Reader's Response

Time for a New Great Debate:
Unilateral Initiatives in Nuclear Disarmament?

Gordon L. Shull

The SALT agreements of 1972 illustrate not only the promise but the insufficiency of the treaty process as a means of retarding and reversing the mad arms race we run. Treaty-making on so vital a subject is anxious, tedious and long. Each side must be sure that it has not inadvertently yielded a decisive advantage to the other; the premium is on hypercaution, and the benefit of any doubt is given to the status quo. The article by Alton Quanbeck and Barry Blechman, “After SALT” (Worldview, September, 1972), should make us ask: Can we do no better?

Ten years ago Charles Osgood suggested that the United States unilaterally take several small but dramatic steps toward disarmament and announce that successive steps would follow if the Soviets took some unprescribed but roughly comparable steps of their own. Osgood gave his proposal the acronym GRIT, for Graduated Reciprocation in Tension-Reduction.

Apart from Amitai Etzioni, who demonstrated that a variation of the GRIT process did in fact occur in the six months or so following President Kennedy’s address at American University, the scholarly world has largely ignored Osgood’s proposal. For a number of reasons his suggestion may be more acceptable now than it was a decade ago. Consider the following arguments for unilateral initiatives in Graduated Reciprocation in Nuclear Disarmament (GRIND—or, more pleasantly, GRID):

1. Each side possesses colossal oversufficiency in second-strike capability. McGeorge Bundy has gone so far as to say that each side possesses such a capability for the next decade no matter what happens in research or deployment in the meantime. Lest this sound brash, we should ask what would happen if the Soviet Union were to spring a surprise attack successful beyond all imagining—one that would destroy all of our ICBMs, all of our bombers and all save one of our Poseidon submarines. That one remaining Poseidon could deliver 480—more than enough, by Pentagon estimates, to destroy 75 per cent of Russian industry. We say it, but we do not really understand it, and we certainly do not act upon it. Being first means nothing in the age of colossal overkill. Being second means nothing.

Given such oversufficiency, neither side need be compulsively concerned about symmetry in nuclear disarmament, especially when small steps are taken, and more especially when the steps are taken unilaterally rather than by treaty and can therefore be revoked with less embarrassment.

2. Each side possesses remarkably proficient spies-in-the-sky. In fact, the 1972 SALT agreement commits each side to noninterference with the operations of the other’s surveillance system. The significance is twofold. First, inspection is no longer necessary to verify the number of missiles deployed. Second, each side demonstrates its appreciation of the other’s need for reassurance. These augur well for a policy of taking small, easily verifiable steps without waiting for formal agreement.

3. The mood of U.S.-Soviet interaction is far less hostile now than it was in 1962. Many more individuals on each side are inclined to view the adversary as motivated by considerations of national security (however ideologically tinged they may be) rather than messianic zeal. Ironically, this growth of mutual appreciation and relaxation has been accompanied by a dramatic missile race. It appears that the major propellant of that race is not fear of the other’s motives but of his capabilities—coupled with the policy on both sides of being prepared for “the worst possible case.”

Small but dramatic dearmament steps, taken unilaterally, could embolden and support those in the USSR who wish, for whatever reason, to dampen the arms race. (Presumably there are bureaucrats who want more money for their own programs, as well as others who for reasons ideological or humane would like to see the arms race moderated.)

4. We have abundant evidence that our balance of terror is indeed a delicate one. Technological accidents have brought us close to disaster on several occasions. One thinks of the “determination” by our radars in Thule that it was 99.9 per cent certain that the adversary had launched a full-scale missile attack; the still-unexplained self-ignition of a BOMARC missile; the inadvertent flight of a U-2 over USSR in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Discipline and communication within the American bureaucracy during the Cuban

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probing about the modalities of the unresponsiveness to McNamara’s closer to Cuba; Secretary Anderson’s been authorized, and its resistance to blockade; the Air Force’s assumption amplyes are from Graham Allison, the order moving the blockade line ent violation of Missle Crisis proved appallingly fragility of rational process in the finest minds. If these be true, nations must move with all deliberate speed toward a more rational arms posture. That movement must eventually be multilateral, but it might most feasibly begin and proceed through prudent unilateral acts, reciprocally undertaken.

What are the long-range consequences of unilateral initiatives? We do not know—but nor do we care. That is the beauty of it. No one act irrevocably upsets the balance of power; the process can be stopped or stepped up at any time; acts taken unilaterally but reciprocally can later be formalized by treaty; new occasions will teach new possibilities. If we should ever approach the point of “undersufficiency,” in terms of second-strike capability, we will have the option of stopping or of moving into new arrangements made possible by a new climate.

No magic is claimed for such a policy. It will not resolve the disputes which wrack the planet. But it might help to tranquilize the superpower involvement in some of them, if not the disputes themselves. Together with other policies, unilateral initiatives might play an important part in transforming the insane arms race into a dearmament walk.

The question for international relations scholars, theologians—yes, and for CRIA—is: have we given this possibility the attention it deserves?

WE PREDICT . . .

. . . that the special issue (May) on Israel’s 25th anniversary as a sovereign State will provoke everyone and completely satisfy no one. Our new Associate Editor, Hillel Levine, has just returned from the Middle East where he was rounding up articles—political, religious, humorous—that will present a unique insight into the short and long-term problems facing what is, after all, a unique nation.

. . . that John Voll’s “Lebanon’s Impossible Options” will illuminate the unbelievable options facing a Christian/Muslim State that is pressed (by Israel) to get rid of the Arab guerrillas and (by the Arabs) to make a more unequivocal commitment to “Palestinian liberation.” What may in fact happen is the destruction of democracy in Lebanon.

. . . that readers will think twice about the “peaceful uses of atomic energy” after reading Ashok Kapur’s treatment of the subject. It seems that, in this realm too, the line between peace and war is anything but clear. India and Canada are two countries that have played crucial roles in shaping the ideology of “peaceful use,” and may end up as victims of their own designs.

. . . that a forgotten people will be discovered after the publication of Rabbi André Ungar’s article on the Jews of South Africa. They are neither Afrikaaner nor English, and they are certain they are not Black, Coloured or Asian. Ungar puts the proposition of Jewish commitment to human rights to a severe testing.

. . . that Jonathan Power’s reassessment (April) of Martin Luther King’s work will stimulate serious reflection on the fifth anniversary of the prophet’s death. Somehow those—both black and white—who claimed they were going “beyond” King begin to look very dated, while the relevance of his words and works presses upon us with new urgency.

. . . that Benjamin Barber’s massive and devastating “Man on Women” (a two-part article) will become a landmark in the feminist liberation furor. Barber’s polemic will either end the debate or start a new one. We are making no promises except that the discussion will never be the same.

. . . that, if we had more space, we would tell you about upcoming articles by Ronald Stone (why was Reinhold Niebuhr a moralistic hawk on Israel?), by Herbert Kelman (maybe the conflicting responses to the issue of war crimes in Indochina has had more to do with class than with ethics), and by Donald Smith (Bangladesh has given “secularization” a new definition). . . . All of which leads us to the confident prediction that thoughtful readers will not want to miss the next six months of Worldview. Or the six months after that, for that matter.