

Banning the Bomb: Four Decades Too Late?

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For forty-one years we have lived in “the shadow of the bomb,” and as nuclear arsenals multiply, the shadow lengthens. That nuclear holocaust would be an unspeakable catastrophe requires no argument. As the bumper sticker reminds us, “One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.” But the present state of nuclear deterrence, in which the superpowers aim tens of thousands of warheads at each other, is viewed by many as a nightmare in its own right, and a moral abomination.

In *The Abolition*, Jonathan Schell argues that by consenting to live under the doctrine of deterrence, “we bear responsibility not only for the lives of the people whom ‘we’ may kill but also for the lives of those whom ‘they’ would kill; namely, our families, our friends, and our other fellow-citizens. . . . Our acceptance of nuclear weapons is in that sense a default of parenthood, of love, of friendship, of citizenship. . . .” Quoting Khrushchev's remark following the Cuban missile crisis, that the smell of burning flesh was in the air, Schell observes, “in truth, that smell is never far from our nostrils now.”

Of course vast numbers of people carry on with their daily business for the most part oblivious to the realities of nuclear deterrence, giving little thought to the weapons targeted against them, less to the weapons their government targets against others. If this is so, then, according to Australian philosopher C.A.J. Coady, so much the worse, morally, for them. He likens those who avert their noses from the threat of nuclear incineration to those good German burghers who failed

to notice preparations for the Nazi death camps.

Coady holds nuclear deterrence to be immoral. He also recognizes, however, that it is not clear exactly what follows from that admission. The issue is not whether we should bring nuclear weapons into existence. The weapons are with us, and our policy is in place. The difficulty arises, in Coady's view, because "the matter of retreating from the policy of threat has pragmatic and moral aspects itself," leaving "room for a gap to arise between the judgment that [nuclear deterrence] is seriously immoral and the decision what to do about avoiding or abandoning [it]."

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Nuclear deterrence—the promise to punish any nuclear transgression with the "assured destruction" of the enemy and, maybe, of oneself and the rest of the world as well—is hardly, on the face of it, a palatable alternative. But, Schell suggests, "there is nothing wrong with the doctrine of deterrence which is not wrong simply with the possession of vast nuclear arsenals." So-called war-fighting strategies to employ those weapons in some "limited" nuclear exchange are, if anything, less reassuring still. The problem lies not in doctrine, he argues, but in "existential features" of the weapons themselves. Thus the hope is to "ban," not deterrence, but the bomb—in Schell's words, to get rid of the bomb before it gets rid of us.

The Strategic Defense Initiative

One way to escape from the bomb, short of eliminating nuclear weapons altogether, is to construct defenses effective enough, in the hope of President Reagan, to render ballistic missiles "impotent and obsolete." In March 1983 the president unveiled his "Strategic Defense Initiative," calling on the scientific community, which gave us nuclear weapons in the first place, to develop new technology to save us from them. The image conjured by the imagination is of a huge bullet-proof bubble arching over the Earth, sheltering allies and adversaries alike. (Reagan has vowed to share defensive technology, once developed, with the Russians.) Against such an impenetrable shield, nuclear weapons, as in a Saturday morning cartoon, bounce off and fall away, harmless. With a defensive system in operation, innocent civilians on both sides would no longer be held hostage to the threat of nuclear war. And, once useless, swords could be beaten to plowshares, or simply forgotten.

In reality, the "bulletproof bubble" is to be a vast

network of laser interceptors, coordinated with split-second timing and perfect precision by a computer program of unparalleled complexity. Will it work? Will it work well enough to make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete"? Leon Sloss, a leading spokesman for strategic defenses, cautions, "At this stage in our knowledge of advanced defensive technologies, it seems unlikely that we can create a perfect defense or eliminate nuclear weapons at any time in the foreseeable future. Even if SDI is successful, it will not provide defense against all nuclear weapons." Sloss recommends, not supplanting offense by defense, but a mix of offensive and defensive forces: "Defense should not be seen primarily as defending specific targets, but rather as providing one of several layers of protection which will add greater uncertainty and ambiguity to the calculations of Soviet planners." Defense, then, is one more tool for us to use in maintaining deterrence against the Soviets, not a protective umbrella shielding us both.

For this reason Henry Shue, director of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's Working Group on Nuclear Policy and Morality, argues that the pursuit of SDI cannot be construed as the moral high road, for "we are keeping the offensive missiles, which are what the moral argument condemns. . . . It is planning to retaliate, not being retaliated against, that just-war morality requires us to eliminate." Other critics charge that far from demonstrating the futility of further developments in offensive weapons, SDI will spur yet another escalation in the arms race. According to Harold Feiveson, of Princeton University's Center for Energy and Environmental Studies, "defense of population is likely to sabotage efforts to restrain the arms race and to provoke an offensive response by the adversary which could well result in still greater damage

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in the event the arsenals were actually used." We build defenses, they build offenses to counter them. They spend money, we spend money. And in the end?

Deep Reductions

A second way to back off from the bomb is through deep and dramatic reductions in the number of nuclear weapons. Feiveson advocates a 90 percent reduction in superpower arsenals, arguing that "essentially all the roles claimed for today's absurdly bloated nuclear arsenals could be achieved as well with drastically reduced numbers of weapons." The foundation of

nuclear deterrence is the relationship of mutual vulnerability, in which one side deters the other from a nuclear attack by threatening nuclear retaliation and is itself deterred by leaving its own population unprotected against retaliation for any transgression of its own. "Certainly," Feiveson maintains, "both superpowers have far more weapons than needed to hold hostage the adversary. . . . In fact, the mutual hostage relationship is clearly a very hardy one. No disarmament (short of virtually complete disarmament), no offensive buildup, no defensive umbrella, appears likely to upset it in the slightest."

In *The Abolition* Jonathan Schell takes the argument for reduction one step further, pressing to the conclusion that "in the nuclear world the threat to use force is as self-cancelling at zero weapons as it is at fifty thousand nuclear weapons." Schell advocates abolishing nuclear weapons altogether, keeping only the factories for manufacturing them, and, most important, the knowledge of how to do so—"knowledge that nations are powerless to get rid of even if they want to." This alone—the fact that nuclear weapons can never be uninvented, nuclear innocence never regained—keeps deterrence sufficiently robust that the weapons themselves become superfluous. "It has often been said," Schell notes, "that the impossibility of uninventing nuclear weapons makes their abolition impossible.

But . . . the opposite would be the case. . . . Once we accept the fact that the acquisition of the knowledge was the essential preparation for nuclear armament, and that it can never be reversed, we can see that every state of disarmament is also a state of armament. And, being a state of armament, it has deterrent value."

One considerable advantage of deep reductions in nuclear arsenals, according to Feiveson, would be a savings in money and resources: "it cannot be denied that the arms race, as now constituted, involves an abhorrent waste of resources in a world stained by hunger and poverty." This advantage would be eroded, however, if money were lavished instead on building up even more expensive conventional forces. Both Feiveson and Schell also defend their plans as leading to greater stability in times of crisis. As Schell puts it, "We sometimes say that we live on the brink of nuclear destruction. But . . . it would be more accurate to say that we are hanging by one arm from a branch that sticks out over the brink." Abolition, he argues, would at least return us to the brink again.

Sloss replies, however, that it is at best a "tenuous proposition" that the degree of danger is directly proportional to the size of the arsenals. "One can argue that very small arsenals are more unstable than large ones, because of the potential risk from cheating on the size of the arsenals; the increased temptation with a limited force to attack limited numbers of high value targets (i.e., cities); or the added leverage given to a small power to threaten a large power." Critics speculate that we might do better to leave the missiles slumbering in their silos than to pace the floors of the factories feverishly anticipating a signal to race into production.

A second objection is that shrunken arsenals might nevertheless be targeted at innocent women, men, and children (though Feiveson emphatically rejects direct targeting of cities); even on Schell's proposal, as he himself admits, "we would still be implicated in the intention—somewhere, someday, perhaps—of slaughtering millions of people. Instead of rejecting nuclear deterrence categorically, we would still be relying on it." Both Feiveson and Schell defend their proposals, nonetheless, as decisive steps in the right direction. Feiveson hopes that reduced nuclear forces would lead to scaled-down notions of what nuclear weapons can be used for and mark the beginning of serious detente. Schell hopes that abolition of nuclear weapons would at least succeed in pushing nuclear terror "into the background of our affairs . . . thereby clearing a space into which the peaceful, constructive energies of humanity could flood."

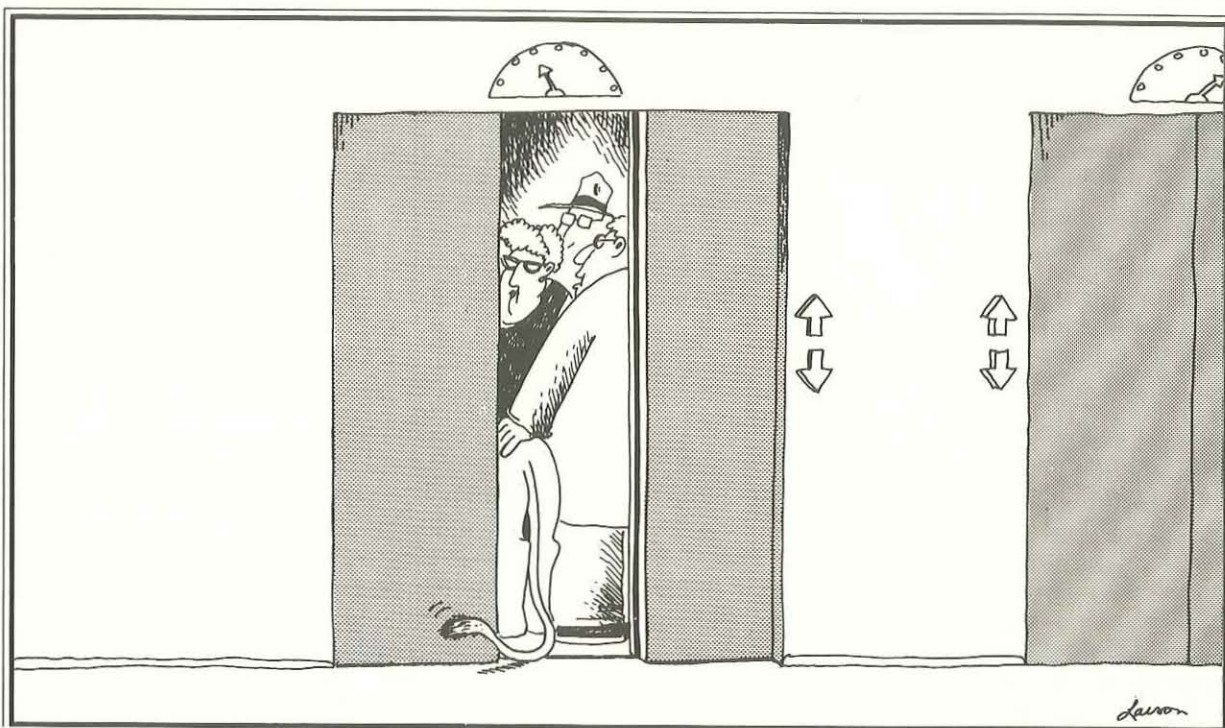
A final problem—or challenge—for both proposals is that both depend critically on bilateral, mutual reductions. The United States and the Soviet Union are to join together in deeply cutting—or abolishing—their nuclear stockpiles. But Sloss comments, "The post-war record of limiting and controlling armaments offers little promise that negotiation is the route to security. . . . arms control negotiations are the product of an adversarial relationship which, if it changes at all, will



Drawing by H. Martin; © 1982
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"I figure the universe was formed with a big bang
so it might as well end with a big bang."

"The Far Side" cartoon is reproduced by permission of Chronicle Features, San Francisco.



"Don't be alarmed, folks. . . He's completely harmless unless something startles him."

only change gradually." Indeed, Thomas Schelling, professor of political economy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, lambastes arms control negotiations as themselves driving the arms race. He charges that the purchase of, for example, MX missiles seems to be "an obligation imposed by a doctrine that the end justifies the means—the end something called arms control and the means a demonstration that the United States does not lack the determination to match or exceed the Soviets in every category of weapons." Of late, investment in SDI has been championed, not as contributing to defense for its own sake, but for its usefulness as a bargaining chip, and as a threat to lure the Soviets to the bargaining table.

Schelling holds out hope, however, that "something that deserves to be identified as arms control can come about informally and without being recognized as arms control by the participants." For example, with no formal Soviet acknowledgment of the principle that a war in Europe should be kept non-nuclear, both sides have proceeded to some extent to pursue that objective de facto by purchasing and installing appropriate weapons. However, it seems that the kind of reciprocal restraint Schelling describes aims at maintaining a robust status quo of deterrence rather than trying to achieve any radical overhaul of the nuclear balance.

Unilateral Disarmament

If it seems unlikely that the superpowers can cooperate on any significant initiative toward bilateral disarmament, the option remains for the United States to lay down its arms unilaterally. The United States could decide simply that the deadly game of nuclear terror

is one that it declines to play. While the American political climate at present is hardly conducive to such a proposal, it remains in our power to adopt, and some might argue that its adoption is morally incumbent upon us.

As Shue outlines one rationale for unilateral disarmament, "avoiding the commission of a wrong yourself takes moral priority over preventing even very bad things, for which you are not responsible, from happening." We threaten nuclear attack against the Soviets to deter them from attacking us, or our allies. If deterrence works, then, it serves to prevent the Soviets from inflicting terrible harm. But if the threat itself is immoral, we have ourselves committed a grievous wrong, and it is our job to look after our own conscience and let the Soviets look after theirs.

With this reasoning Shue emphatically disagrees. If our withdrawal from the nuclear brotherhood would be destabilizing (for example, by alarming allies like Germany and Japan, who then might begin their own, perhaps more threatening nuclear build-up), that increase in risk must be on our conscience as fully as our own continuing participation in deterrence would be. "If the choice to abandon deterrence unilaterally would in fact create an unstable situation in which nuclear war would occur, that choice can hardly be described simply as letting other people kill each other. It is contributing knowingly to the occurrence of great harm. In a situation of interdependent decisions, what you do—not a distant consequence of what you do—may be to increase danger with which others must deal."

On a small, crowded planet, after so many mistakes have already been made, it may be that we cannot

preserve our moral purity single-handedly. Progress toward peace and stability may have to come through international cooperation, not by our own isolated action, however high-minded it might be.

Conclusion:

In a more perfect world, nuclear deterrence would be no one's first choice for how to conduct the world's business. That we aim tens of thousands of warheads at the Soviets as they aim tens of thousands of warheads at us is, at best, a peculiar premise for global harmony. But that nuclear deterrence is morally flawed unfortunately need not mean that any other course of action now open to us is any better. As Shue points out, "It may well be that all the options toward nuclear deterrence still available now are wrong, but that some are more deeply wrong than others. Nowhere is it written that in every situation there is a right way out—indeed, nowhere is it written that in every situation there is any way out." But that all options are flawed does not mean that any choice is as good as any other. It means we must choose the least bad—that is to say, the best available. If this turns out to be a continued reliance on some kind of deterrence, then that may be the choice that now lies before us.

Maybe the first steps we can take to retreat from the nuclear brink will not be major policy initiatives, but more humble, homely measures: a shift away from inflammatory rhetoric, an encouragement of friendship between Soviet and American communities, families, children. If the bomb cannot be "banned," perhaps it can be moved from the center to the periphery of human affairs—a last resort made progressively more remote. If we cannot get rid of the bomb, perhaps we can rid ourselves of the kind of politics that relies upon it, by abandoning the illusion that nuclear missiles create political power.

In the meantime, Schelling reminds us, "Most of what we call civilization depends on reciprocal vulnerability." A balance of deterrence doesn't have to mean a balance of terror: "People regularly stand at the curb watching trucks, buses and cars hurtle past at speeds that guarantee injury and threaten death if they so much as attempt to cross against the traffic. They are absolutely deterred. But there is no fear. They just know better."

The views of C.A.J. Coady, Leon Sloss, and Harold Feiveson are quoted from papers prepared for the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's Working Group on Nuclear Policy and Morality, to appear in *The Shadow of the Bomb*, edited by Henry Shue (forthcoming). Henry Shue's views are quoted from his papers "The Moral Defense of Strategic Defense" (condensed and adapted as "Are Nuclear Defenses Morally Superior?" *QQ* vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1985) and "Redistribution of the Risk of Nuclear War" (unpublished manuscript). Jonathan Schell is quoted from his book *The Abolition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Thomas C. Schelling from his article "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985/86).

Diverging Paths for Deterrence April 22–24, 1987

A conference sponsored by the
Center for Philosophy and Public Policy
to be held at the Adult Education Center
University of Maryland, College Park
funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation

Philosophers and strategists from the United States, Germany, Japan, and Australia will explore three alternative ways of departing from deterrence as usual: finite deterrence, the strategic defense initiative, and conventional defenses for Europe.

Civic Education and Traditional American Values

"Something has gone tragically wrong with our society in recent years," begins a recent report of a commission on civic education. What has gone wrong, the report charges, is this: we are failing to educate future citizens for citizenship, and the core of this failure lies in a falling away from traditional American values: "a lack of honesty and integrity among . . . citizens [is] directly related to the failure of our institutions to effectively transmit the values contained in our cultural heritage." This report is very much a product

of its time: countless local and national groups, study commissions, education lobbies, and reform movements are decrying disrespect for traditional values and advocating a rekindling of tradition as a remedy for the various public ills that assail us.

The traditionalist's argument has not met with universal assent, however. What is controversial about inculcating traditional American values? What should we conclude about the persistence of this kind of controversy? These questions force us back to a prior ques-