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LIVING WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS - AVOIDING NUCLEAR WAR

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LIVING WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS—AVOIDING NUCLEAR WAR

Remarks To the Crossroads Peace Institute Peace Weekend¹

June 23, 1989

Thank you, and thank you for inviting me here tonight.

As I understand it, this weekend's purpose is to explore the agenda for the 1990s for U.S.-Soviet relations, and in particular how to ensure peaceful relations between our two countries. I want to describe to you tonight some of the work that's being done on that subject, in the context of a project called "Avoiding Nuclear War: Managing Conflict in the Nuclear Age." Just as background, this multi-year project, which we're now about half-way through, is run jointly by the RAND Corporation and the RAND/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior, and supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Of course, anything I say here tonight represents my opinion only, and not the opinions of RAND, UCLA, or the Carnegie Corporation.

I presume that you're all here tonight because you're interested in how to reduce the chances of war, particularly of nuclear war, and to promote the chances of peace. I have some good news for you—we've done pretty well so far. We haven't had a war between the Soviet Union and the United States, ever, and we haven't seen nuclear weapons used in anger in almost 45 years. That, in my view, and given the previous record, is pretty impressive.

Still, nuclear weapons exist, and that alone is very worrisome to many people, including to all of us here, because as long as they exist, there is still some small chance that they might one day be used.

Conflicts are political. Nations know that, and so they keep weapons, including nuclear weapons, in order to settle their conflicts by force if that becomes

¹ These remarks were given by the author to a group of students and some of their parents and teachers from Los Angeles-area private secondary schools assembled for a "peace weekend," under the auspices of the Crossroads Peace Institute, on June 23, 1989.

necessary. The community of nations is not, unfortunately, like the community you live in: Within a nation, there is a supreme power, which has a monopoly, or at least a superiority, in the means of coercion, and which has the power, by consent of the governed, to settle disputes and enforce order, including, if necessary, by force. The community of nations does not possess a global police force, or a global court whose judgment everyone accepts. (Just by way of an example, you'll recall that Nicaragua tried to take the United States to the World Court after the U.S. had mined a Nicaraguan harbor. The U.S. refused to accept the court's jurisdiction.) While it might be beneficial, in terms of the victims of criminal behavior, if private possession of guns were eliminated or sharply restricted, that alone would not eliminate criminal behavior or the conflicts between citizens which are normally settled by civil suits in the courts. Similarly, eliminating weapons and armies would not eliminate disputes between nations, and since no such enforcement or settlement mechanisms exist between nations, they keep armed forces.

It may seem, then, that we could at least eliminate nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the technology of nuclear weapons cannot be forgotten or made to disappear. We missed one chance, early on, to place the technology of atomic power under international civilian control, and it will be exceedingly hard ever to put this particular genie back into its bottle. To the contrary, one of the most worrisome trends for the next decade will be the proliferation of nuclear and chemical weapons, and the means for their delivery—specifically, ballistic missiles. So, whatever the future may hold for disarmament, we will be probably be living with nuclear weapons for a while yet. The question, then, for us, is how to do that—how to live with nuclear weapons, but avoid a nuclear war.

Not only that, but there is a certain paradox at the heart of the existence of nuclear weapons: I noted earlier that the good news is that, since their very first use, despite the enormous growth in the Soviet and American nuclear arsenals, nuclear weapons have never been used. And I believe that that is precisely because they are viewed by everyone as not like conventional weapons—everyone accepts that their use would be truly awful. Thus, the simple fear that a conflict between the superpowers might involve the use of nuclear weapons has helped to prevent armed conflicts between the superpowers. I might even go a step further and say that the very size of the superpowers' nuclear arsenals has reinforced this fear of their use. If we only had a couple of hundred weapons each, it might be easier to imagine a leader saying, "Well, perhaps the destruction would not be so great that my country

couldn't recover." With very large arsenals, the fear that events might somehow get out of hand and escalate to a general war serves to dampen the risks leaders are willing to run, because they know that a general nuclear war involving all their nuclear weapons would almost certainly spell national suicide and global disaster. Thus, even a drastic reduction or elimination of nuclear weapons, such as President Reagan proposed at Reykjavik, may have its perils—and again, this is precisely because the causes of conflict between nations are not the weapons themselves, but disputes over perceived interests.

Therefore, our project starts with two presumptions:

First: Everyone wishes to avoid nuclear war—no rational leader would find any cause, any interest worth destroying his society for.

But the second presumption is that avoiding a premeditated nuclear war is only half the problem. The other half of the problem is avoiding a war which arises out of the political and operational dynamics of a confrontation between the two superpowers. One way to avoid nuclear war, or the risk of it, is to simply lie down and let the other side have its way, to forego the protection of your own national interests in the interest of avoiding war. This is what Professor Alexander George has called the paradox of crisis management—that there need be no crisis at all if one side is simply willing to not put up a fight. However, nations do come into conflict, and they are not willing to just let the other side have its way—they are willing to run some risk of war, and even get into a war, if they believe that they need to do so in order to protect important national interests. The Allies fought World War II, at enormous cost in terms of death and destruction, because it was preferable to living under Hitler.

Now we have added nuclear weapons to this equation.

The fact is that, historically, the superpowers have been willing to try to manipulate the risk of nuclear war for the purpose of bargaining in crises. That is, they have been willing to demonstrate a willingness to run the risk, if not of nuclear war itself, at least of a military clash which might threaten to escalate into a nuclear war. This has been referred to as "the threat that leaves something to chance"—one side in effect says to the other, "This is important enough to me that I'm willing to initiate a series of actions the end result of which I can't completely control or foresee." They do this by posturing their military forces, i.e., alerting them, deploying them, mobilizing, etc., all for the purpose of signaling, and for hedging against the failure of diplomacy to arrive at a political solution.

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Again, though, that paradox of nuclear weapons crops up—both sides are so conscious of the risks of nuclear war, and of its horrors, that they are very reluctant to even run the risk of armed conflict at a very low level. There has been for some time now a kind of implicit rule that Soviet and American troops avoid direct confrontations. Some of the work we've done seems to suggest that the United States and the Soviet Union are becoming even more reluctant to run those risks today (I'll come back to that later).

Let me try to make some of this concrete with an example.

The example is the best known and most studied superpower crisis of the nuclear era: the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The basic facts are fairly straightforward: Sometime in the late summer, the Soviet Union began placing in Cuba missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to targets in the United States, after repeatedly assuring the United States, both publicly and privately, that it would never and was not doing so. The missiles were discovered and positively identified by U.S. satellite and overflight reconnaissance in October. The United States instituted a naval blockade of Cuba to keep out any further offensive weapons, and issued an ultimatum demanding the *withdrawal of the missiles already in place*, and threatening to take whatever actions were necessary to ensure their removal if they were not withdrawn—President Kennedy even explicitly threatened nuclear retaliation if the Cuban missiles were fired against the U.S. The United States also began preparations for various military options against the missile sites, including a full-scale invasion of Cuba. After several very tense days, the crisis was resolved when the United States pledged never to invade Cuba, and the Soviet Union pledged to remove the missiles. This allowed the Soviet leader, Khrushchev, to save face at least to some degree, by appearing to have extracted from the United States a pledge not to attack Cuba, which is what he claimed the missiles were originally put there to defend against.

While just how close we actually came to nuclear war in this instance has been debated, it is clearly the closest we've ever come. It is interesting to note that from the very beginning of the crisis, all of the President's advisors were in agreement that the missiles had to be removed, but this was due less to the military threat they posed, and more to the political ramifications of the crisis: the sense that the United States could not just sit idly by while the Soviet Union used an island ninety miles off the U.S. coast as a missile base. It simply offended American dignity and prestige too greatly, and President Kennedy felt he could not tolerate it. It is worth recalling also

that congressional elections were only two weeks away at the start of the crisis, and the president had been campaigning hard to ensure a continued Democratic majority. Thus, the president also was conscious of his immediate political future: if he appeared to be weak or faltering, his party might be rejected at the polls, and he would be politically damaged, probably very severely, given the stakes.

The Cuban crisis also provides an example of how difficult it is to closely control all aspects of crisis management. Despite the tightly centralized crisis management team, located in the White House and run, in the president's absence, by his brother the Attorney General, and the very close control they attempted to exercise over the naval blockade, an important and completely routine naval operation escaped their attention. Navy ships were actively pursuing Soviet submarines which bore a large share of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, and they would probably have been able to prevent the Soviet subs from firing their nuclear-armed cruise missiles against the United States. This pursuit could only have appeared to the Kremlin as a very coercive action, and yet this was exactly the kind of coercion which the President and his advisors sought to avoid—they wanted to leave Khrushchev as many outs as possible. They simply were unaware until late in the crisis that the Navy was conducting these operations.

A couple of lessons: First, the United States is willing to run the risk of confrontation and war—even nuclear war—if it believes the stakes are high enough—and the stakes are always political; questions of perception, international reputation and prestige, even domestic politics. Second, using military forces as a tool for fine-tuned crisis management is fraught with dangers of unintended escalation. In Cuba, the United States thought it was starting at the lowest level of coercion possible, leaving itself the option to ratchet up the pressure as necessary. But the American civilian crisis managers were entirely ignorant of a routine military procedure which, because it directly threatened a very important element of the Soviet Union's strategic forces, probably conveyed exactly the opposite message to the Kremlin.

We have probably never come so close to nuclear war as we did during the Cuban missile crisis. And yet that was some twenty-seven years ago. In the meantime, arsenals have grown enormously. If the sheer number of weapons dictated the probability of war, we surely would have had one by now, if we came that close when we had so few, relatively speaking. In fact, if anything, we seem

to get further and further away from the likelihood of a superpower confrontation that would run the risk of escalating to the use of nuclear weapons. The last time the United States used its strategic nuclear forces in the manner I've been describing—rattling our nuclear saber, so to speak—was during the Yom Kippur war which pitted Israel against Syria and Egypt in 1973—sixteen years ago. Since that time, the United States and the Soviet Union have not had a conflict serious enough to warrant using or threatening to use military force against the other. There are many explanations which have been advanced as to why it is that the superpowers are less and less willing to confront each other in ways that risk armed conflict, and perhaps nuclear war. Certainly a large part of the reason is the awareness of our mutual vulnerability to devastation in a nuclear war.

This is not to say that we won't ever have a superpower confrontation again. But it is important to understand how much the underlying state of superpower political relations matters to their likelihood of getting into a serious confrontation which carries with it the risk of war. As part of our project, over the past couple of years we ran a series of crisis simulations, or games, in which we had two teams, playing the Soviet and American leaders and their top advisors, involved in a crisis scenario which we developed in order to examine certain hypotheses about crisis interactions. It was particularly interesting to note the difference between our third run of this game, which took place in the fall of 1987, and our fourth and final game, which we ran in January of this year. Both game runs used the same scenario, which posited a military crisis between two Middle East countries, one of which was a United States ally, who invades the second country, a Soviet ally. To make things lively, we set it up so that there was a significant chance that the U.S. ally would fail and suffer a humiliating and perhaps regime-threatening defeat if it did not receive U.S. military assistance. Thus, to save its client, and its own reputation as a strong and reliable ally, the United States had a strong incentive to get directly involved. However, the Soviets also, and for similar reasons, might well have felt compelled to get involved on behalf of their client, to keep him from going down to defeat.

We found that, at least for our game participants, there was a significant reluctance to run the risks of a military confrontation with the other superpower. Once in such a situation, however, their calculations and their willingness to run risks were subject to abrupt swings as they tried to balance their regional stakes with their incentives to avoid a direct military conflict. A notable difference in the final game from our previous experience, however, was a stronger-than-ever convergence of

superpower desires to avoid conflict, even at the expense of their regional stakes and relations with their local allies. This was very simply due to what we might call "the Gorbachev effect:" both sides had a very different and changed view of how the Soviet Union would plausibly behave under these circumstances. The Blue, or U.S. side, expected different, less aggressive behavior from a Gorbachev-led Red team. The Red team, in turn, played their side differently than past Red teams had.

In the history of U.S.-Soviet relations, there has been a large dose of what we might call "zero-sum thinking" in superpower relations: in other words, if I win, you automatically lose, and vice-versa. Korea and Vietnam could not fall to the communists; Nicaragua cannot become a Soviet satellite on our borders, et cetera. A game like the ones we ran can't prove anything, because it can't simulate reality well enough, but it is instructive in that it reflects a trend that many people recently have commented on, which is a change in the atmosphere of U.S.-Soviet relations away from this "your-loss-is-my-gain" mentality, and toward a less competitive relationship. The basic point is that the basic determinant of crisis behavior is the underlying state of the superpowers' political relationship.

Let me just conclude with a couple of remarks about the benefits and risks of the improving political climate for crisis management and the risks of nuclear war.

First, and most obviously, the risk of superpower crises arising from direct confrontations is diminishing as the underlying political relationship improves. Moreover, our games suggest that the likelihood of crises or wars growing out of conflicts over regional stakes may also be decreasing.

Second, and relatedly, the opportunity now exists to take some measures to reduce the risks of inadvertent escalation, should crises occur. Currently there are negotiations underway in Vienna on reductions of conventional forces in Europe. These appear to have a good chance at success—although many obstacles remain—in really reducing the forces of the two alliances to nearly equal levels, and perhaps also to posture them in such a way as to reduce the chances of short-warning attack. This would significantly enhance crisis stability in Europe. Similarly, the two sides will undoubtedly sign a far-reaching strategic nuclear arms control agreement in the next year or so.

The opportunity also exists, to borrow a phrase from the *New York Times*, to control risks, not just arms.² The current climate presents a good opportunity to

² "Controlling Risks, Not Just Arms," *New York Times*, June 14, 1989, p. A18.

establish mechanisms and procedures to increase understanding, communications, and transparency between the two superpowers and the two alliances. The agreement recently signed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Crowe, and his Soviet counterpart, on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities, represents a step in that direction. Also underway currently is an unprecedented, ongoing military-to-military dialogue, including talks on military doctrine, begun last year.

The point I wanted to make to you this evening is that peace is a political condition, and so is war. Peace does not flow automatically simply from fewer numbers of weapons on either side. If right now there is a political environment between the superpowers that is less competitive, then I believe that that is a healthy and desirable development. We can and should seize the occasion to reduce the risks of a war that no one wants or intends. If it allows us to reduce the burden of defense expenditures, so much the better. If it allows us to continue to avoid using our military forces, then the cause of peace will have been served.

USA AND USSR: AGENDA FOR THE '90'S

FRIDAY, JUNE 23
5 - 9 p.m.

5 00 - REGISTRATION

DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNG SOVIET IMMIGRANTS

6 00 - "THE SOVIET UNION: A YOUNG PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE"

Susan Goldberg, a member of the student performance troupe *Peace Child*, will present a slide show of her tour of the Ukraine last summer.

7 00 - DINNER AND INTRODUCTION OF WEEKEND PROGRAM

7 45 - "AVOIDING NUCLEAR WAR:

MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE NUCLEAR AGE"

Keynote speaker C. Preston Niblack is a Research Associate at the RAND corporation in Santa Monica. He is currently working on a research project with the RAND/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International behavior. Parents and friends of participants are welcome.

SATURDAY, JUNE 24
8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m.

8 30 - "WHAT CAN I DO?"

Lynn Greenberg, the Executive Director of the Thursday Night Group, will lead an action-oriented workshop.

10 15 - "THE EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR WAR"

Dr. Dan Newman is a member of the nationally recognized group Physicians for Social Responsibility.

11 15 - "HOW TO STOP A NUCLEAR WAR"

Citizen activist Donna Schoenkoph will present a film and a letter-writing workshop.

12 00 - LUNCH AND PEACE INFORMATION FAIR

Organizations will include:

- * SANE/FREEZE (South Bay)
- * GLOBAL WALK * INTERNATIONAL PEACE WALK
- * INTERNATIONAL SIGNATURE CAMPAIGN
- * AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE (Pasadena)
- * LOS ANGELES STUDENT COALITION
- * VETERANS FOR PEACE

SATURDAY (con't)

1:00 - "VIOLENCE IN OUR SOCIETY"

Jerry Rubin is the director of Alliance for Survival, which has been active in the national protest against war toys

2:00 - "ONE SPACESHIP, ONE CREW"

Representatives of the Eco-Home, an ecologically sound model home, will discuss global interdependence.

3:00 - LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Introspective peace workshops will be led by Jack Zimmerman.

SUNDAY, JUNE 25

9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

9:00 - DRAMA WORKSHOP

Improvisational exercises will be led by drama teachers/actors/writers David Colloff and Scott Weintraub.

11:00 - "NEW TRENDS IN MILITARY THINKING"

Joan Bokkair will discuss the work of the Citizens Network for Common Security

12:30 - LUNCH AND ART PROJECTS

Students will design their own t-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers

1:30 - "NON-CONFRONTATIONAL COMMUNICATION"

Tommy Hajduk, a junior at the University of Puget Sound, will discuss effective methods of conveying ideas and beliefs.

2:30 - WRITING WORKSHOP

Teacher and published poet Peter Levitt will lead creative exercises

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