THE LAUCKS FOUNDATION —

from time to time calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification or understanding of critical issues affecting world peace. The accompanying reprints constitute Mailing No. 24.

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Santa Barbara, CA., 93108

June 22, 1981

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS Wednesday, June 10, 1981

There is no isolation

It would be a terrible folly to view Israel's attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor as an isolated incident in one of the world's more obscure regions. It was an action that shows, as clearly as any event in recent years, how close the whole world is to the brink of proliferating catastrophe. The ruins at a relatively small plant 15 miles outside Baghdad are a symptom of international insanity.

The American government immediately and sharply criticized Israel and said Menachem Begin was misusing the fighter-bombers that we had furnished to Israel. Egypt's Anwar Sadat, who had worked with Begin to maintain peace in the Middle East, was just as outraged. So were most government heads around the world.

The reaction was natural: the rest of the world was scared.

Of course it was, and so are we, because somewhere along the way the community of nations has almost erased the line between what is offensive and what is defensive. The question, "Who started this?" has become all but unanswerable.

Was it offensive of Israel to sneak those planes over Iraq and hit that plant? Or was it more offensive of Iraq, which considers Israel its prime enemy, to build that plant in the first place, with the almost obvious intent of producing atomic weapons?

Or was it more offensive of Israel to enter the "nuclear club" itself before Iraq did? But didn't Israel, which has had to be a warrior nation throughout its modern history, act defensively in working to produce its own atomic weapons?

The questions go all the way back to Hiroshima, Japan, where the replies and justifications began to become entangled. The questions lead only to another one: What does non-proliferation mean?

Iraq had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, meaning in brief that it has no intent to inflict nuclear war, that its purposes are "purely peaceful." But how else could it use the reactor? Back in March Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) warned the U.S. Senate that this plant near Baghdad was one to watch, because Iraq has no program for developing commercial nuclear power. France, he said, had sold Iraq some weapons-grade fuel for its new plant.

Where does the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty become effective?

All the most powerful nations have their own stockpiles of weapons, tested and ready. Now little unstable governments scattered over the world are moving well along into nuclear technology, becoming capable of making their own bombs. Work is going along in Pakistan, which hasn't even signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Work is going along in Brazil, and in Argentina, and in South Africa. Libya has been trying to get into this fearful business.

Would it be offensive or defensive to blast these efforts before they turn into bombs?

What happened at one plant outside Baghdad must teach the world to stop and consider whether its ability to kill has outstripped its ability to live.

Of several minds: *Thomas Powers*

Commonweal, A Review of Public Affairs, Literature and the Arts, is published biweekly, except monthly Christmas-New Year's and July and August, by Commonweal Publishing Co., 232 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016. Telephone: (212) MU 3-2042. Yearly subscriptions, U.S. and Canada, $22; foreign, $24. Special two-year rate: $39; foreign, $43. Single copy, $1.

SPASM WAR

WILL BOTH SIDES SHOOT THE WORKS?

LAST FALL I went to see the deputy undersecretary of defense for strategic and space systems in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, a man with a crewcut and horn-rimmed glasses named Dr. Seymour Zeiberg. We talked about the MX missile complex which the Air Force wants to build in an area of central Nevada and Utah called the Great Basin. Dr. Zeiberg is a thoughtful man. He is not unmindful of the dangers of nuclear war, nor immune to moments of gloom. "When I feel like that I get away for awhile," he said, "take a ride in an airplane, go out to an Air Force base somewhere and kick a few tires."

Dr. Zeiberg thinks the MX is a good idea. I don't, for reasons which must have been apparent from the questions I asked. During World War II something under three million tons of conventional explosives were dropped by Allied bombers over Europe. The 2000 warheads of the MX system could deliver the equivalent of 700 million tons of conventional explosives. I suppose I must have sounded as if I thought the results would be 200 times worse than the results of WW II. Dr. Zeiberg takes a more relaxed view. He thought I had misconceived the probable course of any new war involving the MX or other modern strategic weapons systems. "You're too hung up on spasm war," he said. I've been thinking about this ever since.

"Spasm war" is a phrase invented by the civilian strategist and defense consultant, Herman Kahn. He used it to refer to an all-out, unrestrained, fire-everything war between the United States and the Soviet Union—in effect, a war of annihilation conducted in a mood which might be described as murderous and suicidal in about equal measure. American and Soviet strategic weapons systems are extraordinarily responsive to central direction. A single order by the president could fire all of the 1,052 land-based ICBMs within two or three minutes. It would take somewhat longer to fire the SLBMs from nuclear submarines because of communications difficulties. Nuclear weapons carried by conventional aircraft would take the longest of all, but even so the United States *could* deliver just about all of its warheads in less than twelve hours. The Soviets could do the same. This is what Kahn was referring to in the first instance—a brief, instinctive, unrestrained assault which would doubtless bring the same in return.

Dr. Zeiberg considers a spasm war very unlikely. Its consequences would of course be catastrophic, something well understood by the political leaders and military men of both sides. Even a first strike—that is, a Pearl Harbor type of

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surprise attack on military targets—would probably be limited in the hope of mitigating the response. But the real point at issue here is not whether a substantial majority of our strategic weapons will be fired on the first day (a spasm war in its archetypal form), but whether the war will continue until they are pretty much used up. We might describe the latter as a spasmodic war—a succession of salvos, one wave of attacks eliciting another in response, as each side tried to bend the other to its will. In some respects this might be even worse than an all-out war, over in a day, if only because initial recovery efforts—the establishment of new hospitals, transportation centers, emergency tent cities, military rendezvous points, and the like—would offer new targets for attack.

The truth of the matter is that Dr. Zeiberg, like just about every other professional defense expert, does not expect any sort of nuclear exchange, ever—much less a spasm war—between the United States and the Soviet Union. If we can maintain at least a rough balance of forces then we can avoid war. This is why Dr. Zeiberg favors the MX. Like the rest of the defense community, he feels the best we can hope for is a Mexican stand-off.

But even if a war should begin—he does not know how this might happen; no more do I—Dr. Zeiberg thinks both sides would agree to call a halt in the war's early stages, not go all the way. I take a different view, and ever since our conversation I have been trying to figure out why.

Let me begin with a confession: I have no direct, personal experience of war. I never set foot in Vietnam. Once, in the biblical city of Tyre on the coast of southern Lebanon, a friend and I thought we heard artillery in the distance, but it was only a single, isolated boom in the night. Some years earlier, in Athens the night of the colonels' coup in 1967, my wife and I sat up late on a pleasant terrace, listening to occasional bursts of machinegun fire and wondering what was happening. Apparently very little; there were no reports of casualties the following day. Nor have I been in government—or in any large institution,

for that matter—at a moment of crisis. Tolstoy once said that anyone who has seen a street fight can understand a great battle. Whatever knowledge I have of war is of that sort, or comes from reading and from thinking about what I have read. The result is a notion of war quite different from that of Dr. Zeiberg.

Most writing about war treats it as the solution to a problem—the rational (albeit dangerous) pursuit of a tangible (albeit arguable) goal. But this does not explain why so many possible occasions for war are passed up, nor why the fighting is so hard to stop once begun. Clearly war has its rational side, but this is limited to the mechanics of military operations. It is like chess in more ways than one; the way it is played determines who will win, but has nothing to do with the larger question—why the game is undertaken in the first place. So it is with war. The techniques of combat reveal little about the spirit of combat, which exists on a different plane. That spirit is not easy to put down.

Perhaps the first thing to be said of big modern wars—and in particular of the two great wars of our century—is that their violence has been dramatically out of proportion to their original goals. The First World War began in a hopeless muddle of aims—the confused desire, on both sides, to emerge from a conflict of will over a trivial matter with that enhancement of prestige, that aura of confident strength, which comes from getting your way with everybody watching. Either side might have backed down without an iota of diminishment of tangible strength. The same might be said of the conflict over Poland in 1939. The fate of neither Poland nor the Balkans can plausibly be said to have justified the immense suffering, death, and destruction of the wars for which they served as occasion.

An occasion is just that—a moment for beginning, not a reason for carrying on to the end. Once the belligerents have joined in combat the occasion fades in significance and the struggle itself becomes paramount. Clausewitz defines the object of military operations as destruction of the enemy's capacity to fight. Once that is achieved all else follows. The victor has the luxury of deciding what the war was about after it is over.

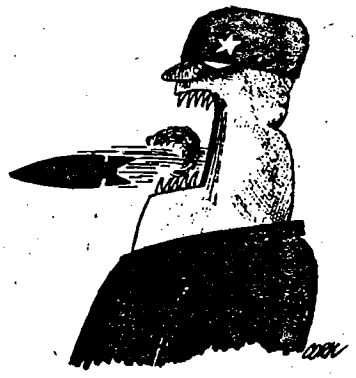
But in modern wars the prize—territory, reparations, access to material resources—is dwarfed by the cost of winning it. The real object of war seems to be something quite different, an end to the threat posed by hostile arms. In theory arms are acquired in order to defend something one has got, but arms cannot defend without threatening. Arms, in short, are both cause and result of arms. It is tough enough to live in fear of arms in peacetime. In war the threat becomes actual, and is more than the spirit can bear. Thus a war which might begin over something small—a bullying reply to a diplomatic note; title to a chunk of Central Europe—tends toward an open-ended struggle to free oneself from the threat of arms by destroying them. When whole societies have been devoted to preparation for war we can expect conflict to be on a commensurate scale. About the only thing one might hope to gain from such a war is freedom from the fear of having to go through it again. The oil of the Persian Gulf might serve as an occasion for war between the United States and the Soviet Union, but that isn't what it would be *about*. In war ontology is everything. Their beginnings have one kind of logic, their ends another. It is weapons which threaten us, and weapons which we fight to destroy. We might say that the reason wars are fought—as opposed to the reason they begin—is to see who will be left with weapons at the end.

The second thing we might say about big modern wars is they do not end when one side surrenders, but when one side is beaten. During the First World War Ber-

trand Russell was briefly sent to jail for having suggested that the war couldn't possibly win anything worth the sacrifice involved, and that it ought to be ended immediately on any terms available. This was a sensible suggestion. The four great belligerents—Britain, France, Russia and Germany—all but destroyed themselves for what amounted in the end to illusory reparations, an illusory hegemony in Europe, minor colonial acquisitions, and inconsequential changes in European frontiers. Russia, of course, gained nothing at all—not even illusions. In terms of money, the war was merely ruinous. In terms of life, it beggared the horrors of history. Whole generations of young men were cut in half. Thus began the darkening of the modern mind. But with all these excellent reasons for halting the war in mid-battle, no leader on either side ever seriously suggested doing so. Even at the very end the Germans could not bring themselves to surrender, but dithered until a revolution at home settled the matter.

The Second World War was even more replete with opportunities for surrender. No one did so. Even France waited until it was clear its army was incapable of fighting before accepting an armistice. Britain had no hope of winning in June, 1940, but she did not surrender. Russia seemed all but beaten in the late summer of 1941, but did not surrender. Germany and Japan were both beaten by the end of 1944. Neither surrendered. The losers were beaten—hammered down until they could fight no longer. The logic of war seems to be that if a belligerent can fight he will fight, that leaders will not surrender until surrender is academic. This appears to be a corollary of the immense cost of modern war. Victory may be ashes, but at least it is *something*. How is a national leader to explain the sacrifice of so much for *nothing*? It is more than they can bring themselves to do. The loss of cities and armies is not taken as reason for quitting, but as reason for risking the rest.

The military is asked, Must we surrender today? The military answers, No, not today, we are not beaten yet. Time foreshortens terribly. The psychology is that of the man condemned to be hanged,



described by Dostoevsky. It is the moment the condemned man dreads. *Not yet*, he tells himself the night before his last day. *Not yet*, he says in the morning. *Not yet*, as the hour draws near. *Not yet*, as he is led to the door. *Not yet*, as he reaches the stair to the scaffold. *Not yet*, when there is still one step to climb. A man does not have to die until the noose draws tight. A nation does not have to surrender until it is beaten. The awful cost of war is reason to shrink back before it begins; afterwards, it serves as goad.

The third major characteristic of big wars in our century has been their level of gratuitous destruction. The ghastly loss of life in combat during the First World War was not repeated in the Second, but civilian casualties increased enormously. Big Bertha, the huge German railroad gun which fired on Paris in 1918, scared more people than it injured. Civilian bombardment in WWII was on an altogether different scale. Whole cities were destroyed in an attempt to break civilian morale. The approach did not work. Bombing rallied Britain in 1940-41, and had the same effect in Germany thereafter. The practical reasons for strategic bombing, as it was called, were two: air defenses were too effective by day, and cities were the only targets big enough to find at night. But the infliction of pain on this scale is hard to understand as anything except a response to anger, suffering, and frustration—all of which are in the nature of war. Nuclear weapons, of course, offer an ideal means for inflicting pain. Cities are the one target which cannot become lost in the confusion of war. We might sum up, then, by saying that big modern wars are violent out of all proportion to goals, are fought to the bitter end, and encourage gratuitous destruction.

What does this suggest about the course of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union? Both sides are armed, and threaten each other, beyond all precedent. The cost would be great from the opening shot. Other belligerents—especially China and West Germany—might enter the war at an early stage. The United States assumes it would lose a conventional war without recourse to nuclear weapons. We may take it as a given that the occasion for war would be a substantial one—access to oil in the Persian Gulf, perhaps. We may assume that one side had committed itself to X, and the other to resisting X. Could either side lightly drop its commitment once the shooting started? Would either side be in a mood for compromise once the shooting had already cost more than X was worth?

It is possible that one side or the other, reading the logic of the situation in a cold light, would abandon all restraint and reach for whatever advantage is to be obtained from a sudden, spasmic firing of everything in its arsenal. But this strikes me as unlikely. In my imagination—and at this point imagination is all any of us has to go on—the war follows a different course. One act of destruction elicits another. Fleets and armies are destroyed. Panic spreads, communications are strained, confusion rises. Things happen quickly; there is no time to think. The leaders of neither side can bear to have lost so much for *nothing*. And yet the horror is all contained in messages on bits of paper. The loss of an entire city, unimaginable before the war, still leaves many others. The war does not *have* to end now.

The arsenals we have built are very great. Once the war had begun in earnest—once we had truly begun to suffer—it seems to me the shooting would continue in spasmodic waves until technological exhaustion asserted itself, and we could no longer get at each other. What else are those weapons *for*? But as I say, Dr. Zeiberg thinks otherwise, and God willing, he'll turn out to be right.

THOMAS POWERS

sane world 514 C Street NE. Washington, D C 20002
Vol. 20, No. 5 May 1981

"Four Out of Five Doctors . . ."

by Matt Wilson

While President Reagan and Premier Brezhnev appear intent on prolonging the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, a unique collaboration of 100 international physicians have joined forces to do what they can to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. At their first meeting, held March 20-24 in Airlie, Virginia, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, Inc. appealed to the leaders and physicians of the world for nuclear disarmament by graphically spelling out the physical and human destruction that would result from a nuclear exchange.

Photo by Ray Cassidy/PRISM

Dr. Bernard Lown, President, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

The gathering of physicians provided an international forum for conversation among the superpowers, something which has been lacking recently. The physicians represented ten countries, including the U.S., Soviet Union, Japan and Great Britain. Among the ten Soviet delegates was Dr. Yuri Chazov, Brezhnev's private doctor—Reagan's doctor, Daniel Ruge, did not accept an invitation to the conference.

The main purpose of the conference was to dispel the myths that a nuclear exchange could be limited and winnable. The physicians, led by the president of the conference, Dr. Bernard Lown, Professor of Cardiology at Harvard, countered the "winnability" myth by spelling out in simple and stark terms that there can be no winners in a nuclear war. The conference discussed the effects of nuclear war in regard to its impact on the human species, an angle transcending all the political, tactical and ideological arguments which dominate talk about arms reduction.

The horrors of a nuclear war were discussed in both its long and short range effects. The immediate effects, obviously, are mass deaths caused by the blast, heat and radiation. The death toll is estimated at 200,000,000, with 60,000,000 others injured Medical help would be unable to care for the injured, as an estimated 80% of the doctors and hospitals would be lost in the bombings. The conference report states **"the survivors will indeed envy the dead."**

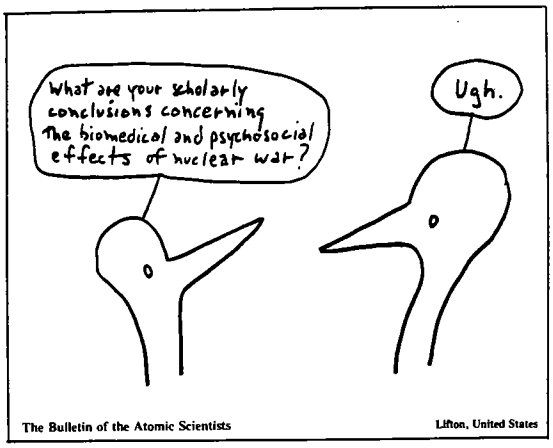
The long range picture points to an equally gruesome scenario. The ozone layer, which blocks the sun's lethal ultraviolet rays, would be greatly depleted by the massive amounts of nitrous oxides given off in an explosion. Arable land would be damaged, the food cycle greatly disrupted, and our water contaminated for an indefinite period. The physicians conclude that the **"survival of civilized life is at stake."**

The physicians report that the probability of a nuclear exchange grows each day. This threat grew even worse when the "limited" nuclear war doctrine became official policy. Though the superpowers have a supposed policy of deterrence, the possibility of a nuclear explosion exists through technical malfunction, human error, proliferation by an irresponsible government, or utilization of a bomb by a terrorist group. As long as nuclear weapons exist, the haunting specter of nuclear holocaust is always present. As it is virtually impossible to help nuclear bomb victims, the physicians advocate a "preventive medicine"—that of disarmament.

This first and hopefully annual conference of physicians (the second meeting is planned for London) succeeded in getting Soviets and Americans together to openly discuss the arms race. Such an exchange is especially important since Defense Secretary Weinberger has cancelled the semi-annual Soviet-American talks on the strategic arms treaty for the first time in eight years. The physicians urged the superpowers to view each other not as inanimate targets on the world map, but as members of the same human species.

The end result of the five day conference were three resolutions signed by the 100 participants. One resolution went to the heads of all governments and another to all the physicians of the world asking for their **"cooperation and dedication . . . which is needed to achieve an early cessation"** of the arms race. The third and most important resolution went to Reagan and Brezhnev asking these leaders to halt the arms race and to look at the madness and potential destruction they have created.

Matt Wilson is an intern at SANE



Automatic Political Reaction...

By Charles Peters

J.-C. Suarès

WASHINGTON — Too much of the political discussion that we hear divides along predictable lines, and the result is that we quickly guess what is coming next. The reason is the automatic response. The automatic response comes in several varieties, of which conservative and liberal are probably the most familiar. It is guaranteed to bore all but its true believers, and, far worse, it keeps us from seeing sensible solutions to our problems.

Take defense, where Republicans tend to be uncritical supporters of more spending while Democrats spent most of the 1970's automatically opposing the military. People like Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, who advocates a strong national defense but opposes wasting money on weapons that aren't needed or don't work, have been rare indeed.

James Fallows, author of the new book "National Defense," asked Richard Viguerie, the conservative Republican fund-raiser, why he automatically supported defense spending. "Because so many liberals automatically oppose it," was Mr. Viguerie's reply. Mr. Fallows then asked Elizabeth Holtzman, a liberal who was Democratic Representative from New York, how she responded to that charge. With all the graciousness that made her a former Representative, she replied: "I won't dignify that with an answer."

The regulation issue is another on which people split automatically into "pro" and "anti" groups, with little attempt to discriminate between regulations that are needed to protect life (do you really want your baby deformed by a dangerous drug?) and regulations that needlessly stifle competition.

Of course the subject that inspires the most automatic of automatic responses is abortion. The pro-abortion people absolutely refuse to acknowledge the obvious truth that a life is being destroyed. The anti-abortion people refuse to acknowledge the occasions when having a baby would be disastrous for a mother or her family — or the toughest fact of all, the fate that is suffered by children who are truly unwanted.

Not long ago I read a newspaper article about the remarkable success enjoyed by the Austrian economy in the 1970's. That success was attributed in part to a surprising combination of Keynesian and monetarist principles. The right solutions to our problems could have similarly mixed ideological roots. But we won't find out as long as we are prisoners of the automatic response.

To make our automatic responses less automatic, we need to face complexity and take pride in doing so. We don't have to abandon morality to deal with complexity; indeed, the most moral decision is usually the one that takes all factors into account. Nor do we have to sacrifice our determination to get things done — which is, of course, what some people really mean when they say, "Well, that's a very complicated matter." They want you to give up, to stop bothering them.

The way to deal with the problem of the automatic response might be to introduce into the American educational system experiences comparable to those a trial lawyer must go through before presenting a case to the jury. He cannot be a prisoner of the automatic response because that is the sure path to defeat. He must open himself up to every fact and argument in his opponent's favor. He must scrutinize his own case to see what will ring false or unpersuasive to the 12 people on the jury. He must continually expose his own arguments to the questions that reasonable men would have. Of course this is something the worst of the automatic responders hate to do.

In my experience as an editor, I have often had to deal with knee-jerk liberal and conservative writers. They actually get choleric when I try to make them face the reasonable arguments of the other side. They obviously think that their articles will be weakened if they acknowledge the valid points of their opponents, when, in fact, their articles would be better if they faced them, enriching their own positions with an acceptance of the other side's good points and making their own position more convincing because they have demonstrated to the reader that they aren't some blind zealot.

Think of a failing marriage. It can usually be saved only when the parties stop replaying in their minds the litany of arguments that inflame their sense of self-righteousness and really begin to listen to the legitimate points of their partners.

That is exactly what concerned liberal and conservative Americans must begin to do.

Charles Peters is editor of The Washington Monthly, from which this article is adapted.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 3, 1981

. . . And Intellectuals' Failure

By Patricia Roberts Harris

WASHINGTON — Recurring violence and increasing political alienation highlight the failure of intellectual leadership in political life. Although there is continuing and frequently impassioned discussion of public-policy issues among intellectuals, there is little effort by them to inform the general public of the complexity of issues or to correct deliberately misleading use of data by political figures. Instead, intellectuals join politicians in tailoring their public positions to the results of public-opinion polling.

Intellectuals may disagree with public-opinion-poll results, or decry efforts of politicians to pander to those results, but they do little to use the political process to ensure that the public is provided with facts on which informed judgments can be based.

This failure of the intellectual community to correct erroneous public opinion can have severe political consequences, as has been demonstrated by the political debate about balancing the budget. At a Cabinet meeting during the Carter Administration, the President reported that a poll conducted by a senator (who was later defeated) showed that a substantial majority of the voters believed that inflation was caused by budget deficits, and confirmed the validity of the Administration's efforts to balance the budget. When a Cabinet officer asked whether a poll showing that most voters believed the world is flat would justify changing navigation methods, Jimmy Carter turned off the question with a joke that some people in some places in the United States both taught and believed that the world is flat. The joke was an accurate reflection of both public attitudes and the all-too-frequent response by intellectuals.

Leading conservative economists have pointed out that budget deficits proportionately higher than those in the United States have not led to significant inflation in other countries. Nonetheless, they do not really challenge the politicians who assert a necessary cause-and-effect relationship between budget deficits and inflation. Discussion of the real issue of getting control of a now uncontrollable Federal budget is so muted that it is scarcely heard in the "deficit-inflation" arguments.

The result of allowing the "balanced-budget/inflation" debate to continue in its present simplistic form has been an absence of discussion of serious inflation-related issues such as valid uses of the Federal budget as a countercyclical tool, inflation-inducing tax and agricultural policies, or private-sector practices such as administered prices and the growing numbers of economic oligopolies. The failure of the intellectual community to force the public to look at systemic problems related to inflation has led to proposals to change political commitments to the poor and the disadvantaged and to a call for a constitutional convention that could alter the political structure of this country.

Intellectuals have never been venerated in this country, and, although they are generally well-paid, the public gives their opinions no greater respect in political debates than the opinions of rock stars. In fact, as intellectuals have come to be better paid, their opinions have become suspect. Many people wonder whether intellectuals accept error on such subjects as the consequence of budget deficits because so many are in higher tax brackets and could expect tax reductions if the Federal budget were reduced. Some also ask whether withdrawal of much of the intellectual community's support for additional school integration (which was advocated for the city) and for affirmative action (which was firmly espoused for the industrial assembly line and the typing pool) is due to the fact that better-paid intellectuals now live in suburbs with segregated schools and work at universities where the white male intellectual's job monopoly is at stake.

The late historian Richard Hofstadter's description of intellectuals as "moral antennae" of the society and clarifiers of fundamental moral issues is not valid today. Neither is the description of intellectuals as supporters of the interests of less-privileged classes. There is an absence of advocacy by intellectuals of fair treatment for the poor and the working class, with whom intellectuals were once identified. Instead of leading the development, public dissemination, and application of ideas to the political process, intellectuals demand that such leadership come from politicians, particularly Presidents. Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy have been lauded as leaders in the development of political ideas, even though their skill was in utilizing and interpreting, in exciting political language, ideas generated by an active and engaged intellectual community.

It is not political leadership that is wanting today. The failure of political leaders in proposing real solutions to our problems is a reflection of the sterility of the political activity of the nation's intellectuals.

Patricia Roberts Harris was Secretary of the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services in the Carter Administration.

National Catholic Reporter
May 15, 1981

Why the family film comeback?

By FRANK McCONNELL

QUICK, NOW: name a film about the havoc wreaked on a middle-class American home by a spouse and parent possessed of and tortured by a vision of a larger life beyond the comforts of suburbia. Name a film about a married couple on the verge of final separation who find their ideas of marriage and love clarified and transformed by the presence of a child. Name a film about a widowed person trying to decide whether to love again, and risk all the heartbreak and psychic damage of marriage, now *knowing* what it's like.

To the first question you may have answered "Ordinary People" — or, less likely, "Bigger Than Life" from 20 years before. To the second, "Kramer Vs. Kramer" — or "The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit," 20 years before. And to the third, "Act Two" — or "All That Heaven Allows," guess how many years before.

The point of this cultural Rorschach test should be obvious. For whatever reasons, the family melodrama has made a stunning comeback in recent American films after a hiatus of at least a decade and a half. A genre we had almost convinced ourselves was dated and hopelessly sentimental is, suddenly, one we seem most willing to see and hear — with a difference in the telling, but nevertheless with the same basic shapes, concerns, obsessions and ideals.

Why? — particularly, at a time when society appears no longer to display the prominent features *of* the family melodrama. Statistics, those treacherous trampolines sociologists string for the rest of us to bounce about on, tell us that in the United States, the divorce rate now about equals the marriage rate: we are all coupling and uncoupling as randomly as free molecules in an entropy box.

"THE FAMILY WAY"

And, closer to home, the divorce rate for Catholics is arcing toward the national norm — despite the best efforts of the Roman curia to deny the fact (many of whose members would probably like to deny the fact of entropy also).

The United States has just elected, without a hint of misgiving at least on *that* account, its first divorced president, to the chagrin of old supporters of Adlai Stevenson. And although George Gallup and Lou Harris haven't yet turned their instruments in that direction, it is entirely likely that the announced fissure between Teddy and Joanie may actually help rather than hinder the power-quest of the last of the Kennedys.

As that American shibboleth, the family, disintegrates, the American family film makes its unexpected, unlooked-for return. Is this just another index of a national schizophrenia, a kind of national, adolescent desire to dream the things we know we can no longer attain? Or is it something maybe more serious and more sane?

The answer, I think, lies in the history of recent American films: the national daydream, the national fantasy and the surest index to, not what we may take most seriously, but what we think we ought to take most seriously. It is impossible to talk about developing ideas of the family, or about developing ideas of the family film, without taking account of the curious fact that, for nearly 15 years, from the early 1960s to the middle or late 1970s, this sort of plot disappears, to all intents and purposes, from the purview of the film industry.

"Family melodrama" is a concept that works for movies of the 1950s and 1980s. The national psychosis of the years between (Vietnam, Watergate, the parade of assassinations) is too corrosive a mix to allow that delicate balance to survive.

But now the case is altered. When, at the end of "Ordinary People," the father and son in their north Chicago mausoleum of upper-middle-class bad taste find each other and learn to love each other — after the evil, ambitious, castrating wife has left the house — we feel a victory has been won. We feel, and are meant to feel, that this is the beginning of a meaningful, creative love relationship.

We feel the same thing at the end of "Kramer Vs. Kramer," although admittedly in more civilized surroundings: when we are assured that the father will keep his son, in their expensive New York apartment, and that the confused, well-meaning but fundamentally flaky wife and mother will conveniently fade into the landscape, we feel that something important has been achieved and stated. Audiences almost invariably weep at the end of "Kramer Vs. Kramer" or "Ordinary People." The interesting question is whether they know what they are weeping *at*.

What they are really weeping at, I think, is something like the perceived gap between expectation and reality, the abyss — either tragic or comic — between what we all wanted and what we have all become.

The recent spate of films about the problems of the American middle-class family, that is, can be taken as a kind of daydream of desperation: a vision, by the national subconscious, of the immense value of the safety, warmth and security of the family unit we are, as a people, in the process of dismantling.

Consider, not the similarities, but the differences between the melodramatic films I have mentioned so far. The elementary assumption of 1950s-style melodrama was that, if the family unit was in any way threatened or fragmented, it *must*, by the end of the film, be reconstituted, reconsolidated, reunited. And, most often, this reunion was made possible by domesticating a male. ∞

Think of Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman, who, although they made only a few films together (e.g., "Magnificent Obsession," "All That Heaven Allows") are the almost mythically perfect couple of 1950s melodrama: he an almost comic book caricature of preconscious virility; she (the first Mrs. Ronald Reagan), the perfect icon of domesticity.

With whatever permutations or complications, the essential plot of the films featuring such characters is, and is bound to be, the way in which the randy, possibly destructive energy of the hero is disciplined, molded into a useful form by the weaker but civilized and civilizing presence of the heroine.

The phrase "women's films" has stuck to most of these movies, not because they are films about what women really are or want, but because they are almost perfect realizations of what a masculine society *wants* women to be like, and want women to *like*.

The mythology of the 1950s melodrama has a great deal to do with the mythology of the family itself — and, therefore, probably with the growing divorce rate. "Love and marriage, love and marriage," sang Frank Sinatra in a popular song of the same decade, "go together like a horse and carriage." All the recent evidence is that they go together rather more like a fish and a bicycle. So why did we ever believe the fairy-tale in the first place?

We believed it, mainly, because of our heritage from the 19th century novel and the 19th century ideal of a wedding between romanticism and social benevolence, the dream of making the Byronic hero a productive family man. The great architect of the dream is Charles Dickens, who virtually patented the idea of romantic love within the family unit, and who in later life scandalized England by leaving his wife to run off with an actress, Ellen Terrian.

The 19th century invents the modern family and invents it as a kind of fantasy-land — call it the Bob Cratchitt syndrome — where passion, romance, domestic bliss and social productiveness are all supposed to be able to function together with minimal friction.

It is interesting that the more recent family melodramas in American film all begin with the assumption that this myth is still believed, and that it is wrong. If the classic plot of 1950s-style melodrama was to discipline the man to become a husband, the emerging plot of recent melodramas is to educate the husband to rediscover his humanity. "Ordinary People," "Kramer Vs. Kramer" and "The Great Santini" are all parables about successful *fatherhood* (just as "The Shining," that great horror-melodrama, is fundamentally a parable about failed fatherhood).

The assumption of the "old" family film is that the father's responsibilities end with *his* assuming the family role. But lately, in our collective life as well as in our films, we have come to realize that happy endings do not begin with, but are tested by, marriage. The fighter-pilot father, hero of "The Great Santini," brilliantly played by Robert Duvall, is in his way the perfect paradigm. Obsessed, possessed by an image of his own larger-than-life, heroic role, he must struggle to fit himself into

"KRAMER vs. KRAMER"

the life of his family. And he fails, at least part of the time. But there is no doubt that the members of this family love one another; that the father is trying *not* to be a monster. And that makes all the difference.

This is to say that recent American films about the family begin, where most families begin, in uncertainty. But it is a healthy uncertainty, just as the growing rate of divorce may, after all, be a healthy rather than a decadent index. To admit failure, after all, may be an indication that you have a firm idea of what really constitutes success. And Adam probably never had as complete a vision of Eden as when he lost it.

If, at any rate, the survival of the family is one of the crucial problems of our cultural moment, it is at least reassuring that our best films understand that it *is* a problem, and that marriages, far from being made in heaven, are made by living men and women on earth, with all the fallibility that is our birthright and our potential triumph.

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