THE NUCLEAR AGE:
STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

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The prospects and hazards of our age have attained global proportions. This is the result of a complex array of economic, technological, and cultural-political factors. Ours is the first age ever to give rise to an authentically global history: nations which earlier existed in the margin of world events are breaking out of this condition and acting as agents of historical change. In the economic sphere, the extension of capital markets erodes traditional national boundaries and facilitates the development of expanding trading zones, partially monitored by multinational organizations. Technologically, breakthroughs in telecommunications encourage the development of a common world culture. Global interdependence is emerging as the distinguishing mark of the contemporary international system. Geographically and politically, it is a hard - and often painful - reality. Interdependence constitutes the common challenge facing the globe in the last decade of the twentieth century. While encouraging in many ways, these global tendencies are at the same time marked by various risks — first among them the threat of nuclear war or environmental disaster.

It was almost as though the twentieth century could have developed in one of two ways. At one pole, bringing together the promising features of our time, we may at one point have looked forward to the possibility of a universal civilization in which diverse cultures would cooperate in shouldering jointly the stewardship of the human race. At the other pole, the century might have been foreseen as the arena of a massive struggle for the domination of the globe in which the immensity of the stakes is equaled by the enormity of destruction. From the perspective of the fin de siècle, the latter prophecy appears more accurate.
The view of warfare as the governor of human affairs, the arbiter of conflicting state interest, and the instrument for excising the feeble and decadent, pervaded thinking about war from classical times until World War I. Both classical and modern analysts of conflict draw from their understanding of the power of war to humiliate great nations lessons of military preparedness. Advocates of empire have traditionally discerned in the superiority of their weapons an adequate justification of their conquests; and moralists discovered in the rigor and sacrifice that war demanded a remedy for what they maintained were the lethargy and flaccidity induced by peace. In 1914, when war broke out in Europe, there were many who believed that “this was the providential lightning flash that would clear the air.” The war would cleanse mankind from all its impurities.1

There always existed, though, beneath the acceptance of war and the enthusiasm it frequently inflamed, a sense of trepidation, if not dread. During the final years of the First World War, thoughtful individuals feared that a continuation of the conflict would demolish European civilization. During World War II, such fears were given new credibility, and the prospect developed of war the great regulator curing the pleurisy of people by destroying the human race completely.2

The relationship between war and technology is an obvious one in our time, as evidenced by the many studies on nuclear strategy, deterrence, and escalation. A close reading of these studies reveals that the human function has been taken over by the weapons themselves. In these circumstances, does it make sense to talk about war as an instrument of policy?

We have been in an absolutely new situation since 1945. This condition illuminates the crisis not only in East-West relations in general, but in Marxism and Christianity, in particular. With the advent of the nuclear age and the power to bring all human life to an end, the human race has moved into a radically new religious situation, one unanticipated in the Judeo-Christian tradition (or, for that matter, in any of the other great religious traditions). The potential nuclear destruction which we confront signifies the possible extinction of the human race, an event which can have no redemptive significance.

Of course, the end of history has long been the object of speculation in religious traditions. Consequently, the notion of a catastrophic end to history is not a new one for western cultural and religious traditions, although it has mainly been a subterranean idea in the West since the Enlightenment.

In the religious thought about the end of time in the West, however, the end of history is conceived differently than it must be thought of today. For it is premised on belief in a creator and governor of history, one who from the beginning was working out purposes which were to be actualized as history moved toward completion. The end of time—whether conceived as final salvation or final catastrophe—was to be the climactic act of God. A finale of this type was something that the faithful would be able to live with— even anticipate with hope.

Conversely, the end of time which we must face—an end brought about by nuclear war—must be thought of not as God’s action but as humanity’s. Furthermore, it is difficult to conceive of this catastrophe as part of a grand design to realize the salvation of the human race; it is, rather, the total destruction of human life on the planet. It will be we who are responsible if this should occur. This possibility confronts us as an act of human will, not of the will of God, and both our actions and our hopes with regard to it, consequently, need to be directed toward the transformation of policies and institutions.

The reality of complete responsibility for the future of the planet which a potential nuclear war symbolizes, calls into question traditional religious language—held together in the symbol of the divine ascendancy—of God’s providence as the only source of hope in such an extreme situation. We thus need to ask much more profoundly if it is not essential to reevaluate some of the most basic tenets of western
economic policies have been greater than they were between the two world wars, or in the century before 1914. Yet cooperation remains infrequent relative to conflict because the rapid development of international economic interdependence since the end of World War II, and the increasing involvement of governments in the operation of modern capitalist economies, have created more areas of potential conflict.

The decline of hegemony in the world political economy does not make international cooperation impossible. Yet, how can cooperation among nation-states take place in the absence of a common international government or without the dominance of a single power? How can cooperation be engendered in such a way as to improve international peace as well as to foster economic development? Issues of cooperation and international institutions are explicitly relevant to contemporary policy. There is a disjunction between the current denigration of multilateralism and a need by the United States for multilateral cooperation in a world of increasing interdependence. The United States would profit from a strategy for its engagement with international institutions.

Faced with increasing complexity and interdependence, governments during the last century often turned to international institutions to facilitate their attempts at cooperation. In the past, international institutions were viewed as entities above the state. In contrast, international regimes are currently seen as part of the bargaining process among governments. The question then becomes: How are international regimes able to facilitate cooperation without assuming that any transfer of sovereignty will necessarily ensue? This notion of international institutions is more reciprocal than hierarchical.

In order to attempt an answer to this question, I want to focus on how cooperation among nations can be organized when common interests exist. I would like to propose steps toward the resolution of political conflict that are practical, and in consonance with principles of
conduct that are widely shared among many cultures. The nations of the world have never experienced such massive cooperative efforts.

The contemporary situation summons governments and peoples to gain mastery over new capacities that risk the destruction of all. It challenges nations to utilize their resources in order to deal more decisively with famine and disease, poverty and environmental issues. Opportunity exists among nations to demonstrate renewed determination to break out of the cycle of the arms race and to focus attention and resources on the most exigent global issues. Yet it is not adequate to hope that governments will bring about some form of universal equilibrium on their own. It is also unwarranted to relegate human survival to the uncertainties of a world balance of power or to naive faith in the judgment of the increasing number of individuals with the ability to initiate a nuclear conflict. There is a need for individual involvement at every level — local, national, and international.

It was, after all, an informed public opinion that pressed for an end to slavery, it was an informed public opinion that sought an end to child labor; it was an informed public opinion and action that helped convince politicians to institute measures to protect the environment, to integrate schools, and even to set in place a limited ban on the testing of nuclear weapons. It was informed public action that had such powerful impact in bringing the Vietnam war to an end. It would thus be a significant enterprise for universities to reach out to inform and engage the wider community. If they do so, there is no more pressing issue with which to start than one that bears directly on human survival.

Such concerted action will be futile, without concentration on the basic qualities that facilitate the bonding and survival of communities under pressure. Nation-states will never reach accord on the fundamental attitudes necessary for cooperation on the scale that is now essential without taking their orientation from such basic principles. When these principles are disregarded, suspicion is the response, among individuals as among governments, even though it also vitiates collective responses to jeopardy.

The steps that need to be taken deal not only with the nuclear threat, but also with the many conventional wars that bedevil this century. These wars resulted in the loss of over seventeen million lives, most of them civilian, since 1945, and drove millions from their own countries. By the next century, a number of nations currently engaged in regional conflicts will probably be nuclear powers.

The argument is frequently made that deterrence exacts unusual caution from nations maintaining nuclear arsenals. Yet there is no assurance that this will always be the case. In fact, “deterrence” is basically a code word for continued escalation of the arms race. The realization that even if all nuclear weapons were destroyed, the knowledge of how to reinvent them would remain and could be employed in any of a dozen or more nations, has also modified previous hopes for nuclear disarmament. Yet, more piecemeal approaches to arms reductions allow for serious risks. Progress has been laggard toward even the limited agreements now in place, and these are, for all practical purposes, provisional. Even if the Soviet Union and the United States were able to realize their most grandiose plans for arms reduction agreements, the remaining weapons would still be enough to wreak incredible destruction. And the reasons for mutual apprehension are palpable enough to keep nations from significantly diminishing the threat, let alone doing away with it.

We can look at the problem from another perspective, by referring to a social environment that is as much in jeopardy as the natural environment. There has been incremental damage from numerous activities to the earth’s oceans and waterways, its atmosphere, even its ozone layer. Nations will need concertedly to reduce the level of this damage in order to restore some form of environmental equilibrium; simply permitting current policies to continue insures ecological disaster. It is just as urgent to lessen the harm done to the social atmosphere in which human exchange takes place and to maintain the minimum of
cooperation that is its principal component. Societies are able to prosper only within a certain range of trust and skepticism. Excessive trust encourages exploitation and is itself life-threatening; yet if suspicion becomes overwhelming, societies can no longer function, much less project for long-term survival.

A reexamination of practices that generate suspicion is called for. It will be necessary to reevaluate, from this perspective, the many forms of psychological and economic warfare, the practice of "disinformation," cheating on international treaties, human rights violations, and the support of regional wars. Such a reexamination of national policies is an urgent priority. Governments can no longer afford to violate basic moral standards at will in the international sphere. However frequently these standards have been disregarded in the past, they have now become essential for survival. Nation-states should not be exempt from the ethical principles that guide our personal lives. The actions of institutions must be congruent with individual standards.

Pragmatic steps need to be taken in order to transform the ethos within nations, as well as among them. Civil war or oppression still bear down on the majority of the world's peoples. Even in nations better off than the majority in those regards, suspicion and factionalism stand in the way of solutions to pressing problems. When public officials disregard basic values in the conduct of foreign policy, they are led to do so domestically as well, if for no other reason than to hide their activities and to silence critics. Such behavior erodes public life, undermines the accountability without which further abuses thrive, and adds to the already strong public suspicion of politics and government. No nation can long afford to allow what its leaders claim are the demands of foreign policy to undermine domestic life so severely.

To be efficacious, a strategy for the resolution of international conflict must set forth an ethical framework that can be shared by both religious and secular traditions. Such a framework can offer guidance to all whose activities can have any impact on the environment in which governments and peoples have to face mutual problems.

This purpose is best served by emphasizing the moral constraints necessary for maintaining an environment of at least minimal trust in any society, and consequently perceived as essential within most cultural traditions. A constraint such as that on taking innocent human life, for instance, is familiar enough to members of most societies as to demand no elaborate explanation. The constraints accentuated in an ethical framework intended to be international in scope must be few enough to set realizable standards and straightforward enough to be easily comprehended, yet also sufficiently concrete to offer more of a sense of direction than general injunctions to demonstrate, for instance, justice or compassion. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights is an example of this.

Many practices in East-West relations are overdue for change. Among them are violations of law such as the mining of international waterways, the use of poison gas, and the employing, subsidizing, or training of terrorist forces. Some of the necessary changes, such as those affecting covert action, may demand negotiation. Just as nations bargain about arms reductions, so they can do much more to negotiate modifications in policies that stand in its way.

Practices such as economic exploitation, censorship, and denials of political or religious freedom not only chip away at basic moral constraints in their own right but also add to the distrust a nation inspires abroad as well as domestically. Governments that demonstrate no respect for basic moral constraints in their treatment of opposition forces at home inspire little hope that they will do so internationally.

The problems in the way of agreement about such issues are great, since the majority of governments want no part of outside interference in internal affairs, no matter how high the level of mismanagement and repression. Yet it is increasingly difficult to compartmentalize domestic and international affairs. Stock market and banking activities cross all national boundaries, so that what is done in one nation can have a powerful impact across the world; this is also the case with government
policies that affect human rights.  

The Cold War has waxed and waned for more than forty years, and United States policy during this time has been shaped mainly by one major force: fear of and opposition to the spread of Soviet-sponsored communism. In the last eight years alone, the Cold War has led to more than two trillion dollars in military spending by the United States. The Cold War has also averted attention from pressing domestic issues, distorted our relations with other nations, and has moved us away from our own traditions.

The East-West military confrontation is becoming moot in the face of the vast political, ethnic, and economic problems that are now plaguing the Soviet Union and its allies, of the difficulties with which the countries of Western Europe contend as they move toward economic and, as some hope, a form of political union, and of the upheavals and disasters that are occurring in China and the third world. The United States and the Soviet Union now have far less to fear from each other than they have to fear not only from their internal problems, but from events over which they can have little control - from the changing age and ethnic structure of their own populations, from the global environmental changes that have become so serious a threat, from the likely emergence of new nuclear weapons states, and from the fact that chemical and biological weapons are being used or proposed for use in regional disputes.

Equally, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States can afford to go on spending for military purposes what it is now doing. Other and vast social, political, and economic problems press on both. It is the supreme irony of our times that the best that has so far been achieved in forty years of an immensely costly technological nuclear arms race is the treaty to agree on the reciprocal destruction of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force weapons, weapons that added nothing to the security of either side. The Soviet Union of today, while it could change under another leader, cannot simply revert to the Soviet Union of Stalin or Brezhnev.

We are now in a time when a certain level of cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union may begin to replace confrontation. Together, for instance, they could make a reality of the United Nations' peacekeeping responsibilities. Why, for example, should the UN not participate in the successful INF verification procedures, and then have a part, even if a silent one, in the conventional arms and Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) negotiations and, if these succeed, participate in the vast program of verification that would follow?

Since 1960, arms control has been pivotal to the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. If the cold war is finished, what is the place of arms control? It is true that the changed political atmosphere increases the chances for solidifying agreements. Yet it is also the case that better U.S.-Soviet relations diminish the level of apprehensiveness about nuclear weapons and immediacy about arms control agreements.

Yet there is now a need for even more concern with the diffusion of power in world politics. The spread of chemical and ballistic missile technologies to about twenty nations during the next decade will present a new kind of menace. A higher priority needs to be given to proliferation and multilateral measures. During the years ahead, the Soviet Union and the United States, while remaining adversaries on the conventional agenda, will find themselves conferres in some of the emerging issues of arms control.

What is to be done about the diffusion of military power and the proliferation of nuclear weapons? It is first necessary to think about what measures to take after technology has spread. The aim should be to slow the rate of spread of dangerous technologies in order to better control their destabilizing effects. Yet at the same time political settlements are
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In such a multi-polar world, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would be able to dominate their respective spheres in the way they do at present. The notion of independent states acting collectively on the basis of mutual interests should also guide our policies toward the countries of the developing world. The idea of the United States and the Soviet Union carving out spheres of influence, based on compliant client states, has been discredited and should have been discarded years ago. From Egypt's expulsion of the Soviets in the early

Modern military technologies, specifically nuclear weapons, have made war an unacceptable means of advancing a nation's political agenda. In analyzing the origins and implication of the confrontations over Berlin, Cuba and the Middle East, we now recognize the danger that such crises may escalate through misinformation, misjudgment and miscalculation. In the nuclear age, crisis management is dangerous, difficult, uncertain. We must direct our attention to crisis avoidance.

U.S.-Soviet negotiation might further concentrate on cooperation in a non-proliferation regime, and efforts to cooperate in crisis management and avoidance. It will obviously demand a leap of the imagination for the United States to conceive of its national goal, its role, in a world not dominated by the struggle between East and West.

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In the 1970s, we have seen repeated examples of the way in which the world has evolved far beyond the notion of client states in political or economic relations.

At the minimum, the United States and the Soviet Union should guarantee the neutrality of the Third World, commit to ultimate termination of military support of conflicts between nations, and assure support for a mechanism for resolution of regional conflicts without superpower involvement. Agreement by East and West to support such a program would represent a return to Churchill's and Roosevelt's notion of the post-war world in which order would be maintained through international cooperation and support for a set of multilateral institutions.

In this era of dramatic change, the emerging challenge for United States foreign policy is the diffusion of global economic, political, and military power. It is the defining reality of our age. Nuclear proliferation, tensions in political alliances, global trade and communications, terrorism, and the call of the world's peoples for self-determination, we could hardly ask for more compelling evidence.

I have tried to demonstrate that there are ways to integrate political realism in international relations, with ethical obligation. The form of realism that considers moral conduct in international politics impracticable, or ascribes to nations a privileged moral sphere different from that of individuals or of communities within the nation, has a great deal on its side in the way of historical precedent. The claims of ordinary morality, however, the desire for a type of state conduct that does not result in double-dealing and violence, cannot be ignored. Nations are, after all, represented by persons whose actions affect other persons. Ethical considerations are consequently both appropriate and cogent. But we cannot take for granted that the actions of nations will be changed simply by indignation and exhortation. An attempt at integration such as this acknowledges the constraints of international politics, and yet it aims at changing the traditional rules of international conduct.

History is filled with melancholy parables. And Easter Island in the eastern Pacific Ocean, renowned for its giant stone statues, is one of them. These statues were images of local deities. And there was, curiously enough, among these people, no god of evil. The fate of Easter Island might serve a reminder that the resources of our island earth are no less finite. A reminder that humanity's own unparalleled creative gift seems fatally linked to its own self-destructive mechanism. Here in the endless sea, a vagrant cell of human life created itself and vanished, leaving a handful of survivors with no conscious recollection that it had ever happened. Yet, if humanity is at least in part invented by itself, if living generations were born out of the imagination of people long dead, then the choices remain. Shall we, islanders no less than they, pass on the reaches of invention of human wisdom to living inheritors, or to mindless inheritors - the cult of nuclear weapons - that mock all that we possess. Perhaps the islanders were right: we are not victims of the god of evil - we are victims only of the evil we bring upon ourselves.

If nuclear weapons were to be used in warfare, or if they were to be detonated on any considerable scale by accident or misunderstanding, we might be not only putting an end to civilization as we now know it but also destroying the entire product of humanity's past efforts in the development of civilized life, that product of which we are the beneficiaries and without which our own lives would have no meaning: the cities, the art, the learning, the knowledge of the universe. How can anyone who recognizes the authority of the Judeo-Christian tradition accept responsibility for incurring the risk of doing...
This civilization we are talking about is not the property of our generation alone. We are not the owners of it; in biblical terms - we are only the stewards.

Dialogue among the religions of the world is often necessary for the resolution of regional conflicts. Frequently, the most fanatical and violent political struggles are inspired and legitimized by religion. How much would the affected peoples have been spared, if the religions had recognized their responsibility as agents of reconciliation, if they, instead of aiding and abetting conflicts, had mediated them? Consequently any ecumenical theology has to acknowledge its share of responsibility for conflict resolution. There can be no world peace without peace among the world religions.

Those who are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, those in fact, who belong to any of the world's major religious traditions, have access to a profound understanding of the resources for struggling with the reality of finitude. Very little has been done to bring that understanding and those resources to bear on the present situation. Is it any longer possible for those who belong to university communities to continue, in the name of "objectivity" and "neutrality", to pursue academic work in this kind of aloofness from the possibility of nuclear war that faces all of us? To do so would not only be inhuman, it would be to turn away from a quality of life today which confronts us with the most vital questions with which a "humane education" is concerned.

We need to recognize and acknowledge that we have moved into an historical situation unanticipated by biblical writers and subsequent theological commentators alike, a situation of much greater human knowledge, power, and responsibility than our religious traditions had ever imagined possible.

In consequence, instead of understanding ourselves mainly as handers-on of these traditions, as having a task simply of interpretation, we must be prepared to enter into a new understanding of the traditions we have inherited. Yet this does not mean that we have to begin from a zero point in the context of past traditions. It is simply that in our time we have a new and more profound awareness both of the extent of human power and of the enormous threat of contingency, thus contributing to a renewed sense of the ultimate mystery of our lives.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union must certainly appreciate that the forces shaping the future of our species are not under the control of individual governments; that no single state can solve the global environmental problems that threaten us all; and, equally, that no single state, however powerful, can make itself responsible for the world's economy or global security. Even if they worked together, the United States and the Soviet Union could not do all these things on their own. The major and only task that they might still be able to accomplish bilaterally, is to eliminate the one global danger that is solely under human control - the risk that our world could be destroyed by the force of the atom.

All significant world problems appear more and more to be both international and interrelated. The problem of hunger, for example, which exists acutely in some thirty-two nations, has many social and economic allies: unemployment, poverty, the vagaries of world trade, and the arms race. Ironically, the last, by manufacturing more and more nuclear weapons, is eroding that which arms were once thought to provide - national security. Clearly the only foreseeable future is a global one. The survival unit in our century is no longer an individual nation - it is the entire human race and the planet. There are ways to bring the Western heritage of moral reasoning to bear on the central issue of our age, and there are reasons to believe - given the recent course of events in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union - that the post-Hiroshima generation can live in freedom without being the last.
NOTES

1 Ernst Glaser, Jahrgang 1902 (Berlin, 1929), pp. 188-189.


3 See Gordon Kaufman, Theology for a Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), for an attempt to reconceive the central concerns and symbols of Christianity in the context of historical experience.


5 The role of the university in public education on the issue of nuclear arms was the subject of President Derek Bok’s 1982 Commencement Address at Harvard University, reprinted in the Harvard Gazette Commencement issue, June 1982.

6 The analogy between the natural environment and the social environment in this regard is used by Sissela Bok in the Introduction to A Strategy for Peace (New York: Pantheon, 1989), xii.

7 Some of these issues are spelled out in detail in Bok, ibid.


9 Stanley Hoffmann deals with the limits and possibilities of ethical international politics in Duties Beyond Borders (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

10 These issues are given consideration by Hans Küng in Theology for the Third Millennium in his treatment of the topic: “Is There One True Religion?” (New York: Doubleday, 1988).