

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.

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."² 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.'

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 Lincolnesque 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

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 Finland ization" 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...."⁴

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 CPC 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 debilitatin,

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."²¹

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." Pipe:

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 naivete 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.

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Nuclear Images in From Apocalypse

Nuclear imagery had lain dormant again in the late 1970s. By 1982, rivaling that of 1962. Although remained the same. *Reader's Digest* magazine in the country. Time-Life category, although *Time* had replaced arms race spiraled on, unabated. nuclear anxiety and "the nightmare subconscious of civilization ... in their nuclear firepower by several momentous new reality, however: b States could no longer claim nuclear warned that "the United States is aspects of military preparedness, nations are in rough parity meaning other."³

Whether our position was per shift in nuclear imagery was inescapable meaningful concept, images of om war could not be sustained. Some r to the Bomb and the arms race. Th the Reagan administration. Although