

A
Shuddering
Dawn

Religious Studies and
the Nuclear Age

Edited by

Ira Chernus and Edward Tabor
Linenthal

With a Foreword by

Ninian Smart

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Chapter I

*Nuclear Images in the Popular Press:
The Age of Apocalypse*

The many rituals and myths that surround nuclear weapons remind us that these weapons are much more than mere physical objects: they are perhaps the richest and most emotionally charged symbolic realities in America's public life. When we speak or even think of such immensely powerful weapons, we cannot avoid speaking and thinking in symbolic images. Abstract concepts can never express our deepest responses to the Bomb. When historians of religion address the nuclear issue, they therefore find themselves on familiar ground, for their principal concern is the interpretation of symbolic images and the myths, rituals, and cultural contexts in which those images occur. Historians of religion trace the changing configurations of images, hoping to uncover clues to the changing patterns of human experience. At the same time, they inevitably discover enduring constants in the experience of communities, nations, and perhaps even humanity as a whole.

In modern America, nuclear imagery forms a chaotic collage of beliefs, fears, hopes, hunches, and fantasies. While all of us have our own unique kaleidoscope of images, there are common threads running through the national experience. How can we find these unifying threads? We have no sacred scripture, no official body of doctrine or myth to articulate them. Yet we do have a widely shared store of public imagery—the popular media. An unending stream of films, stories, TV shows, comic books, and the like has depicted nuclear themes since 1945 (and even earlier). These are important and instructive for understanding nuclear imagery, but they are usually written off

as mere entertainment. Our more serious images occur in the news media, both in current news reports and in feature stories and editorials offering deeper background to the news. A study of these sources using the methods of the historian of religions can illuminate aspects of the nuclear age that might otherwise remain obscure.

There is, as yet, little systematic study of the images of nuclear weapons and nuclear war that appear in the popular media. As a first step toward such a study, this article offers a preliminary survey of the most widely read national magazines treating the subject during the first two decades of the nuclear age: *Life* and *Reader's Digest*. The themes that recur in these sources suggest, among other things, that the power of the Bomb touches deep recesses of the psyche, recesses that are the breeding ground of religious symbols, myths, and rituals. Images of damnation and salvation, omniscience and omnipotence, faith and infinitude, transformation and rebirth, and many other familiar religious motifs abound in this material. There are recurring allusions to traditional apocalyptic imagery; that is, imagery of a violent cataclysm in which the forces of good permanently vanquish the forces of evil, ending the present era of existence and inaugurating a radically new world situation. The "numinous" quality that James Aho defines in his essay in this book (Chapter 4) is as pervasive in the popular news magazines as it is among atomic scientists. And there are new forms of religious symbolism spawned by the Bomb and its numinous aura. Readers can judge for themselves whether the themes and images described here are indeed the nation's common heritage and basic vision of the nuclear issue.

When *Life* reported to its readers the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it added a lengthy editorial on the true meaning of "The Atomic Age."¹ This editorial prefigured many of the basic motifs that would dominate popular perception of the nuclear issue at least until 1963. The great atomic "bang," readers learned, signals the birth of a radically new age. It is as if the world has awakened from a long sleep into "a strange new land ... an entirely different country." The Bomb is clearly a numinous power; "this uncontrollable new secret [is] the miracle" that certifies "the inherent mystery of things." Although we properly feel like ants, "in awe before the harnessed infinite," the crucial point is that the infinite has indeed been harnessed. Invoking the image of Prometheus, the cunning hero of Greek legend who gave fire and hence civilization to humankind, the article asserts that "no limits are set to our Promethean ingenuity." America, with sole possession of this unlimited weapon, is "the most powerful nation perhaps in all history."

It may seem, the editorial admits, that this new age is one of moral chaos. We have emerged from World War II "with radically different practices and standards of permissible behavior." Atomic science itself has proven that

everything, including morality, is relative. Thus there is "the very real danger of a reversion to barbarism. "Our bulwark against barbarism is firm adherence to traditional moral values. President Truman himself said that, as always, "the basic proposition of the worth and dignity of man is the strongest, most creative force now present in the world." This means the dignity of the individual who can choose the right and the good: "The individual conscience against the atomic bomb? Yes. There is no other way." Just as scientists have harnessed the infinite, individual conscience can harness the nation's "Jovian impulse," its urge to emulate the unfettered power of the ancient Romans' supreme deity. If omnipotent America can restrain itself, it "can abolish warfare, and mitigate man's inhumanity to man."

The whole editorial is riddled with contradictions: All things are new yet little has changed; we are gods and ants; the Bomb is harnessed yet uncontrollable; moral standards are abolished yet they endure unimpaired. The subliminal message may be the incomprehensibility of the new weapon and the new age it brings. What is the best response to our bewilderment? The editorial's true message may be buried in its recurring imagery of being underground. We have "emerged from the tunnel," but "the really terrifying questions are not under the bed but in the cellar." The lesson of the ants is that despite endless warfare the species survives: "Constructing beautiful urban palaces and galleries, many ants have long lived underground in entire satisfaction."

This lesson is relevant now because "if there is no defense, then perhaps man must either abolish international warfare or move his whole urban civilization underground." One way or the other, a weapon of limitless destruction must portend some radical transformation of human life perhaps a return to our origins in the womb-like cave. But such a drastic conclusion may be just "wild speculation." It is better to be "cool and unimaginative." In a similar vein, *Reader's Digest* advised that the damage to Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not been nearly so bad as we are led to believe.' The hysteria over the supposedly dreadful new weapon is therefore uncalled for and should be avoided.

Life was apparently unable to heed its own call for calm, however, in the face of infinite power. A few months later, it ran a most imaginative article describing World War III as "The 36-Hour War."³ Accompanied by large science fiction cartoons, the brief article describes a Soviet nuclear missile attack that leaves American cities in rubble. American missiles retaliate in kind; the concluding sentence is an unexplained assurance of American omnipotence: "The United States wins the war."

Our sole possession of the Bomb permitted such naive confidence for just a few years. By 1950, as the Cold War reached its first peak, Americans had to absorb both the Soviet Union's successful atomic bomb test and their own

government's decision to build hydrogen bombs. The nuclear issue was now framed within an overarching East-West dualism and an unquestioned need to maintain U.S. military superiority.⁵ Although many Americans, *Life* lamented, respond to the news of the H-bomb by "looking for a hole to hide in," they should stand up and face the awesome challenge of "the elemental fact of 1950: The enemy of the free world is implacably determined to destroy the free world." This "godless opponent ... cannot surrender and cannot make peace. ... There can be no compromise and no agreement with Soviet Communism."⁶ The February 27, 1950, issue of *Life*, adorned with a cover photo of a mushroom cloud in brilliant colors, carried seven separate articles on the Bomb.⁶ The title of one, "War Can Come; Will We Be Ready?" captures the apocalyptic spirit of the ensemble.

"This is the age of obliteration," readers are solemnly informed. "The hydrogen bomb reeks with death.... A burning, searing death." Scientists, moralists, and politicians wrestle with its problems, but, as one title puts it, "The Soul-Searchers Find No Answer. In the face of the world crisis and the H-bomb they foresee annihilation but not how to forestall it." In fact, there may be no way to forestall a catastrophic war: "All-out war is never predictable. But it is always possible." Therefore, as in the past, we must know what to expect and learn to accept it: "Horrible as it may sound, we must be prepared to lose 10 to 15 million people on the first day of the superblitz." Though the numbers are much larger than ever before, the basic principles of war have not changed. The evil enemy will, of course, start the war. We must be prepared to finish it with superior power, whatever the cost. "Every effort must be pressed to maintain our overwhelming advantage in the development of atomic weapons," as Bernard Baruch says. The bottom line is the spiritual wisdom of General Eisenhower: "Every invention of mankind has been capable of two uses, good and evil. It is up to the moral fiber of mankind to decide to which use an invention is put." Even obliteration, it seems, can be harnessed to serve the forces of good in their cosmic struggle with the forces of evil.

No doubt Eisenhower would have endorsed Baruch's stirring proclamation in the *Reader's Digest* a year later: "Spiritual Armageddon Is Here Now."⁷ As in all apocalyptic crises, the article said, the true battle is not between weapons but between values. The freedom, individualism, and peace of one side oppose the tyranny, communism, and war of the other. Yet good cannot defeat evil unless it temporarily adopts some of evil's tactics; if the citizens of "heaven" will not voluntarily choose guns over butter, their

government must somehow control their selfishness and enforce "voluntary" self-discipline. Peace can be maintained only through economically painful preparation for war: "No outside enemy can defeat us. We *can* defeat ourselves. Yours is the decision. Which shall it be—discomfort or defeat? The spiritual Armageddon is here."

The crisis atmosphere may be unwarranted, however. We have "Our Triple-Threat Atomic Weapons"⁸ to protect us: "Conventional A-bombs, the kind that can pulverize an entire city in an instant, still are a mainstay in the U.S. arsenal." But now all three military services have smaller versions for tactical as well as strategic use. War is still war as we know it; troop advances must be stopped, submarine bases bombed, and ground attacks supported by air forces. All of this can be done even more efficiently with "baby" atom bombs. So if Russia "insists on picking a fight" and "wants an atomic war, she will get it." There is little to fear. With our superior moral power and superior military power, we are bound to be victorious.

Defense is the other side of war as we know it, and here two important advances have been made. By mid-1950, an "Atomic Handbook is a Best-Seller: New government handbook tells what will happen and what to do if A-bombs fall on U.S. cities."⁹ Laden with facts and figures, this article shows that experts have the answers. They know that an atomic blast is awesome. It begins with a "blinding flash of terrible light brighter than a hundred suns." But the light, heat, shock wave, and radiation can all be translated into scientific terms. And understanding means the possibility of protection: "Inevitably casualties will be heavy; but the precautions suggested by the AEC may make the difference between life and death to thousands." "The elements of atomic defense" are illustrated in two sets of cartoons. "This is how you can protect yourself": crouch behind a tree, dodge into a doorway, fall flat on the sidewalk. "This is what must be done" following an attack: fighting fire, detecting radioactivity, treating burns, giving transfusions, and so on. Trained experts are pictured efficiently handling these tasks. "An air blast will leave little residual radiation ... and those parts of a city that are still standing will be usable very soon after the blast." So a well-coordinated civil defense program, following the experts' advice, will ensure that we can meet the challenge of all-out war. If we must endure obliteration, with proper preparation we shall rise and live again.

After 1950, nuclear concern faded for several years. When it returned in 1953, defense was still on *Life's* mind. "Outcasts of Yucca Flats"¹⁰ tells us how "Mannequins are martyrs for science in a 'nuclear diagnostic shot'" at the Nevada test site. This "experiment," with soldiers and civilians watching at close range, "confirmed a foregone conclusion: that foot soldiers, prudently disposed and properly equipped, have no particular reason to fear the atomic

bomb more than any other weapon The A-bomb [is] something between a heavy hand grenade and an artillery shell." While some test houses were destroyed, the damage was nothing more than a normal three-alarm fire. One mannequin survived in a \$40 basement shelter (as a picture shows), though "radiation effects were not determined." As a spectator event, a nuclear explosion no longer makes the grade:

When the first nuclear device exploded at Alamogordo, observers had the sense of being close to the infinite. Now it is depressingly plain that the bloom is off infinity's rose Hardly had the mushroom cloud gained its full height before it became apparent that the audience was disappointed. A middleaged woman in a lumberman's shirt remarked to a colleague, "I really don't mind it at all. I rather expected something much more violent."

Life's ostensible conclusion is the need for more public apprehension and "sensible" civil defense. But the real message is made clear: "Atomic weapons are not necessarily the terrifying devices that some have painted." If the Bomb is so benign, why not think of its infinite might as a trustworthy ally? And even if nuclear war comes, you can meet death both as a martyr and as a mannequin -already dead.

The air of tranquilizing nuclear boredom was shattered by news of the first H-bomb explosions. The grotesque irrationality, mystery, and unpredictability of "the Super" was the central theme in a sequence of three articles in *Life's* March 29, 1954, issue." The main article, "First Casualties of the H-Bomb," "translated the awesomeness of the H-bomb into human terms all Americans can comprehend"--and all Russians as well, who are meant to comprehend that the United States might indeed unleash this "limitless weapon" upon human beings. But how and where and when, and with what effects, no one can really say. That is the key to our supremacy.

The "first casualties" were the unfortunate crewmen of a Japanese fishing boat (ironically named the Fortunate Dragon) that was 71 miles from Bikini atoll when the United States detonated the biggest H-bomb blast to date. As

the crewmen tell their story, the numinous power of the Bomb is evident. At first they mistook it for the sun rising eerily in the west, but then "the sun was obliterated" by the mushroom cloud that seemed to billow infinitely high, raining down "ashes of death." The crewmen tell of radiation sickness (amply illustrated in lurid photos), intolerable itching and swelling, and feelings of panic, confusion, anger, and depression. The Japanese people, like the crewmen, believe that radiation's danger is omnipresent and inescapable. Accompanying articles confirm the implications of these images: the United States has "the psychological-and military-advantage of possessing the most devastating weapon in the world ... several hundred times as terrifying as the Hiroshima bomb." Although it still leaves the United States "a good deal

short of omnipotence," it is only "the biggest so far"; the mere mention of omnipotence offers something to think about for the future.

The sense of grotesque terrifying power is tempered, as so often, by contrasting images. A U.S. medical expert found the irradiated fishermen "in better shape than I had thought."The Japanese "welcomed assurances of their recovery, but they were still worried." Similarly, "Tokyo University specialists agreed that the danger from the 'hot' fish had probably been overemphasized. But the average Japanese was dubious." Apparently the average person lacks sufficient respect for the experts' expertise. To encourage proper respect, another article explains the basic scientific principles of the H-bomb but confides that "the details are known only to a few top scientists [who] grapple with the 1,001 details of perfecting the hydrogen weapons." Military experts are also accomplishing impressive feats: "The atom has been tamed to a wide variety of nonsuicidal uses, including battlefield tactics." Despite the nuclear priesthood's grasp of the Bomb, however, the layman must see it as the ultimate in irrational mysterious power. ¹²

And this is the key to a successful American military posture. We had to develop the H-bomb to "move the U.S. ahead another big notch" and ensure "adequate power to deter Soviet bloc aggression." Yet, as Secretary of State Dulles put it, the way in which we would retaliate against aggression "is a matter as to which the aggressor had best remain ignorant." "Uncertainty is our own and our enemy's lot." Diplomatically, "we can never regard the present boundaries of the Soviet world as fixed." Militarily, "peace will remain as precarious as freedom." "The one thing we know for certain is that war may come, and if it does, "there is no longer any doubt that we will use atomic weapons when and where they promise to be effective." As we perfect our weapons and move toward omnipotence, the Bomb's inscrutable irrationality is a powerful tool in the hands of our leaders who resolutely save us from the Communist menace.

Just two weeks later, *Life* ran another large spread featuring numerous pictures of the fireball and mushroom cloud at Bikini atoll. ¹³The photographs speak more eloquently than words of the Bomb's wondrous might. But there are plenty of words, too, helping to shape the reader's response, and this time the emphasis is on reason and restraint. The introduction to the issue admits that the pictures of the

frightening holocaust mushrooming up ... resemble nothing else on earth because there has never been anything like it on earth . . . but we were not among the doom-shouters who wail that this means the end of everything, so we note that such easily recognizable journalistic symbols as kids, dogs, and pretty girls are still around. P.S. As this issue went to press we were still alive.

The mushroom cloud was obviously becoming an "easily recognizable

journalistic symbol" itself. By 1954 it seems to have been mainly a symbol of the ambivalent feelings, the fear and fascination, aroused by limitless power. Indeed, the issue informs us that in an H-bomb blast "there is no known practical limit to the area of destruction.... Although it is inconceivable that any nation would try, it is possible to make doomsday come to pass."

The dominant theme, however, is to mute the cries of the doom-shouters. "A mood of alarm and bewilderment [is] the worst of all moods in which to pass sweeping judgments or to take fateful decisions." Similarly, the greatest

hindrance to civil defense planning is the threat of widespread panic: "To achieve discipline an urban population would have to be drilled like an army," the magazine asserts, without passing judgment on the possibility it has raised. In "this desperate world of survival," with "the whole world worried," the best advice is obviously to "keep cool." So we are challenged to develop a philosophy of "adjustment to the constant presence of this vast *memento mori* [reminder of death]." A series of photos indicate scientists' impersonal objective attitude toward the H-bomb explosion. Why should we not all feel the same way? Although a policy of massive retaliation is still necessary to deter Soviet aggression, our attention should return to our main task—calmly building prosperity for the free world. "The avoidance of hydrogen war is merely a precondition of civilized life, not a substitute." Once the experts have harnessed the infinite in the service of freedom and prosperity, there is no limit to America's prospects for progress.

The image of an infinite, ambiguous, incalculable power sustaining good in the war against evil is hardly new in human history. Religious traditions around the world, and certainly in the West, have been built on just such foundations. So the *Reader's Digest*, in its principal nuclear article of 1954, intertwines political and religious themes in issuing its own challenge to the nation. "The Road Ahead in the Light of the H-Bomb" is subtitled "Provocative gospel on today's major problem."¹⁴ The question is really spiritual salvation, defined here as peace, international harmony, and the brotherhood of all humanity. The road to salvation is a pilgrimage of the spirit, following the Star of Bethlehem up the Lord's mountain. On this road we must "toil through rough realities, with the hydrogen bomb our companion-and peace our compulsion."

The Bomb is ambiguous. It leaves us "poised in dread on a hairline between life and death.... Many of the ancients made the sun a god. We have made him a devil. How shall we chain that devil? No man can answer surely."

But the very need to "chain the devil" is the force propelling us on the road to salvation. We are "searching in the horrendous glare of the H-bomb" for peace. Its saving light brings together scientists from around the world, prophesying the coming time "for making the atom the friend of the whole

human race." Even if there is a war, "the world is not going to disappear. Enrico Fermi informs us authoritatively that science knows no way of destroying the planet. And life will persist on it." Religious wars in the past often destroyed whole nations. Yet the world survived and enemies often became friends: "Someday the Russians may again be allies.... When that day comes we shall see that our true enemies were not the millions of Russian people but the handful of men who ruled them."

We should be busy preparing for that day, the article continues. Yet few of us work for peace earnestly enough. The true challenge of the nuclear age is the spiritual challenge to overcome our own deficiencies and travel the long hard road to saving peace. The H-bomb, with a moral ambiguity mirroring our own, lights our way, leads us, and compels us on that eschatological journey. So we must do more than merely chain the nuclear devil. We must use it to purify and redeem ourselves from evil. Doing so, we redeem the Bomb from its own evil, transform it, and render it divine: "We want *permanent* peace. Let us follow the light that can lead us to it.... Since the stars gave us the hydrogen bomb, we can call it the saving Star of Bethlehem."

The nation seems to have needed time to absorb these new challenges, for nuclear imagery subsided again, reappearing as a pressing concern in 1958. This time the stimulus was the debate over fallout from atmospheric tests. *Life*

saw both sides of the matter. Reassuring us that scientists and legislators were undertaking "A Searching Inquiry Into Nuclear Perils,"¹⁵ it warns that "the danger point could be reached in five years." Above the article, a large surreal photograph shows bronze mannequins arrayed in rows wearing "plastic masks, which are designed to protect their wearers against gas or radioactive particles in the air.... Six basic sizes will fit everyone from a child to an adult. Masks weigh eight ounces, are not yet in mass production." Once they are in mass production, the caption implies, this scene of death-in-life may depict our technological salvation. Other articles illustrate scientists' studies and the impressive progress they have made, although "out in the far west some citizens, less well informed, were openly worried." They may have been better informed after reading Edward Teller's reassuring words: fallout risks are overrated, and further nuclear tests can perfect "clean" weapons that will spare civilian lives in war. Tests will continue, *Life* concludes, since the United States "must continue to perfect its stockpile of nuclear weapons until a world-wide agreement on controls can be reached." The Bomb is still the way to safety and salvation, though its path remains darkened by shadows of numinous peril.

By this time, *Reader's Digest* had less patience for the complexities of nuclear issues. Under the heading "Soviet Union [vs. U.S.A.-What Are the Facts?](#)"¹⁶ it offered a recitation of classic Cold War images, as presented by "three distinguished Americans who have unsurpassed opportunity to know the facts." The "authorities" are a triumvirate of well-known cold warriors: Admiral Arleigh Burke, SAC General Curtis LeMay, and AEC Chairman Lewis Strauss. The "facts" fall into a flawless pattern of moral dualism. "The United States has never seriously been labeled as an aggressor." Ever since 1946, the United States has made "the most earnest and persistent efforts to achieve real atomic disarmament, inspected and controlled." We are a hard-working, honest people whose industriousness gives us the high standard of living that all freedom-loving people desire. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of all that we value. "Their purpose and intention is to conquer and destroy the free world. That means, first and foremost, us." Their promises of peaceful intention are worthless, as are any agreements they might sign. (An accompanying article documents "the Reds' shocking record of violating every important promise they have ever made.") The Soviet leaders compel their people to forego basic consumer goods so that they can build up their war machine. Although it is not likely that they would be foolish enough to attack us, "there is always the possibility that a mad or irresponsible person or government in possession of nuclear weapons could start a war."

This possibility compels the United States to keep on building nuclear weapons. We have maintained peace until now because we are omnipotent.

As of today, our defensive shield comprehends a vast complex of ground, sea, and air units superbly equipped and strategically deployed around the world. The most powerful deterrent to war in the world ... presents to any potential attacker who would unleash war upon the world the prospect of virtual annihilation of his own country.

The key phrase is *as of today*. If we have the will to build bigger and better bombs tomorrow, and the day after, the Bomb will continue to be our savior.¹⁷ Our superior technology and industrial capacity can keep us ahead of the Soviets forever. "If, however, we let them get ahead of us-well, I never have thought Communists the sort of people you should offer a shot at a sitting duck." The challenge remains as clear, and as urgent, as ever.

Popular concern about nuclear war reached its pinnacle in the great bomb shelter craze of 1961. "As the warlike rattle rolled out of Moscow and as small amounts of fallout from the daily succession of Soviet nuclear tests floated over the U.S., the people woke up to the fact that they ought to be doing something to protect themselves." War with all its horror is still an everpresent possibility, so there is the "grim reality of the necessity to prepare

for the worst." But the good news is that we can prepare. The September 15, 1961, issue of *Life* offers a five-article spread to help us.¹⁸

Nuclear war is not "too terrible to contemplate.... The best-informed estimates deny that maimed survivors would be fighting for burned crusts amid the ruins of civilization." The nature of nuclear attack and its fallout is now well understood. Although people may still be worrying, "parades of sober statistics also bring them relatively hopeful facts." Fallout, for example, loses 99 percent of its radioactivity within two days. "Prepared, you and your family could have 97 chances out of 100 to survive."

Protection is not very difficult. One article offers a quick "Roundup of Things to Remember in Case Attack Should Come." The Russians will probably attack at night, which means you will be at home where you can have

your own fallout shelter. Otherwise, you can take shelter in a subway tunnel or "dig a cave in a hillside. ""You can live for several weeks without food," though it is necessary to have a water supply. After the war the government "will provide food and medicine [and] rebuild a going economy," in ways to be revealed later on. Knowing that shelters can do the job, we should set aside moral qualms. Some 5 million people might die in a nuclear war, "but you have to look at it coldly." Though shelters cannot guarantee survival, "they will increase the odds." The man who builds a shelter "is actually a solid, sensible man-and a responsible citizen." Responsibility means a prudent, rational approach to the irrational; it means gambling intelligently. As readers learn in "A Message To You From The President," "we must prepare for all eventualities. The ability to survive coupled with the will to do so are essential."

Responsible citizens not only know how to prepare for disaster-they have the will to prepare, endure, and survive. The imagery of the shelter craze offers a communal celebration of all the nation's traditional values. Americans are optimists with an eye toward a better future, but they are also hard-headed realists. If an emergency arises, "there can be no doubt that it will be met as America has met past emergencies with speed, know-how, and calm efficiency." Americans pool their funds and work in off-hours to build communal shelters; they pull together to make sure that everyone is protected. Fortunately, there is enough excess wealth to make shelters available for all. In fact, shelters fit in nicely with the affluent American life-style. *Life* offers instructions on a variety of shelters, including "A \$700 Prefabricated Job to Put Up in 4 Hours." One family is pictured relaxing on the patio alongside "an attractive addition" to their home; another is seen "In the Shelter, Snug, Equipped, and Well Organized." Beneath a photo of a teenager on the telephone, laughing and drinking Coca-Cola, the caption reads: "At the moment the shelter is her clubhouse. But the air-blower is ready for serious work."

The leitmotif of *Life's* campaign is captured in the headline: "Pioneers of Self-Protection in Barnyard and Patio." Although shelters can form an attractive addition to the home, they are fundamentally a symbol of Americans" will to prevail through every trial.

Life is still as full of danger as it was for the pioneer who plowed with a musket in his hand; we must now guard against dangers infinitely magnified above those of the marauding Indians, but with the same threat of sudden and violent death to the unwary.... [Shelters] will give all Americans the hope that they, like their forebears, can some day abandon the stockades to cross whatever new mountains of adversity or trial may lie ahead.

Like the frontier days of old, these are stirring times. They offer an opportunity to join with the whole nation in surmounting a great challenge. A headline trumpets its message: "A New Urgency, Big Things To Do-And What You Must Learn." For once, the nation can visibly act out its faith in itself, its values, and its Bomb.

A few months later, *Life* was a bit less ebullient but still enthusiastic.¹⁹ Now, it appears, "shelters are *not* a direct military deterrent against Soviet attack." But "under certain ghastly circumstances, they *might* save millions of lives-and the nation. "The key to survival has become mass shelters: "Group shelters would probably provide the best guarantee that the largest number of Americans could survive a nuclear attack, fight back, and carry on." More studies are needed by the most competent people using computers; "neither individual citizen nor local officials are competent to make these highly sophisticated studies." But the ordinary person can still muster the pioneer spirit. As an example, *Life* offers its Picture of the Week: "With Strength and Love a Family Goes On." Beneath a heart-wrenching photo of a young family walking away from their burnt home, the caption calls it "a classic portrait of sober human courage.... They are alive, their precious children are alive, their life will go on.... A breath of the kind of grass-roots invincibility which the U.S. respects and understands. "n0 With enough group shelters, we can all become similarly invincible. Then we can look forward to obliteration as an opportunity to gather together, withstand the trial, rise from the ashes, and be born again.

The *Reader's Digest* was a bit more skeptical than *Life*, running an article on "The Case against Fallout Shelters."²¹ When it comes to nuclear war, "the variables and the unknown factors are so numerous as to defy any rational attempt to fill them in or limit them.... In the confusion, the government appears as mixed up as its citizens." Despite this familiar air of irrationality, however, the article continues, it is both possible and necessary to analyze the situation rationally. Experts who have done the most logical calculations conclude that some 90 percent of our people would die in a war unless the

shelter program were much more massive and massively expensive than now proposed. With "no perceptible limit to the power that can be produced by a thermonuclear explosion," the concept of defense is meaningless. Yet this article stays within the bounds of acceptable orthodox belief. To criticize government shelter plans is not to criticize nuclear weapons-something *Reader's Digest* would never consider. In fact, the Bomb can still be our savior as long as it can "force any aggressor to face certain devastation. "The obvious conclusion is that weapons, not people, should be sheltered and secure against any attack.

As the shelter campaign bogged down in inconclusive public debate, attention switched in 1962 to the continuing atmospheric tests. *Life* reluctantly endorsed continuation of "this job that must be done."²² We would readily give up such tests, it averred, if the Soviets would agree. But they, the only threat to world peace, insist on testing bigger bombs merely for propaganda value, "to terrify the world into submission." Perhaps more is at stake than propaganda points, however. In Edward Teller's "Plan for Survival," "A preeminent authority suggests that the Soviets, by clandestine testing, may have taken the lead in nuclear weapons. Further U. S. tests are vital-for the sake of peace. "23 The backdrop is classic moral dualism. The United States, supporting peace and freedom in an open society, is self-reliant and prepared for anything. The USSR, a closed society fomenting illegal acts, is the potential aggressor who robs us of our freedom. Worst of all, the Soviets are so dishonest that disarmament and international law are now impossible. Nuclear weapons are the sole guarantor of our security, freedom, and peace-and we need more of them.

We now have enough nuclear weapons to devastate all the cities in the Soviet Union. But we are not appropriately armed to survive an initial attack on the United States, strike back precisely, or to engage in limited nuclear warfare.... We can never be sure that our existing military strength is sufficient. We cannot keep abreast by standing still.

For limited war, we can develop "tactical nuclear weapons which are lightweight, transportable, and 'clean'. . . . Some of the most interesting tactical explosives produce blasts of under 1000 TNT tons." Political and military progress goes hand in hand with scientific progress; so we need more atmospheric tests for science, national security, and peace. Ultimately they can lead to a workable world government, sustained by "physical [presumably nuclear] force-a world government capable of enforcing world-wide law." Better bombs are the path to fulfilling all of humanity's highest aspirations. They can lead us to limitless horizons.

Lest readers doubt its own commitment to the value of nuclear weapons, *Life* offered a similar hymn of praise to progress and the Bomb.²⁴ Three huge

pictures of a test blast filling the Pacific night sky with brilliant colors are followed by a lyrical description of the sight and poetic musings on its meaning. The vision of the Bomb is like a vision of god. It was "the greatest rainbow in history. . . . But it left something behind I'd never felt with rainbows: elation, awe, and an unearthly fright." A photo of gaping spectators illustrates this mixture of emotions. Fear and awe seem to predominate; "It Was As If Someone Had Poured Blood On The Sky" a headline exclaims. It was "the awesome night when we set the sky on fire" with our "man-made inferno." "Man looked up in awe and wonder at what he had done ... in the bright fury of the blast." "People afterward groped for words to describe it."

There is elation, too-at the beauty of the Bomb and at its manifold benefits. "It was a crucial part of our effort to deter a nuclear war by keeping our nuclear superiority. The Pacific blast may lead to better weapons for us-and perhaps even a defense against enemy missiles." As part of our endless technological advance it "has also the promise of untold reward." And it seems so benign. A nuclear explosion is a thrilling spectator event, "safely remote." Some spectators in Hawaii, "seemingly undisturbed by the symbolism, watched from a cemetery." Of course, there are dangers in the nuclear age. The religious emotions evoked by this awesome blast include "prayers across the world that man's headlong mastery of his universe would always stay as wondrous, and as safety remote." But human progress always has its risks. When man first discovered fire and burned his thumb, "he chose, in his moment of anguish, to keep the fire--and all its benefits--and to take the risks.... Since then it has been his nature to go on burning his fingers.... The beauties and bounties of the ages have been his reward."

This greatest of all human-made fires is primarily a symbol of our wondrous mastery of the universe. "Now man was no longer an observer of his sky. He had tumultuous lightnings of his own. Last week he loosed them....

We set the sky on fire.... We seemed to be triumphing wholesale in tests of strength and skill with nature." Inevitably, a headline tells us, "Man Pursues His Fiery Destiny." Now man is

making plans still more vast.... It is foolhardy to predict what these things may some day mean.... In rising so far so fast, man has pursued his roving destiny, accepting both the risks and the rewards. The fire that once could only warm his food ... now propels him, as he knew intuitively it one day must, toward the stars.

Though we must go through fire and blood, "occasionally be hurt, even to death," we shall one day rise to the heavens-propelled by the Bomb--and assume our rightful place as masters of the universe.

The religious response to nuclear weapons was equally prevalent, though in a very different context, in Lire's coverage of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

Under the headline, "Heads Down-But Not The Spirit,"²⁵ a photograph of a woman praying in church is juxtaposed with one of schoolchildren crouched in a corridor. The article leaves no doubt that "across the U.S." calm prayer was the universal response to the crisis. People knelt, crouched, bowed their heads, went to church and listened to clergymen. They took cover, shielded and braced themselves, watched alertly. They "gave way to neither panic nor jubilation." Inwardly, though, they were standing proudly erect. "Clergymen of many faiths . . . exhorted their congregations to stand united with the President," and they did. Although the government was faraway attending to the crisis, the people, left on their own, supported their leaders with national unity. (The only permissible doubt was whether the President "had gone far enough.") A machinist from Illinois sums up the article's message: "Before it was just like putting your head between your legs. Now you know you can hold your head up." The familiar image of descending to the ground to survive numinous danger is applied here to a real, rather than a fantasy, crisis. But the result is the same--the nation weathers the storm and arises reborn, taller and stronger than ever.

Yet the mood of this article is distinctly subdued. There are no stirring calls to wipe out the enemy's evil, no praises of the Bomb and its beneficent power. Perhaps the nation had come too close to an actuality that would belie its naively confident imagery. In fact, this closest brush with nuclear reality had a profound impact on America's nuclear images: the images virtually disappeared, at least from the popular news media. In 1963, the press reported the Limited Test Ban Treaty. After that, the nuclear issue made only rare appearances for over fifteen years. The nation occupied itself with other concerns and other images.

This brief excursion into the first phase of nuclear imagery has led through a rather chaotic maze. Although nuclear war was obviously not "the unthinkable," popular thinking about it seems to have been a patchwork affair. The images reflect a wide variety of conflicting policies, ideologies, feelings, and fantasies. No logically coherent sets of concepts underlie these scattered pieces. But a psychologically meaningful pattern comes into focus once we realize that the Bomb was essentially a religious reality. At the heart of the nuclear issue lies a quest for salvation. With good and evil locked in mortal global combat, we--the forces of good--can only be saved from the threat of evil by making ourselves invulnerable and omnipotent. We must be prepared at every moment for the final apocalyptic battle in which we will vanquish evil forever. We must possess the infinite saving power that only the Bomb can offer. As we bring its unlimited power and possibilities under our control, we can look forward to political mastery of the world and along with it a technological mastery that promises limitless prosperity. So the fear inspired by the awesome weapon should be outweighed by feelings of security, trust,

progress, and hope. With the Bomb as our savior, there is no limit to the ways in which we can transcend ourselves.

Just as the Bomb can redeem us, so we redeem the bomb. It is an incomprehensible mystery, radically alien to our ordinary life and capable of unprecedented mass destruction. Yet every religious symbol is marked by the same moral ambiguity. The uncanny irrational terror of the numinous always makes it a potential source of evil, while its beneficent, rational, and familiar qualities make it the ultimate source of all good. When salvation is conceived as apocalyptic transformation, this ambiguity is resolved with little difficulty. The redeemer makes all things new precisely by enacting the old familiar pattern; good defeats evil one last unalterable time. Nuclear irrationality is redeemed by serving as the instrument of omnipotent rational order. It unleashes its infinite destructiveness precisely to secure the triumph of the constructive and the good. It brings us to the edge of terrifying danger only to save us from danger forever.

In these apocalyptic times, however, the saving graces of the Bomb are not simply given to us. If we are to redeem the redeemer and make it a force for cosmic good, we must be willing to face difficult trials, endure them, and prevail. We are challenged to be strong enough both to prevent a war and to win it. Indeed, the challenge of a "hot" war would only be an extension and intensification of the challenge currently facing us in our Cold War. The same kind of nuclear strength is necessary to meet both tests, so the way to succeed, no matter what the future brings, is to build more and better bombs. The true challenge, though, is spiritual. We must uphold traditional values, especially the discipline and self-sacrifice required to build military invulnerability. We must trust our experts, following their example of calm rationality. Simultaneously, we are summoned to the deep emotional commitment and intense excitement of joining in the nation's battle. There may be pain to endure perhaps even the pain of nuclear war-but America can survive and triumph over every obstacle. Indeed, every threat and test is a blessing in disguise-a chance to feel transformed and revitalized, as if we had risen to new heights and entered a greater world. It is only by meeting challenges that we can transcend ourselves, be born again, and realize our unlimited possibilities. Ultimately, as the Bomb offers us its power, it allows us to feel released from all our limits; it allows us to feel infinite.

If one analyzes this imagery looking for logically coherent attitudes, fundamental contradictions turn up everywhere: the Bomb is dangerous yet benign, incomprehensible yet comprehensible, a technological weapon yet a spiritual symbol, evoking responsibility along with helplessness, chaos along with order, a need for preeminence and a need for compromise, a radically new world and a reassuringly familiar world, and so forth, and so on. Yet these

contradictions actually reinforce the Bomb's persuasive potency as a religious symbol. In all religious traditions, the central symbols encompass such opposites in profound paradox. They project the believer beyond the realm of finite human reason into a realm where opposites live side by side in harmony. They resolve the dualities of life on the far side of logic.²⁶ The contradictory imagery of the Bomb indicates that it, too, was such a symbol from 1945 to 1962. Its unlimited physical power was matched by its unlimited symbolic power. In nuclear imagery all of our ambivalences toward order and chaos, life and death, good and evil, and their manifold relationships were mirrored, synthesized, and harmonized. In the same breath we could affirm absolute dualism, perfect unity, and an infinite power transcending and incorporating both dualism and unity.

EDWARD TABOR LINENTHAL

Chapter 2

*War and Sacrifice in the Nuclear Age: The
Committee on the Present Danger and the
Renewal of Martial Enthusiasm*

The power to blow all things to dust
Was kept for people God could trust,
And granted unto them alone, That
evil might be overthrown. -*Edgar
Guest, September 17, 1945*

War that is very strong and very hot
ends either with death or peace, whereas
cold war neither brings peace nor gives
honour to the one who makes it.

-*Don Juan Manuel, Fourteenth Century'*

Americans hoped that victory in World War II would bring about the creative transformations necessary to end war. Douglas MacArthur expressed this hope during the ceremonies concluding hostilities in September 1945: "It is my earnest hope and indeed the hope of all mankind that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past." For many Americans, what emerged from the blood and carnage of the war, however, was the transmutation of a perennial evil from the guise of national socialism into the guise of communism. Enduring suspicion of the Soviet Union, muted during much of World War II, reappeared during the latter

stages of that war. The seeds of the Cold War were planted as the fragile coalition of Allies felt the stresses and strains of postwar competition to gain political and strategic dominance in a war-weakened Europe. Many Americans easily transferred the hatred of Hitler and the ideology of national socialism to a hatred of Stalin and the "Red fascist" ideology of the Soviet Union. Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, the fear of Soviet subversion in the United States, the perceived sellout of Roosevelt at Yalta, all contributed to the image of a Soviet Union ready to attack the nations of Western Europe, deterred only by American nuclear weapons.³

Speaking before Congress on March 12, 1947, President Truman portrayed the bipolar world that confronted the United States in the early years of the Cold War:

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.

The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.⁴

As America emerged from the war as the preeminent world power, it was easy for Americans to perceive the nation as a nuclear-armed savior standing between war-weakened nations and the relentless evil of communism. Writing in the *New York Times* in early 1947, military editor Hanson Baldwin expressed this popular perception. "We alone," he said, "may be able to avert the decline of Western Civilization and a reversion to nihilism and the Dark Ages."⁵ For Baldwin and many others, traditional images of American exceptionalism could register in even more persuasive ways, for now the nation could be, according to Truman's Lincoln-esque interpretation, the "last best hope of earth."

The Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) was one group that contributed mightily to the creation and persistence of Cold War orthodoxy. The CPD functioned as a prophetic minority in the early 1950s, when it was first formed, and again in the 1970s, when it came together again to warn Americans of the "present danger." It declared that the nation was beset by a crisis of conviction, which called for a revival of certain national virtues. Only by awakening to the degenerative processes at work in the nation could Americans be led to recognize the true nature of the "present danger" and then enact the different prescriptions of the CPD, which made use of traditional

revivalist declarations of decline and doom as well as expressions of revitalization and restoration.

The CPD saw itself as a significant actor in the great cosmic battle between good and evil in the nuclear age. It was motivated by an apocalyptic view of history and sought to awaken Americans from their spiritual bondage caused by the degenerative processes at work in the nation. Further, the CPD sought to outline the proper plan for a total reconstruction of the national spirit and, consequently, to motivate the public action that was crucial for the life of the nation. Certainly, the CPD functioned as a restorationist group, designed, as William McLoughlin wrote, "to alter the world view of a whole people or culture."⁶ It has been able to shape profoundly the symbolic environment of the nuclear age within which all of us live.

The CPD asked Americans to become attentive to the continued existence of the Cold War world described by President Truman. The committee worked out of certain historical paradigms, sought to revive old mythologies, and wanted to reconstruct a certain vision of America, a vision perceived as necessary for the resuscitation of American patriotic will. Craving a strength and determination that was perceived to have been lost, its warning and its corrective program was designed to reverse the process of physical and spiritual degeneration at work in America. The CPD set forth a program of cultural restoration that it believed was the last chance for the life of the nation and the life of civilization, and nuclear weapons played a crucial role in this program.

By 1950 the bipolar nature of the world was entrenched wisdom in Washington. In that year a joint State-Defense Department analysis of military policy (NSC-68) became the major statement upon which American foreign policy has since been based. The document went much further than George Kerman's celebrated "Long Telegram" that had outlined a policy of containment. NSC-68 stated unequivocally that the Soviet Union was bent upon worldwide conquest, and this threat was projected as an immediate crisis. The Soviet Union was in an "advanced stage of preparation" and could almost certainly attack and overrun Europe and deliver a nuclear attack upon the United States. Despite the ominous revelations of Soviet military might, NSC-68 declared that the real crisis was internal: the nation must learn to maintain vigilance in the face of the enemy, and the nation's "fundamental purpose is more likely to be defeated from lack of the will to maintain" such vigilance.⁷

Responding to this perceived crisis, a group of prominent citizens formed the original Committee on the Present Danger to help legitimate the goals of NSC-68. The members came from the ranks of government, business, and education. In their initial statement on December 12, 1950, the cofounders of

the CPD, James Conant, president of Harvard; Tracy Vorhees, former undersecretary of the Army; and Vannevar Bush, who had served during the war as head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development and then as head of the Carnegie Institution, proclaimed that the current crisis and the American response to it were caused by the "aggressive designs of the Soviet Union." Disbanded in 1953 after its members were satisfied that the nation was alerted to the danger, the committee was reconvened in 1976 in the midst of a growing sense of "injured innocence" in America. Unreconstructed Cold War liberals, contemptuous of the McGovernite triumph of 1972, had finally clothed the visceral anticommunism of the New Right with intellectual respectability. The intellectual elite of the CPD consisted of Paul Nitze, a former secretary of the Navy, who had been active in government service since the mid-1940s; Eugene Rostow, former undersecretary of State; and Harvard Sovietologist Richard Pipes. Two journals served as the intellectual organs of the CPD—*The Public Interest*, edited by Irving Kristol and Nathan Glazer, and *Commentary*, edited by Norman Podhoretz.

The dilemmas and frustrations of the postwar world were clear for members of the CPD. They believed that absolute evil, far from being destroyed in World War II, persisted, indeed in an even more hideous form—but could not now be destroyed without cataclysmic effects to American society. The conflict was present but there seemed no path to an emotionally satisfying ending—the final purification of the world. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific father of the atomic bomb, captured the nature of the dilemma in 1953: "We may anticipate a state of affairs in which the two Great Powers will each be in a position to put an end to the civilization and life of the other, though not without risking its own. We may be likened to two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at a risk of his own life."⁸

The CPD understood that Cold War was now pervasive and the context within which all life must be lived. Eternal vigilance needed to be nurtured in what previously had been called "civilian" life. While the nation must maintain this vigilance toward the enemy outside, it must also demand internal purity against the enemy within.

The memory of post-World War I Europe haunted CPD members. They feared that America, too, was morally tired and militarily weak after its failure of nerve in Vietnam. Desperate for peace, the committee feared that Americans would fail to appreciate the danger from the Soviet Union, an implacable and brutal foe whose ultimate aim was the destruction of Western civilization. Failing to realize that the Truman Doctrine provided the proper strategic and moral orientation and accurately expressed the terms of the clash between civilization and barbarism, the American loss of will combined with its own innate goodness—a Billy Budd kind of innocence—kept the nation

from awakening to the danger. The nation would, then, fall prey to a nuclear age Munich that would lead either to the Finlandization of America or to the terminal war no one wanted.

Consequently, the CPD's purpose was to sound the alarm and awaken the country to the danger and to unwise national security policies (SALT II, for example). But beyond these concerns, this sense of danger touched deep fears among many people that the nation had indeed been victimized-by the war in Vietnam, by the hostage crisis in Teheran, and by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For many Americans, the warnings and the prescriptions of the CPD were coherent and allowed them to make use of historical paradigms, such as Munich, that seemed appropriate.

In order to reveal clearly the plan of Soviet "global hegemony," CPD members were successful in influencing the famous Team B National Intelligence Estimate of 1976. Unhappy with CIA figures, conservative military and political elites persuaded President Ford to allow CIA Director George Bush to appoint an alternate team from outside the CIA to assess Soviet military strength and intentions. Not surprisingly, Team B claimed clear Soviet superiority in conventional and nuclear weaponry. Leo Cherne, chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, commented on the social utility of such "revelatory" knowledge: "We are in the midst of a crisis of belief and a crisis of belief can only be resolved by belief. 'Will' depends on something most doomsayers have overlooked--crisis, mortal danger, shock, massive understandable challenge."⁹ The nature of the CPD's world was certainly one in which crises were imminent. The external crisis was dangerous not only because of aggressive Soviet intentions but because of the "fallen state" of the United States. Elite members of the CPD began sounding the alarm about the inner disorder the nation faced.

Norman Podhoretz, one of the chief theoreticians of the CPD, asked if the nation had become a "culture of appeasement." For Podhoretz, the legacy of Vietnam was bitter. As the critical event in the contemporary loss of will in

America, it engendered internal disorder and tempted the totalitarian impulse. It led to an insidious pacifism that thought **nothing** worth dying for, and produced a loss of clarity in foreign policy, a loss of confidence in American power, and a "national mood of self-doubt and self-disgust." This "spiritual plague" had moved through the protest of the 1960s, and then found its contemporary home among the "kind of women who do not want to be women and ... those men who do not want to be men."¹⁰

These gender confusions-the loss of the masculine principle that was the basis for the will to sacrifice-were important, for they reminded Podhoretz of the spiritual malaise that swept over post-World War I England and led to a similar abdication of "proper manhood among homosexual writers of the

20's."This abdication had, Podhoretz believed, "an inescapable implication in the destiny of society as a whole." Certainly, Podhoretz would have approved of the spirit of a member of the Roosevelt administration who said during the early years of World War II: "In an America grown magnificently male again we have the chance to fight for a homeland.... Here is the time when a man can be what an American means, can fight for what America has always meant-an audacious adventurous seeking-for a decent earth."¹¹

For the CPD, the period of detente only contributed to the inner malaise that gripped the country in the post-Vietnam years. Podhoretz spoke contemptuously of "Nixon's doctrine of strategic defeat." Detente, he argued, did not allow for clarity of purpose in a dangerous world. As evidenced by the trauma of Vietnam, it did not allow meaningful sacrifice to inspire the nation to acts of courage. Podhoretz stated that detente took from the Soviet-American conflict "the moral and political dimension for the sake of which sacrifices could be intelligently demanded by the government and willingly made by the people."¹²

The inner confusion brought about by the war in Vietnam and "spiritual Finlandization" caused by the policy of detente terrified Podhoretz and his contemporaries. In 1978, Eugene Rostow compared the years of detente to the European situation before both World Wars, and his perceptions revealed the continued relevance of the Munich paradigm for members of the CPD: "Since the final bitter phases of the Vietnam War, our governments have been preaching with the fear, passivity, and inadequacy which characterized the British and American policy so fatally in the Thirties, and British policy before 1914."¹³ This kind of gloom pervaded the ruminations of the CPD. Sociologist Peter Berger, in his famous mea culpa regarding his once critical stance of American involvement in Vietnam, looked into the future and saw only a "long, long age of darkness," in which "American society may be swallowed up."¹⁴

The perceived loss of will and abdication of global responsibility were all the more significant because of the external crisis that was upon the nation. The 1976 policy statement of the CPD declared, "our country is in a period of danger, and the danger is increasing." The danger was, of course, from the Soviet Union's desire for world domination. As the crisis grew worse, the CPD stated in 1980 that the Soviet Union was pursuing a policy "even more ambitious than Hitler." Nowhere, however, was the reassertion of national will more significant than in the will to nuclear superiority. Eugene Rostow declared that unless the strategic deterrent was strong, "unless the adequacy of our second-strike capability is clear-our position in every lesser conflict is in peril." Doubt regarding American will to use these weapons stemmed not only from what the CPD perceived as nuclear inferiority but also from debilitating

debate at home. Hence, the CPD was wary of domestic dissent. Verbal policies, its members well understood, could be misinterpreted in the symbolic world of perception that was so crucial to deterrence theory. 's

Nowhere was the sense of American weakness greater than in the CPD's analysis of the strategic balance—a weakness (ironically enough) that it chose to proclaim loudly, which could be construed as a destabilizing act in itself. In 1982, the committee stated that the Soviets had a clear margin of nuclear superiority and knew how to use it. "The United States has become second best," and a respectable second-strike capability was not foreseen until *perhaps* the 1990s. Soviet superiority had immediate implications, Richard Pipes claimed, because the Soviet Union had never followed the philosophy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and was making plans to fight and win a nuclear war. Further, even if nuclear war never came, Pipes believed that nuclear superiority was part of the Soviet plan of global hegemony. This superiority would be translated into nuclear blackmail—"armed suasion." In 1984, seven years after writing his celebrated article on Soviet nuclear strategy, Pipes declared that Soviet leaders "believe that nuclear weapons are the means of quick and decisive victory." The chances for change were slim, Pipes believed, because the trouble was in the very roots of Russian culture. The Communist Revolution had installed in power the Russian peasant (*muzhik*), and wrote Pipes, "the *muzhik* had been taught by long historical experience that cunning and coercion alone ensure survival: one employed cunning when weak, and cunning coupled with coercion when strong."¹⁶

The message of the CPD went beyond depictions of the internal and external crises that the nation faced. The committee also offered its plan for recovery. The first stage of national rehabilitation was the resuscitation of national courage—the realization that the enduring struggle might be endless. Podhoretz declared that Americans could no longer simply wish a different world into being. While "liberals are dreaming the dream of a new intellectual order," he complained, the Soviet Union is in a period of "active, imperialist, expansion."

The path toward redemption led through the recovery of the American spirit that had supposedly been lost in the 1960s. Speaking before the platform committee of the Democratic Party in 1976, Eugene Rostow marveled that slowly, almost intuitively, public opinion "has come to realize that the Cold War is far from over." In that same year, Podhoretz offered a Wilsonian call to righteous battle, declaring that the nation's leaders must "use American power to make the world safe for democracy." In 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when the Carter administration had reverted to orthodox Cold War anticommunism, Podhoretz thought it quite likely to be too late. The only salvation was for the United States to spend billions more on new nuclear

weapons systems, "which alone can prevent the Soviets from achieving nuclear superiority and thus an unobstructed road to domination."¹⁸

For the CPD, commitment to weapons modernization and restoration of moribund systems (the B-1 bomber, for example) were unmistakable signs of the recovery of the American will. Failure to do this would only bring about

Podhoretz's ultimate nightmare, the Finlandization of America. In this vision, the Soviet Union would gain economic and political leverage in Western Europe through nuclear blackmail, and American politicians would be forced to work "toward a socio-political system more in harmony with the Soviet model." Podhoretz remained cautiously optimistic, however. He saw the hostage crisis and the invasion of Afghanistan as triggering the end of America's period of self-doubt. He looked to the 1950s as the period that should serve as the paradigm of American patriotism, for this was a time when Americans were willing to "pay the price in blood to fight Communism." Those like George Kerman, who should have known enough to look back to this period as a time when perceptions of the enemy were clear and national will inspired blood sacrifice, had failed to do so, a sign that they had obviously "grown weary and fearful over the years."¹⁹

For the CPD, the election of Ronald Reagan, a CPD member, signaled a "new consensus" on the threat from the Soviet Union. In spite of this internal patriotic awakening, the committee thought the external crisis grew even more desperate. Podhoretz envisioned a "Cuban missile crisis in reverse ... staged in the Persian Gulf, with the Finlandization of the West following inexorably in its wake." Others also constructed invasion scenarios to ensure that the hopeful signs of national recovery would not lessen perceptions of the danger. Robert Conquest's *What to Do When the Russians Come* offered a detailed picture of what would happen in America when the Russians invaded. Based on the experiences of Eastern European countries and the postwar occupation of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, Conquest painted a vivid picture of the gradual "Sovietization" of American life—a scenario that would become reality, he said, only if the United States became weak militarily and misperceived the intentions of the Soviet Union. Americans *were* often misled, Conquest believed, but they may "yet wake to the problem." Time, however, was on the side of the Soviet Union, and the bleak scenario Conquest painted was designed to awaken Americans to this present and ominous danger. At the same time as these apocalyptic scenarios were being vividly portrayed, others spoke of the hopeful seeds of recovery. Jeane Kirkpatrick echoed the theme of the rebirth of America, suggesting that our "dark night of the soul" was over; Reagan's election symbolized the end of a "national identity crisis through which the nation has been passing for some ten or fifteen years."²⁰

The vision of the apocalypse—descriptions of the terrors that await, the

inner degeneration by which the terrors will conquer, but the persistent hope for final recovery--was a part of the awakening process. It motivated the true believer to a sense of missionary fervor, for with the advent of nuclear weaponry, apocalyptic fantasies were readily believable, and the invigoration of living in the last days provided a sense of cosmic importance to the task of awakening to the end-time crisis.

For the CPD, there were only mutually exclusive choices regarding the future. One could believe that it was better to be "Red than dead" or better "dead than Red," and the choice once made governed all future individual value decisions and public policy decisions. Podhoretz's hope for the future rested with the bulwarking of American military might and, with the strength of such martial will in the face of the danger, the eventual breakup of the Soviet Union. Otherwise, he envisioned a gloomy future: an endless war, an "eternity of confrontation ... without hope of victory in the end." He also foresaw a "universal gulag and a life that is otherwise nasty, brutish, and short." To forestall this process and to bring about the only palatable future, the United States must roll back communism, not just Soviet power, and this meant hearkening back to John F. Kennedy's crusading message: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."]

The success of the CPD's campaigns lay in its ability to construct a milieu of crisis at a time when the perplexing memories of Vietnam and more current foreign policy dilemmas made Americans susceptible to the comfortable, if not comforting, symbols of the Cold War. Sorting out the "proper" perceptions of the enemy offered at least social orientation, and as the CPD offered the logic of its analysis of the present danger, latent anticommunism arose quickly. The crisis, some believed, was a time of unprecedented opportunity. Perhaps, it was possible to resolve the inevitable frustrations of the "scorpions in the bottle" without living forever in the cold situation that allowed for no sense of a redemptive ending.

To resolve this unsatisfying balance of terror, the CPD pointed beyond containment to a reassertion of traditional images of heroic war and the renewed power of redemptive sacrifice in a holy cause. A crucial part of the agenda was the committee's attempt to perceive nuclear war as potentially decisive and purifying. As always, this was accompanied by rhetorical denials that Americans were at all warlike. Podhoretz wrote, for example: "The idea of war has never been as natural to Americans as it used to be to the English or Germans or French. We have always tended in this country to think of war as at best a hideous necessity."²² The development of generations of nuclear weapons had not--any more than had the development of the machine gun--brought humanity to the realization that war might at last be obsolete.

The fear of the power of nuclear weapons was matched by the fascination with the opportunity for final victory using the ultimate weapons. If Cold War was so intolerable, perhaps the last hot war might bring about the final fundamental transformations that had been dreamed about for so long.

These millennialist fantasies usually were not expressed crudely, except in fundamentalist visions engendered by apocalyptic models in scripture. More often they were construed in the dispassionate language of nuclear strategists.

Nuclear war-fighting scenarios and plans for civil defense were part of the desire for a way out of MAD, for they allowed people to dream once again of conditions that could allow for final victory, a new birth of freedom, and millennial peace. Colin Gray, consultant to the State Department and member of the General Advisory Committee of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, expressed this hope:

The United States should plan to defeat the Soviet Union and to do so at a cost that would not prohibit U.S. recovery. Washington should identify war aims that in the last resort would contemplate the destruction of Soviet political authority and the emergence of a postwar world order *compatible with Western values*. (emphasis added)²³

The Minuteman was now a missile, but its purpose was apparently the same as that of those original embattled farmers--protection, salvation, and the transformation of the world.

The CPD correctly understood that the debates surrounding nuclear weapons were part of the ongoing debate about what it meant to be an American in the nuclear age. For many, Richard Barnet's comments on the early 1960s seemed appropriate: "What characterized America was now its power, and the citizen's sense of belonging was somehow related to the vicarious exercise of national power. More and more an American came to mean someone who identified with the struggle against America's enemies."²⁴ As one shared in the tremendous power and promise of nuclear weapons - either in fantasies of their use or fantasies of their potential political utility - one presumably shared in the only experience that linked all Americans together. The CPD's call for a revival of the crusading spirit of World War II and the 1950s reflected the yearning for a new beginning.

The statements of many CPD members on the character of nuclear war made it clear that nuclear war was perceived as different in *degree*, but not in *kind*, from other wars. Because no fundamental discontinuity existed between the nuclear age and previous ages, no fundamental discontinuity existed between war in the nuclear age and previous wars. Richard Pipes, for example, described "realistic" scenarios for nuclear war fighting and argued that "victory is quite feasible *exactly as it is in any military conflict* [emphasis added], i.e., one side disables the other and inflicts its will upon it." Pipes

dismissed the arguments that nuclear weapons, by their very nature, precluded rational use in a battlefield situation. These arguments, he believed, served the purposes of the Soviet Union. Pipes believed that the Soviet Union was primarily interested in keeping fear of nuclear weapons at the center of Western thought so that the West would desire good relations with the Soviet Union *above all*. Hence, nuclear anxiety, according to Pipes, was part of the Soviet plan for global hegemony: "it is designed to translate the natural dread that most people have of war in general and nuclear war in particular into an overwhelming anxiety that paralyzes thought and will."²⁵ In other words, the rise of fear of nuclear war in American culture in the late 1970s was mainly due to Soviet-constructed anxieties, designed to make Americans think that there was nothing worth dying for. It was *this* insidious degeneration of the will to sacrifice that the CPD feared would lead to the surrender of the West.

It is not entirely clear whether the millennialist ethics of the CPD called for the will to consider global human sacrifice in the final battle between the forces of good and evil. The justification for global sacrifice has been discussed

for some time. In 1961, Sidney Hook declared that "survival at all costs is not among the values of the West." More recently, President Reagan communicated this sense of global sacrifice to the National Association of Evangelicals on March 8, 1983. The message came anecdotally. The president was reflecting on a speech that he had heard a "prominent young man" give on the subject of communism before a "tremendous gathering" in California during the Cold War:

"I love my little girls more than anything-" And I said to myself, "Oh no, don't. You can't-don't say that." But I had underestimated him. He went on: "I would rather see my little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God."

There were thousands of young people in that audience. They came to their feet with shouts of joy. They had instantly recognized the profound truth in what he had said, with regard to the physical and the soul and what was truly important.²⁶

The CPD's call to recovery seemed to balance precariously between a desire for the final battle in which the national will to preserve sacred principles would be expressed by a willingness to die for them, as a country and perhaps

as a world, and a desire for a recovery of American will necessary to maintain the contest of wills with the enemy that could continue for the foreseeable future. Without question, the CPD called for America to awaken to the dangers that it faced from within and without. The will to nuclear superiority and the stoic determination to sacrifice whatever was necessary was, in its view, the unmistakable sign of the vitality of cultural renewal.

The Committee on the Present Danger set forth a powerfully articulate statement about the risk the nation faced, the proper identification of internal and external enemies, and the prescription for American recovery. The CPD perceived that the moment of truth was drawing near and that its restorative work was the last chance for the nation and for Western civilization. The CPD made use of the familiar rhetorical pattern of the jeremiad: it spoke both of decline and doom and of revitalization and exaltation. Cultural restoration would begin with a tactical revolution of feeling, a required shift of the affections. The CPD worked out of a dominant historical paradigm: the memories and lessons of Munich.

The CPD knew that national recovery would begin with a kind of spiritual discipline: an inner transformation, the restoration of the will to sacrifice, would precede, but be directly related to, the public policy decisions

that would spring from a rejuvenated nation. Nuclear weapons played a crucial symbolic role in the restorative process. For the CPD, the will to modernize the arsenal and to plan soberly for the possible use of nuclear weapons revealed that Americans had recovered the sense of millennial destiny they had abandoned only recently. The CPD had great success in revitalizing Cold War orthodoxy in the late 1970s, and yet, ironically, Cold War fears engendered not only fears of the Soviet Union and *their* nuclear weapons, but fear of nuclear weapons in general. Consequently, the eruption of the fierce ideological civil war in America over the function of nuclear weapons can be partly traced to the fervor of the CPD. For Americans who thought the world view of the Cold War dangerously archaic, the CPD's message was *itself* the "present danger," and American nuclear weapons, far from being symbols of protection and ultimate salvation, were symbols of ultimate destruction. Consequently, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Americans battled over the proper symbols with which to interpret the dangers of the nuclear age.

Antinuclear activists argued that the threat of nuclear weapons made nuclear war the real danger and entered into the realm of symbolic politics by proposing a "freeze" on the research, testing, and production of nuclear weapons. The assumption of those enamored of the Freeze Movement was that the nuclear threat could be measured by numbers of weapons not specific crisis situations. Hence, the way out of the nuclear dilemma was first to freeze, then to reduce, and then to do away with nuclear weapons. Like the CPD, antinuclear activists sought to utilize fear as a prod to public awareness and action. In a 1983 article in *Science*, several scientists, including the popular Cornell professor Carl Sagan, argued that even a modest detonation of nuclear warheads could bring about a "nuclear winter," in which the earth would suffer catastrophic environmental damage, and life on earth might come to an end. Antinuclear activists hoped that such a dramatic symbol

would have a profound impact on people's consciousness and force the superpowers to reduce nuclear arsenals, which would, in their view, make nuclear war more unlikely.²⁷

In response to the symbolic politics of the Freeze and nuclear winter, those more fearful of the Soviet Union than of nuclear weapons maintained their belief in the contours of the Cold War world and argued that a sturdy deterrent and the revival of traditional American patriotism would safeguard the nation. Yet, by the mid-1980s, these same cold warriors who often sneered at the political naiveté of antinuclear activists offered the nation the most dramatic example of utopian politics: on March 23, 1983, President Reagan offered his vision of a missile defense designed to make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." In the ensuing years, members of the CPD helped articulate the ideology of strategic defense. This ideology was rooted both in the world view of the Cold War *and* in the belief of antinuclear activists that the threat of nuclear war called for a dramatic transformation in the status quo. Those who shaped the ideology of strategic defense told the American public that the Cold War *was* still being waged, for Americans would have to conquer the final frontier of space or else risk losing the war in space to the Soviet Union. Yet, these same spokesmen also told Americans that strategic defense would dramatically alter the nuclear age, eventually bringing about a world free of nuclear weapons.²⁸

The Committee on the Present Danger could take credit for helping arouse both anticommunist activism and antinuclear activism in American culture. Like every other group that enters the public forum to shape opinion on these issues, the CPD had to contend, it seems, with two conflicting impulses—the popular desire to be nourished by the patriotic enthusiasm that has given coherence to the postwar world and a fear that these tribal allegiances might lead the nation into the abyss.

