant and reckless powers who on ideological or political grounds would plunge the world into a deadly atomic holocaust? The truth is that answers will come as part of a slow, gradual process the direction of which cannot be measured by the collapse of the Paris talks any more than by the illusory advances of Geneva or Camp David. No one can foresee the future with its unpredictable turns and pathways. Yet history yields to human initiative and evil may yet spawn good as those of us who examine personal experience must hasten to admit.

Modern man could look to an uncertain future with more assurance if civilization provided surer intellectual and moral footing. On one side we are endlessly disposed to downgrade the awesome burdens of political leadership and the tragic choices that political reason imposes on the statesman. In his heart, he would prefer freedom to slavery, peace to war and love to power, yet in his official duties he is forever reduced to accepting the lesser evil (or greater good). Because the main stuff of his vocation is political calculation, his actions carry a bad name. From all sides, friends and critics call on him to pursue justice, but because he is often an honest broker of conflicting moral claims, he ends by in some measure failing them all. He must gauge the political consequences of every moral act and with Lincoln accept as his guide the words: "I do the very best I know how, the very best I can. And I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference." In this sense, a political ethic is "future-facing" and good intentions or noble manners will not excuse the statesman for moral or political failure.

Yet it also remains true that every political calculation has its moral components and we remember as our greatest statesmen those for whom a tireless conscience preserved the tension between the practical and the good. Prudence stands between a judgment of present reality and some higher and objective good. Incidentally, both eunuchs and perfectionists are inclined to undervalue the full scope of moral conduct inspired by the tension between these two poles. Thus when a distinguished pacifist scholar writes: "Christian conscience in wartime seems to have chiefly the effect . . . of making Christians do reluctantly what military necessity requires," he closes his eyes to a range of conduct many of us have observed: charity to helpless victims of the struggle, aid to the suffering and the wounded often at great personal risk, and, following the conflict, a lifetime of dedication to peace as the supreme goal. I would suggest that a profound concern, often unarticulated, with the conduct and purpose of war runs deeper in many sensitive hearts than this indictment would suggest.

Nevertheless, students of political ethics are correct in calling us back to "the moral tradition of civilized warfare" and to recreating the military and material circumstances that may foster it. We have need to reflect on right and wrong conduct in war as in peace. I suspect the United Nations, particularly in parts of the world where suspicion of Westerners runs rampant, can be a limiting and restraining force. Yet given the immense hazards of the clash between the great powers who hold in their hands forces of mutual destruction, we should also have, with Lincoln, a sense of throwing ourselves on the mercy of Providence. In the end this may prove a greater support than political calculation or the resurrection of the ancient concepts of a "just" war.