Strange how we trust the powers that ruin
And not the powers that bless
Christopher Fry, A Sleep of Prisoners

Self-preservation is seen to be a fundamental facet of human life, although in the last analysis subordinate to love and obedience to God which includes love of the neighbor.

Therefore to assess the moral status of nuclear deterrence in Christian terms we must inquire more fully into the way it serves love of God and neighbor as well as its precise effectiveness in preserving life. It is soon discovered that the matters of effectiveness and the issue of moral validity are closely interrelated. For a threat to be effective and thus really to preserve life it must be believed, and in order for it to be ethically valid it must be proportional to the threat that it is countering, i.e., it must be just and loving at one and the same time. In a word, unbelieved threats do not deter and threats out of proportion to the initial threat, even though they deter, are morally questionable because if they had to be carried out they would not serve justice or love.

But supposing one can imagine nuclear deterrence to be precisely that extreme threat which, if made, will never have to be carried out. May it not be legitimized if it creates stability among nations, prevents aggression, preserves peace and justice? Is not the bomb itself the most potent of weapons against war? This line of argument has great appeal but is not to be embraced or rejected lightly.

We must begin with basics. First, what are the original threats which cause the power blocs in East and West to develop nuclear weapons? The West fears the nondemocratic regime of Russia will impose its political and social system upon Western Europe, the neutral world, and finally on the United States. This will mean a definite loss of freedom as well as of national sovereignty and a probable decline in civilization. The East fears a similar invasion launched by capitalist powers, notably Germany, with a probable great loss of life and a blotting out of the social and political accomplishments of almost a half-century of Communist rule.

As to the grounds for such fears, it is only neces-
Sary here to observe that there is objective evidence to support both sets of fears. The West can point to Communist internal suppression of dissent and to domination of Eastern European countries, as well as to a cheap regard for life shown in the earlier Communist purges. The East can recall Nazi Germany's treacherous invasion with its enormous physical and human destruction, and the obliteration and nuclear bombing practiced by the United States which is now in alliance with Western Germany. For the moment it is not necessary to consider which set of fears is more realistic; it is sufficient for our purposes if we can agree that East and West are not altogether psychotic in their mutual fears.

Now we are in a position to consider the nature of the nuclear deterrent as the countervailing threat directed by East and West against one another's possible aggressions. This deterrent consists essentially of bombs capable of decimating whole cities and regions and disrupting the fabric of human community. But this deterrent does not replace other lower-grade deterrents; it rather caps a whole range of countervailing forces from combat troops up to the big bombs. We speak of "the nuclear umbrella" to describe the protection which this large-scale force gives and the way in which it includes under it the lesser but more flexible deterrent forces. The practical effect of the nuclear umbrella is to give more weight to the lower level forces since it is recognized that any considerable fighting even at a low level could "escalate." It is thought then that the fear which the ultimate weapon inculcates in both sides serves as a stalemate not only to massive war but to lesser wars which would otherwise have been fought long before now.

To this point it may seem that we are reviewing military strategy in a nuclear age rather than considering a moral question. But it is precisely the substance of my argument that matters of conscience can only be decided by taking all the international, political and military facts in detail and with utmost seriousness.

Now that we have looked at what the initial threats are sensed to be by both power blocs and have considered what each believes to be the urgency of nuclear deterrence, we may move on to ask about the believability and the moral legitimacy of this policy.

As to believability, or "credibility" as it is now normally called, the very existence of the missiles and bombs in a constant state of readiness, the swiftness with which they can strike, and their virtual invulnerability to counterattack constitute a strong argument for credibility. But mere possession of such horrendous weapons does not prove readiness to use them; only demonstration of a concerted will to use the weapons can convince the enemy and one's own public that they are a potent "peace force." Among the standard ways of showing this will are parades, shows of forces, publicized tests of weaponry, warning speeches and diplomatic notes. So the more glastly the weapons are the more it seems necessary to underline one's will to use them if, under extreme conditions, it should become absolutely necessary.

Here we reach the nub of the matter for ethical decision. Deterrence assumes that as long as one convinces the enemy that nuclear weapons may be used they will never have to be used. But supposing they ever are used? Should deterrence fail, how catastrophic would that failure be politically and morally? Can the individual Christian conscience blink at that individual catastrophe? Can a nation which wants to preserve itself find its own annihilation, even in company with the enemy, a credible solution?

We prefer of course to think that the weapons will never be used. Yet it is clear that so far as announced official policy goes, both East and West are committed to use nuclear weapons if a showdown is reached. There may be understanding among the top leaders both in the East and West, or even between the two camps, about the limits which will not be exceeded, but these have not been made public and we cannot see for certain that whatever limits might be accepted could be made to stand in a time of crisis.

Often the Cuban crisis of 1962 is cited to prove that a staunch nuclear deterrent will prevent war. It is true that our firm counter-move "worked" with-
in the terms of nuclear deterrence. Yet the whole context of that crisis must be viewed. It was a first nuclear move by Russia which upset us so, a move which the East could well argue merely gave them parity with us. A nuclear pistol aimed at the head is not calculated to make for rationality and calmness even if one has a similar pistol aimed at one’s assailant. Surely the Cuban crisis did not only—and I would say did not primarily—show that nuclear deterrence can be made to “work.” Far more it showed how dangerous a matter nuclear deterrence is even when it does “work,” how one side or the other can miscalculate the feelings and responses of the other, and how domestic political pressure can sway military policy. The Cuban crisis could have been a cul-de-sac had Khrushchev found himself hemmed in by a heated Russian public opinion about Cuba.

It is understandable that Mr. Brodie should say of the Cuban crisis, “I personally lost no sleep over it. I felt utterly confident that this crisis would not deteriorate into war.” One need not be in possession of all the classified information available to Mr. Brodie, however, to say that he was more confident than the history of war gave him the right to be. His was the sleep of a confident military theorist but not the sleep of a student of human nature or even the sleep of an honest historian.

Is nuclear deterrence morally defensible? In Christian terms the answer to that question must be an emphatic no unless the one who says yes qualifies by saying that the sole purpose of nuclear deterrence is to buy a little time to work for peaceful alternatives. He who says that nuclear deterrence is credible and morally defensible without working relevantly for other ways to peace has betrayed his conscience and is neither a credible Christian nor a credible citizen of the 20th century.

There is a definite division between those who understand our present sleep as the sleep of near-victors over oppression and war and those who take it to be the sleep of prisoners complacently and unimaginatively tied to an archaic nation-state system. Christians have no alternative to examining their sleep to see if it contains sweet dreams—or at least manageable nightmares—or if it is shot through with visions both troubling and beckoning.

Behind us lie
The thousand and the thousand and the thousand years
Vexed and terrible. And still we use
The cures which never cure.

A Sleep of Prisoners

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