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THE LAUCKS FOUNDATION

from time to time calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification or understanding of issues affecting world peace. The accompanying reprints constitute Reprint Mailing No. 66.

(Mrs.) Eulah C. Laucks, President
Post Office Box 5012
Santa Barbara, CA.93150-5012

November 19, 1984

The following is quoted from a statement made by the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia to Phillippe Pons in an interview entitled "The Bomb Renders Absurd Everything That Was Once Fundamental'! The Manchester Guardian Weekly, *August 26, 1984, p. 12:*

"The existence of atomic weapons has gradually changed our notion of the world. The bomb means the death of the human species. It is such an apocalyptic concept that it has drained the great political conflicts of their substance; ideological motivations are becoming weaker and weaker. The bomb renders absurd everything that once might have been perceived as fundamental, such as revolution, the defence of existing values, and so on. That is the essence of the bomb culture we live in."

The following is quoted from "Letter to a Russian" by George Kennan. The New Yorker, *Sept.24, 1984, p.66:*

"...The relations between peoples, as distinct from the relations between governments, are too important in this modern world to be entrusted extensively to the good graces of governmental organs whose prescribed duties and concerns relate only to dividing peoples, to keeping them remote from one another, rather than to promoting their understanding and intimacy. These elaborate precautions are taken, obviously, with a view to the dangers that could conceivably be brought to national security if a greater liberality were permitted to prevail. To a certain point, again, this is understandable. But in today's shrinking world there are dangers beyond the purely nationally conceived ones—dangers greater, actually, than any mere national ones could ever be. These dangers can be met only by tolerance, by understanding, by recognition that the day has come when no one's defeat can be anyone else's victory."

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Ethics and strategy in the '80s

Nuclear deterrence is itself vulnerable

JOHN C. BENNETT

IN THIS ARTICLE I am concerned only about deterrence through the possession of nuclear weapons and the implicit or explicit threat to use them to prevent their use by another nation. The use of power as a deterrent in many contexts is justifiable. Deterrence is an essential element in the best legal systems of criminal justice at all levels from the prevention of murder to the inducement of people to pay taxes on time. Those who are not absolute pacifists accept the possession of conventional weapons as a deterrent to aggression. Today many of those most opposed to the use of nuclear weapons advocate an increase of conventional capability in Western Europe to provide an alternative to the use of nuclear weapons.

I do not believe that by some great change of policy we can leap out of the present structure of deterrence, but there are reasons for believing that confidence in nuclear deterrence will erode and that this may create the surest incentive for the radical reduction of nuclear armaments. One element in this erosion is the growing number of people, both in the churches and outside, who have come to the conviction that the use of nuclear weapons even in a second strike, after one's own nation or its forces have been attacked with nuclear weapons, can never be justified. That moral and religious judgment is important in itself in changing minds; in addition, there is evidence that such use of nuclear weapons in accordance with the logic of deterrence would be self-defeating as well as immoral.

My own thinking on this issue has changed greatly since World War II. In 1950 I was a member of a commission of the churches created by the Federal Council of Churches, a predecessor of the National Council of Churches, to advise the churches concerning the moral issues involved in the use of "weapons of mass destruction." The decision to produce a hydrogen bomb caused the appointment of this commission. Its chairperson was Angus Dun, the Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C. Other commission members were Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Robert Calhoun, Georgia Harkness, and George Thomas. In its report the commission had much to say about the theological and moral issues raised by the existence of nuclear weapons and about the responsibility to prevent nuclear war. *Its report was one of the earliest corporate statements within the churches that gave full support to the strategy of nuclear deterrence.* I remember well the debate on whether the commission should oppose "first use" of nuclear weapons under all circumstances. We voted by an 8 to 2 margin to refuse to oppose "first use." I voted with the majority.

We believed in 1950 that the chief danger of war was that the Soviet Union might invade Western Europe using conventional weapons, and we thought that the surest way of preventing such an invasion and a war in which nuclear weapons would almost certainly be used at some stage was to preserve the option of first use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. Those of us who voted for that position believed that it was the surest way in practice to vote against the use of nuclear weapons. This argument is still being used by those responsible for the strategy of NATO.

New perspectives

Today the rejection of the first use of nuclear weapons is coming to be one point at which, both within and outside the churches, many people are beginning to move away from accepted assumptions about nuclear deterrence. Today I would vote against the policy of "first use." Why this change of attitude? There are at least three reasons.

1. In 1950 there was the one great fear of the invasion of Western Europe. Today there is little such fear. The Soviet Union has trouble enough controlling Eastern Europe and is bogged down in Afghanistan. Also, the Russians have usually been cautious, and their internal political and economic problems are immense. The fear today is that confrontation between the two superpowers

JOHN C. BENNETT, Senior Contributing Editor, has been closely associated with C&C since its inception. This article is a portion of a chapter on "Christian Realism and Nuclear Deterrence" that will appear in a book now in preparation under the editorship of Bernard Adeney.

might occur in another part of the world, perhaps in the Middle East, and that either power might be the first to use nuclear weapons if threatened by defeat. Can we say that our own country would be less likely than the Soviet Union to take that course? The prospect of the first use of nuclear weapons at one of many stages of conflict in any one of many places where military actions are less closely monitored than in Europe has made it less credible that the option of first use would be likely to prevent nuclear war. It might well provoke the use of nuclear weapons by the other side.

2. In 1950 there had been little discussion concerning the chances of keeping a nuclear war limited, once it has started. Now, after years of reflection and debate, there remains little confidence that any planned limitations would be realized, whether in targets, weapons used, or the geographical areas affected.

3. Also, in 1950 we had no knowledge of the probable long-term effects of many nuclear explosions on the earthly or atmospheric environment and on the support systems of most or all of humanity. Today we realize that the very existence of the human race would be at risk. More of this later.

If we put together those last two changes since 1950, it seems clear that it would be utterly irresponsible for any nation to initiate a nuclear war or the nuclear stage of a war. No conceivable issue at stake could justify the risking of human existence or the continuities of civilized life on which the values depend for which people might think that they were fighting. The Roman Catholic bishops spoke for many of us when they said: "The danger of escalation is so great that it would be morally unjustifiable to initiate nuclear war in any form."

The deepest question here concerns what should be done if deterrence should fail, for the logic of deterrence requires a retaliatory strike against the other side. Only in recent years has that question been clearly and frankly faced in the churches. Absolute pacifists had a clear answer, but most of us were afraid that if we were to say publicly what we were beginning to say to ourselves, we might undercut whatever protection deterrence provided against war. When I wrote two articles in this journal before 1982 stating that I did not believe a retaliatory strike could be justified, I almost apologized for saying so. Until quite recently the general tendency was to assure oneself that deterrence would work.

Now some willingness has developed among people in power to reject the idea of retaliatory strikes against populations, and this has given rise to the emphasis on limited, counterforce nuclear war. President Carter published the famous Directive 59, according to which the targets for a retaliatory strike would be the other side's nuclear installations and military targets together with industrial and transportation centers that support military action. Judge William P. Clark, President Reagan's former security adviser, made this intention clear in a letter to the Roman Catholic bishops while they were preparing their pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response." He said that "it was not the policy of our government to target the Soviet population as such."

In the recent past we were told about plans for a nuclear war that would be kept limited. But almost as soon as strategy came to appropriate this objective, there came to be very widespread skepticism about the possibility of realizing it. And yet it was this idea of a war with limited targets that has enabled many people with responsibility for decisions about war or peace to live with their consciences. It has provided an escape for most of us from having to face with full realism the moral issues that would be raised once nuclear weapons are used.

Facing reality

The pastoral letter has made it impossible for the churches and many outside to evade these issues any longer. The bishops are the first prestigious group with great visibility and a vast constituency that has gone against the stream and has kept asking the necessary hard questions. In answer to the claim that the United States does not target the Soviet civilian populations, they say that the statement of this intention "does not address or resolve another very troublesome problem, namely that an attack on military targets could involve 'indirect' (i.e., unintended) but massive civilian casualties." They say that they are informed that already there are 60 such targets in Moscow and that there are 40,000 of them in the Soviet Union as a whole. The bishops go on to say the following:

> In our consultations, administration officials readily admitted that while they hoped that any nuclear exchange could be kept limited, they were prepared to retaliate in a massive way if necessary. They also agreed that once any substantial numbers of weapons are used, the civilian casualty levels would quickly become truly catastrophic and that even with attacks limited to military targets the number of deaths in a substantial exchange would be almost indistinguishable from what might occur if civilian centers had been directly struck.

The bishops' argument is on two levels, one having to do with the immediate side effects of attacks on many scattered military targets, and the other having to do with the likelihood that the war would escalate beyond all intention. This is how the bishops clinch their argument against the use of nuclear weapons. Their argument is fully convincing to me.

In December 1983, a few months before "The Challenge of Peace" was published, the American Academy of Religion came to the same conclusion about the use of

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nuclear weapons, for similar reasons. This organization with several thousand members is a federation of many learned societies in the field of religion and includes members of theological faculties and teachers of religious studies in colleges and universities. It is not an advocacy organization that is inclined to take positions on public issues. At its annual meeting it said that the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances "is contrary to the faith and fundamental moral values of the religious traditions of humankind....Together let us speak out now, lest our silence once again make us accomplices to holocaust, this one threatening the very existence of humankind."

All that I have said so far is background for the judgment that the pattern of nuclear deterrence as the most trusted safeguard against nuclear war has itself become vulnerable since 1950. Not only is nuclear deterrence morally vulnerable in the narrow context of the rightness or wrongness of ever using nuclear weapons against another nation, but also in the broader context of the historically self-defeating nature of any strategy that initiates or causes the escalation of nuclear war. Let me offer several considerations on which that judgment is based.

1. The pattern of deterrence fuels the arms race unless it is combined with a resolute determination shared by both superpowers to achieve arms control on the way to a radical reduction of nuclear armaments. Both Pope John Paul II and the American Catholic bishops have quite rightly conditioned their support of the possession of nuclear weapons, with its deterrent implications, on its being an interim policy accompanied by an intent to work toward radical disarmament.

There is reason to believe that the Reagan administration did not believe in arms control in its first two years. It was intent only on our own buildup of nuclear armaments. It was forced to offer proposals and at least to appear to make concessions by the pressure of public opinion in Western Europe and by the peace movement in this country, which had the nuclear freeze as its immediate objective. The administration held the view that if it built up our own armaments and deployed intermediate range missiles in Europe the Russians would become more pliable, but this has proved to be mistaken. Reagan can change his rhetoric without notice, but I believe that he has one settled conviction: Our own increased strength can prevent nuclear war whether we have arms control or not. This is an expression of his habit of viewing all his policies optimistically.

Those who make our policy seem to have no understanding that some forms of our military strength may be provocative. Unless there is a cap on the arms race and a movement to reduce nuclear armaments, new weapons systems are seen by the other side as giving us a first-strike capability. That is true of the MX and also of the Pershing and cruise missiles. William Colby, the former director of the CIA, writes: "The increased accuracy of the MX, and the destructive power of its 10 warheads, moves the United States to a 'first strike' capability. While we know that we would not launch such a strike, the Soviets would no doubt react to our development of that capability by accelerating their own development of an equivalent power" (*Los Angeles Times*, May 14). This illustrates the precariousness of Reagan's optimistic view that our own strength by itself can prevent nuclear war.

2. I have already referred to the difficulty for deterrence in a very unpredictable global situation in which the nuclear stage of a war might be begun by either side involved in a conventional conflict when it becomes afraid of losing. This unpredictability will be increased as more nations acquire nuclear weapons. I remember the great concern many years ago that with several more nations possessing nuclear weapons no nation if attacked would be entirely sure of the attacker. This would undercut the pattern of deterrence. Even nations with only a few bombs that could be used for a catalytic effect, or for terrorist purposes, would create this difficulty.

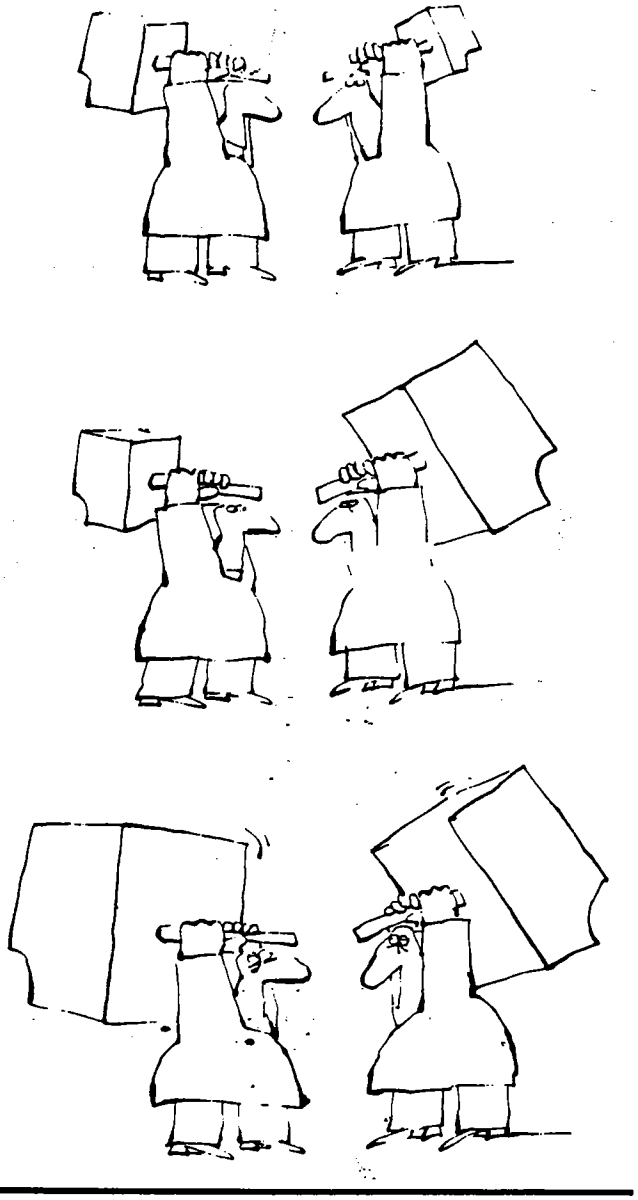
Deterrence as target

3. During the early years of the nuclear age there was a widespread assumption that the surest deterrence would come from the threat of massive attacks on the enemy's cities. The holding of each other's populations hostage, mutually assured destruction (MAD), had the advantage that it seemed to make nuclear war less likely than alternative strategies. So long as each side remained confident that its capacity for retaliatory strikes was invulnerable there was the sense that this pattern was "stable," and that it provided real security against nuclear war. That was the period in which there was little interest in the threat of nuclear war.

In the past few years this confidence and sense of stability have been shattered. Both sides began to fear that their capacity for retaliatory strikes might be destroyed by more precise and more powerful weapons in a "first strike" by the other side. (When I speak of "first use" I refer to the initiation of the nuclear stage of a war that begins as a conventional war. "First strike" refers to the initiation of a nuclear war by a massive nuclear strike against the other side.) So there came to be a conception of nuclear war as consisting of strikes aimed at the nuclear capacity of the other side. This was accompanied by a growing realization that strikes aimed directly and deliberately against cities were morally intolerable and the emphasis on counterforce strategies was thought to give decision makers a more moral alternative to the destruction of populations. I can remember when our leaders could speak with moral complacency about "taking out cities" or about rendering the Soviet Union "nonviable" as a nation, by the use of bloodless words.

President Carter, in announcing his Directive 59, expressed this need to have an alternative to countercity warfare. Speaking for the Reagan administration, Judge Clark expressed this in the letter I have quoted. This admission that populations should not be the targets, an enormous change from the assumptions of earlier decades, was the beginning of a process of moral thinking that has led to the conviction, by way of the arguments so well expressed by the bishops, that nuclear weapons should never be used. The development that I have described in this paragraph is the unraveling of one pattern of deterrence that gave us a long period of complacency about a stable balance of forces that seemed to promise the prevention of nuclear war.

I can date my own greatly increased concern about nuclear war to 1979 when I read an article by Leon Sigal in *Foreign Affairs* (Spring, 1979). Sigal wrote that while until then it had been assumed that we possessed nuclear weapons only to prevent their use, there was at that time a minority in the Pentagon that was thinking in terms of fighting a nuclear war. The influence of that minority soon grew, and a few years later Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger began to talk about fighting a *protracted* nuclear war and *prevailing*. This idea reflects the loss of confidence in a stable system of deterrence that would almost surely keep the weapons from being used, and it also reflects the new emphasis on a limited nuclear war. How would it be possible to fight a protracted nuclear war unless at each stage it was limited, and if it was not limited, what would there be left to prevail over?



Measuring what is at stake

4. I think that my final consideration is the most important. It depends on the rather recent realization that nuclear war would not only kill many scores or hundreds of millions of contemporaries and increase the degree of destruction of the contemporary institutions of civilization that we have known in previous wars, but it would also seriously damage the earthly and atmospheric environment of most or all of humanity, the support systems of this and even future generations. This is the essential dividing line between past wars and nuclear wars. Think of the amazing comeback of the very nations that suffered the most severe damage in World War II, which seemed to have few limits in the destruction of centers of population, and contrast that with the most optimistic expectation of the effects of a nuclear war.

All of this has been much discussed in recent years. Jonathan Schell's *Fate of the Earth* brought this dimension of nuclear war to the attention of a very large public. He has sometimes been dismissed by critics because of what can be regarded as utopian prescriptions (from which he has to some extent backed away in later writings), but these do not reduce the significance of his diagnosis. Also, he has been dismissed as not having scientific authority though he has been given strong support by many scientists. Jerome Wiesner, former president of M.I.T. and a leading statesman of science, has said that Schell had for the first time brought together as a coherent whole the results of nuclear war.

Schell has received powerful independent scientific support, and I refer to two sources in particular. One is a series of studies by experts in several countries, including the U.S. and the USSR, published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Scientists in *Aftermath—The Human and Ecological Consequences of Nuclear War* (Pantheon Books, 1983, with an introduction by Alva Myrdal). More recently there has been the study reported by Prof. Carl Sagan, which predicts that a nuclear war would change the climate so radically that human life would be destroyed in most of the world. Most agriculture would be destroyed in the northern hemisphere, perhaps in the whole world.

A number of scientists engaged in the study, which has been summarized by Dr. Sagan in "Nuclear War and Climatic Catastrophe," which appeared in *Foreign Affairs* (Winter, 1983-4). It is significant that a journal read by members of many establishments published this 35-page article which can be readily understood by anyone.

If it is suggested that the results of this catastrophe may be exaggerated and that no one can really predict what would happen, it seems to me that policies need to be guided by degrees of risk related to degrees of probability. When political decision makers and military strategists take seriously these indirect and delayed results of nuclear war and stop calculating only concerning how many immediate casualties would threaten the survival of a nation and its way of life, there is at least hope that they may come to realize that it is essential to abandon their trust in nuclear weapons even as a deterrent.

We can be more specific about the effect of these revelations on the pattern of deterrence. Not only in general terms would the use of nuclear weapons defeat every purpose for which they might be used, but our own bombs dropped on targets in another nation would damage our own atmosphere, our own support systems. The explosions of our own bombs would add to whatever destruction we might receive from the other side, and this would be true regardless of the targets at which we might aim. Here we can see a converging of the moral pressures on conscience and the warnings of the completely self-defeating nature of a way of thinking and planning.

These may be seen theologically as the converging of God's persuasion and God's judgment. This convergence of religious and moral persuasion and the pressure of the realities that are more and more being revealed about the long-term consequences of nuclear war for most, or all, of humanity is our chief source of hope that we may be delivered from this most terrible threat.

Reversal of attitudes and policies among nations, however, usually takes more than moral persuasion. Vivid perceptions of the self-defeating nature of the direction of policy and of action is almost always necessary to turn nations around. Usually it takes actual experience of such consequences, but in the case of nuclear war we cannot go by trial and error. Moral persuasion is an essential part of the process of change, and already there are signs that it has changed many minds. The warning of judgment becomes part of the process of persuasion, but it is not to be separated from the religious and moral factors in that process. It often takes such a confrontation with reality to cause people to stop and take a fresh view of their situation so that they become open to receive guidance from the truth implicit in their religious faith and to hear the voice of their own conscience. □

Afterword: Choosing a political course

I want to supplement what I have written so far with some suggestions as to how it may be related to political possibilities in the United States. Political leaders will not often say what I have said. If they did, they would probably be accused of being "soft on defense" or of advocating unilateral disarmament. I have not advocated unilateral disarmament, though unilateral steps toward disarmament should at times be taken. I do not expect an immediate abandonment of the stance of nuclear deterrence, but there are positions that can be expected to gain considerable political support that would give promise of reducing the danger of the use of nuclear weapons. In what follows I apologize for the apparent dogmatism that brevity requires, and I hope that the reader will not assume that the validity of the article depends upon that of all the points in this supplement.

Already some political leaders emphasize the overkill capacity of both sides and oppose increases in the defense budget and favor the scrapping of plans to build the more provocative weapons systems, such as the MX. Many members of Congress and the Democratic party platform are committed to the nuclear freeze. There is much pressure on the president to take a more positive or adventurous approach to arms control and disarmament.

One immediate political objective should be to seek the retirement from government of those who have been talking of fighting a nuclear war and prevailing, and who have played down both the immediate and the indirect and long-term consequences of nuclear war.

Another immediate objective would be to establish the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. This has been advocated not only by religious leaders but by elder statesmen with much experience in matters of national security. A famous article in *Foreign Affairs* (Spring, 1982) by McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, George Kennan, and Gerard Smith calls for a policy of no first use. This position can be a rallying point for many people both inside and outside the churches. The fact that the Russians have proposed it should lead our side to explore all possibilities of responding to them.

Our government currently insists on preparation to fight a war, a nuclear war, anywhere in the world. We need to take seriously the idea that it would require much less military strength to deter a war than to fight one. If this idea were taken seriously, it should remove obstacles to agreements on reduction of armaments. The word "minimalist," which Alan Geyer uses in regard to the power to deter, describes well the people who can often be the best allies of those who feel the force of my argu-

ment about deterrence. It isn't their role to say in advance what they would never do but rather to find the next best political move to reduce the danger of nuclear war.

One landmark idea, though not a preferred goal, is that if a nuclear war should begin by accident or because of a failure of policy, it should be brought to an end immediately, and plans for this should be made in advance. Leon Wieseltier in his influential book *Nuclear War, Nuclear Peace* says that "postdeterrence planning should involve the manufacture of mutually agreed upon mechanisms for bringing a wicked war quickly to an end." In this context it would be essential to drop the idea that enemy command posts should be targets for destruction, for negotiating with them would be necessary if a war is to be stopped. This is a grim and not very hopeful idea, but it is a necessary one for those who recognize that deterrence may fail, and it is a welcome alternative to the folly of the war-fighting school.

Studying the 'enemy'

There can be little hope as we look years ahead to be delivered from the present trap of unreliable and morally offensive nuclear deterrence unless we find our way to new relations with the Soviet Union. Considerable political pressure for this has built up in the United States and even more in Western Europe. The obstacles to mutual understanding are enormous because of different histories and differences in priorities among values that are hardened ideologically. Criticism of particular Soviet acts and policies is in order but not in the context of generalized contempt and not in a tone of self-righteousness. The coresponsibility of both countries today for the security of the world transcends all the differences between them. Cannot our negotiations for arms reduction come to be seen not only as a struggle between us for mutual security but also as a cooperative effort to deliver humanity from the nuclear threat?

I suggest that three changes in our attitude toward the Soviet Union would be in accord with the facts and make possible more normal relations between the two nations.

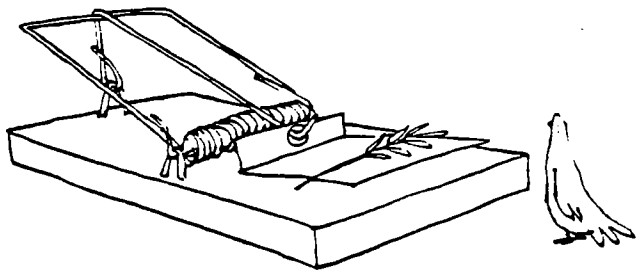
1. We should take more seiously than we do the fact that the Russians are as afraid of us as we are of them, probably more so. It is often said that they are paranoiac, but there are reasons for this fear for which we are partly responsible: the presence of American troops in Siberia in 1919, as the Russians interpret it: the known intention of our present administration, until allies caused us to back away from it, to use economic pressures to force a change in the Soviet Union. Two generations of hostility, with President Reagan's rhetoric the most vitriolic expresion of that hostility, have kept Russian fear of our intentions alive.

2. It is important to realize the degree to which revolutionary dynamism has eroded in the Soviet Union. Ideological rigidities remain, but the impulses and the reasons for wanting to conquer the world for the sake of the communist revolution have largely evaporated. Today Russians are concerned to keep what they have, and it is not always easy; and they want to be accepted as equal to the United States as a superpower. This creates conflicts, but it ceases to be the toal threat of world domination in which our present leaders believe.

3. We should catch up with the fact that the Russians no longer believe in the possibility of victory in a nuclear war. Both their political and military leaders assume that a nuclear war would not remain limited, and they believe that it would be an unprecendented disaster for both sides and for all humanity. This is documented in a study by David Holloway: *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* (Yale University Press, 1983). Robert McNamara summarizes Soviet thought on this subject: "All Soviet writers and political leaders addressing this question now solemnly delcare that 'there will be no victors in nuclear war'" (*Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983).

Changes in our thinking and feeling in these three respects might make a contribution to a change in atmosphere so that neither nation would fear that only its nuclear deterrent keeps the other from being tempted to destroy it. We have assumed for so long that one of the nations had an incentive to destroy the other, but why should this be so except for fear that the other might strike first? If the Soviet Union were still interested in communism worldwide, it would know that communism could not grow in radioactive wastelands. If it does not have that concern, it would not have the incentive to seek world domination that we have ascribed to it. In the case of both nations, there would be inhibitions against such actions from conscience or from ordinary human feelings, and if that claim may seem too idealistic to some readers, such inhibitions would be supported by the understanding to which I have referred that explosion of one's own bombs dropped on the other nations would have a disastrous effect on one's own environment.

J.C.B.



NEW OPTIONS

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July 28, 1984 | Mark Satin, Editor | Issue No. Seven

On July 12 Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate. The very next day he took her out to Elmore MN, his old home town, and introduced her to the crowd as follows:

"If Gerry and John [Zaccaro, her husband] lived in Elmore, you'd love 'em. They're just like we are, with the same values, the same hopes, the same belief in family, the same deep faith, the same appreciation of hard work that we learned right here."

With that, Mondale struck a note he and his supporters would repeat again and again. At the Democratic convention, New York Governor Mario Cuomo gave his "family of America" speech. And Ferraro herself said, "I grew up among working people, straightforward solid Americans trying to make ends meet, trying to bring up their families and leave their country a little better off than when they moved here and found it. Those are my values, too."

It is easy to ridicule these "views" as representing no more than a cynical attempt to appeal to the Archie and Edith Bunker mentality. And yet, there's another side to Mondale's use of this rhetoric that is profoundly hopeful. For it represents the first surfacing, in the Democratic party at the national level, of the "new populism."

Mondale and Ferraro did not discuss the populist ideas that gave shape (and even depth) to their rhetoric. But recently, many people have been discussing "new populist" ideas—in books, in communities and on Capitol Hill. So much so, that it appears not one but three new populisms are simultaneously emerging: a populism of the left, a populism of the right, and what political activists Harry Boyte and Sara Evans call a "democratic or transformative populism." Increasingly, the political debates of the 1980s will be shaped by the developments within—and the conflicts among—these three populisms.

Some things old, some things new

Liberals routinely accuse conservatives of using the populist label for dishonest (i.e., conservative) ends—and vice versa.

"Liberals," says Republican Rep. Phil Gramm (TX), "use populist rhetoric to sell social programs." "Populism is so great a force today," says Democratic Rep. Lane Evans (IL), "that the New Right has moved to appropriate its mantle."

There is some truth to both charges. But most new populists cannot be typed so easily. And whatever their differences, the striking thing is how much—and how deeply much—left- and right-wing populists tend to agree.

- **Grassroots democracy.** According to right-wing publicist Richard Viguerie (*The Establishment vs. The People*, 1984), all populists "share a common faith in the people's ability to make their own decisions in their own way in their own time." According to Boyte and Evans—who are at the polar end of the (traditional) political spectrum from Viguerie—the "defining project" of populism is "the call for a return to power of ordinary people."
- **Basic American values.** Populist candidates speak convincingly of "basic American values," says Viguerie—"the family, honesty, the work ethic, neighbor helping neighbor, fair pay for a day's labor, and peace through strength." For Boyte and Evans too, populism involves the honoring of "democratic communal values . . . themes such as family, neighborhood, community, religion and the American heritage . . . self- help, dignity, empowerment, community responsibility. . . ."
- **Broad economic ownership.** Here's Democratic Rep. Byron Dorgan, a self-proclaimed populist from North Dakota: "You have political freedom in this country only so long as you have broad economic ownership—that is, the landscape dotted with family farms, the Main Streets dotted with independent businesses." Here's John McClaughry, a self-proclaimed populist from Vermont who's served as senior policy advisor in the Reagan White House: "The emerging populism seeks . . . a widespread distribution of private property ownership."
- **Human-scale institutions.** The early populist movement was a grassroots movement of farmers and small businessmen who believed that too much wealth and power had become concentrated in too few hands. Their goal was to distribute power fairly throughout the society. However, as one neopopulist writer recently put it, "They demanded government control over big business, innocently confident that regulation would restore competition instead of creating government-sponsored cartels." Today's new populists tend to be skeptical of all big institutions, with the federal government and the big corporations together at the top of the list.

Dorgan dramatically illustrates this point when he says, "[People] are not only distrustful of big government but of big institutions in general. They want somebody to articulate that. But a lot of politicians don't feel very comfortable attacking large powerful institutions." McClaughry makes the point vivid for a conservative audience when he says, "Big Government is far from the only villain. In many cases it has become a willing tool for powerful special interests, such as Big Business, Big Banks, Big Labor and Big Education."

- **Beyond the major-party mainstream.** According to Viguerie, *both* major parties "are too firmly grounded in the concerns of the well-to-do and the welfare state." He's organizing a new "conservative populist party" that would cut a path "between the Big Business Republicans and the welfare state Democrats." Left and liberal populists are not prepared to participate in any kind of third party effort. But they've also been distancing themselves from traditional corporatist and statist solutions—in part, through a vehicle in Congress called the Populist Caucus.

Populism from the left

Last year, Rep. Tom Harkin (D-IA) announced the formation of a Populist Caucus in the

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Liberal, conservative and "transformative" populists vie for our attention and support

The "new populism" enters the political arena

House of Representatives. Its 15 members are all moderate-to-liberal Democrats, i.e. all scored 70 or better on the Americans for Democratic Action's Congressional voting index for 1983.

Eleven of the Caucus members are from the Midwest, three from the South/Southwest, and one from the Pacific Northwest; not too different from what you might have seen in the 1890s! Most of them are in their 30's or 40's. Two of them—James Weaver (OR) and Berkley Bedell (IA) —were among the "Top 12" Congresspeople in NEW OPTIONS's 1983 decentralist/globally responsible voting index. On the other hand, three of them scored under 10!

The Populist Caucus says it wants to "set the agenda for debate on our nation's political and economic life for the next decade." However, at this point it's done little more than publish a definition of populism and a statement of principles. The definition sounds almost neoliberal (NEW OPTIONS #2), with an anti-big business twist:

"Populism does not mean Big Government or less government. It means a strong government that fights for the economic rights of all Americans, rather than a government which allows a small monied elite [to] dominate the country's economic and political processes. It means a government which creates an environment in which ordinary citizens are able to take care of themselves, not one on which citizens are directly dependent for support."

The "statement of principles" also appears to draw from neoliberalism. For example, it calls for protecting the citizen from "the excessive power of special interest groups." And it calls for a progressive flat tax. On the other hand, it calls for such conventionally liberal measures as increased control on corporate (but not labor) donations to political campaigns, and "reasonable" energy prices (postliberal economist Paul Hawken would *raise* energy prices—see page seven below).

Neither liberal nor neo-

The individual members of the Populist Caucus tend to be more feisty and cutting-edge than the Caucus's official documents.

"Populism is a departure from the liberals and the Reaganites," says Harkin, 44. "The Reaganites are creating a class society. The liberals talk about great truths while the farmers are going broke." What's the difference between populism and neoliberalism? "They're trying to fine tune—we hope to get at the root cause of the problem."

"I see [my] Congressional office as being a large community organizing effort," says West Virginia Rep. Bob Wise, 36. "And that's why I'm here." Back in West Virginia, he led a movement to force coal companies to pay higher taxes—but he's an ardent *supporter* of free enterprise. "I'd just as soon see the free market function [as have big government]," he says. "But populists are saying, all right, you want to talk about a free market, then you've got to have a real free market, and that means no big trusts. No control of energy sources by four or five extremely powerful corporations. No monopoly on telecommunications. . . ."

Rep. Albert Gore Jr. (TN), 36, says it's his populism that's led him to investigate questions like additives in food and the lack of competition in the drug industry. He also says it's his populism that's encouraged him to take non- or post-liberal approaches to these questions.

For example, most "left" consumer groups want the federal government to regulate the amount of salt in processed foods. But Gore favors product labelling. Providing complete information to the consumer, he says, is consistent with the populist belief that the people can make wise decisions. "[It represents] an alternative to laissez-faire government on the one hand and a suffocating manhandling of market forces on the other."

Populism from the right

There is no Republican equivalent of the Democrats' Populist Caucus. (Rep. Newt Gingrich's Conservative Opportunity Society is probably the closest thing; see NEW OPTIONS #3.) But conservatives are convinced they are the "real" populists. After all, they say, it was Ronald Reagan who re-introduced populist themes to the national political arena, campaigning in 1980 against "powerful Washington interests" and standing up for "majoritarian" positions on social issues.

According to conservatives like Richard Viguerie, Reagan sold out his populist, working-class constituency after 1980. "The Republican party ignores them almost totally, except for the rhetoric. . . . I've come to realize that the big business community has its hooks so solidly into the Republican party that I'm not sure you can really make the Republican party a vehicle that will be responsive to the populist people at the grass-roots level." Because of this "realization," this spring Viguerie and his right-wing political allies started laying the groundwork for a third party, tentatively called the "conservative populist party."

The agenda of Viguerie's party-to-be has more than a little in common with the agendas of some left-wing populists. It also has some seemingly unbridgeable differences (though John McClaughry, the former Reagan advisor, insists they are not necessarily unbridgeable).

For example, Viguerie supports a progressive flat tax; strong laws against drunk driving; basing Medicare and Medicaid on "proven need"; and reducing troops in Europe and the Far East by at least 50%. All these measures could be supported by populists from the left. At the same time, however, Viguerie supports slashing foreign aid by 50%; opposing "gay" (his quotes) rights legislation; and moving the United Nations out of the U.S.

But the conservative populist phenomenon is more complex than is suggested by the game of "here they're with us—there they're against us." There are some fascinating ambivalences, even schizophrenias, in Viguerie's book. For example, in one passage Viguerie sounds like Aldo Leopold: "We are here as stewards of the world. We do not have a right to use in a wasteful manner the things in God's world." But 26 pages later he's saying, "To [populists], resources are not limitations on the progress of humanity, because they believe that mankind makes its own resources."

See how they run

Whether or not the conservative populist party ever gets off the ground, many young conservatives are beginning to take these kinds of ideas and run for Congress with them.

For example, in Minnesota, Republican lawyer Patrick Trueman is running for Congress by calling for a school prayer amendment and a publicly accountable Federal Reserve Board. "We ought to return the House of Representatives to the concept of the people's House," he says.

Another Republican populist running for Congress is Galveston TX lawyer Jim Mahan. He was the leading spokesperson for a group struggling to keep legalized casino gambling off Galveston Island—a struggle that forced him to confront a powerful set of outside business interests.

"The [struggle] was basically populist," says Mahan. "We said, this is our town and we're not going to let a bunch of outsiders come in and speculate on our land and run our city into the ground. . . .

"These guys in big business, they don't care →

NEW OPTIONS

NEW OPTIONS is published every three weeks except the first week in July by New Options, Inc., 1346 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Ste. 924, Washington DC 20036, (202) 822-0929.

Please address all correspondence to P.O. Box 19324, Washington DC 20036.

Subscriptions: $29 a year in the U.S., $35 first-class and Canada, $41 elsewhere. Back issues $2 each.

Editor: Mark Satin

Manager, New Options Inc.: Elaine Zablocki

Typesetting: WordMerchants, (703) 237-0096

Printing: Newsletter Services, (202) 529-5700

In-House Critics: Anne Bartley, Claire Collins, Guy Gran, Denise Hamler, Arthur Levine, Michael Marien, Richard Perl, Pamela Plummer, Andrew Schmookler, Judith Schnidman

one hoot and holler on whether we have a balanced budget, so long as they can get something out of the government. I don't consider myself a country club Republican but a populist Republican. [I am] interested in the country, and not just the bottom line."

"Transformative" populism?

Harry Boyte is a political activist and writer (*The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*); Sara Evans is a women's history teacher at the University of Minnesota and author of the book *Personal Politics*. "Democratic or transformative populism" is their term for a populism that overlaps with—but is significantly different from—both of the approaches above.

Its focus is largely local and regional, not national. Talk to a "transformative" populist and he or she will tell you that any "genuine" populism has got to be rooted in the experiences of people in vital democratic communities.

The problem is that most communities today are not terribly vital, i.e. are not terribly democratic or participatory. Thus, a genuine populist movement would focus first of all on building up democratic and participatory institutions at the grassroots level.

You can't have democratic or participatory *institutions* (let alone "reconstituted and simultaneously democratized communities") without empowered and socially committed *people*. And according to Boyte and Evans, changing ("transforming") people and groups is what many of the best community organizing efforts today are all about.

In the 1960s, community organizing was basically defensive and reactive. You went into a community and taught people and groups how to defend their immediate self-interests. In the 1980s, groups like the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, San Francisco Organizing Project, and Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) are built "not only around defense of the community but also around a skillful renewal and democratization of communal relationships." These groups teach "a new self-respect, intellectual openness, public skills, mutual regard, and a greatly heightened sense of individual and collective possibility."

In San Antonio, COPS organizers use the term "metanoia"—transformation of being—to describe the "new cultural sense" their organization produces.

This "new cultural sense" has real-world consequences. Young people no longer move out of the Mexican part of San Antonio. Women have taken on precedent-shattering leadership roles. Church congregations have seen "a democratization of their internal life." One COPS activist told Boyte and Evans, "Over the years I've seen people who join [COPS] mellow. In the early years it was, 'Hey, I want my street fixed first.' Now people wait for communities that need it more."

According to Boyte and Evans, any new populism simply must take care to generate—and root itself in—this new sensibility.

Stumbling blocks

Whichever populism you prefer, if your politics is decentralist/globally responsible you're going to run up against three stumbling blocks.

- Traditional American values aren't nearly so oppressive as many non-conformist radicals, reared on Sinclair Lewis, tend to assume. (That's the point of 88-year-old Helen Hooven Santmyer's extraordinary novel, "*. . . And Ladies of the Club,*" Putnam, 1984.) Still, it's an awfully big jump from family, religion, the work ethic, etc., to some of the kinds of values we've expressed in this newsletter. "Global responsibility," for example. Or "feminism." Or even "nonviolence."

  Perhaps post-liberal populists should promote "constant learning" as one of the basic American values. (Donald Michael, author of *On Learning to Plan—and Planning to Learn*, has been trying to do just this for years).

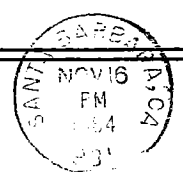
- "Economic growth" is surely one of the basic American values. But we may have reached a point where growth, as an end in itself, is *destructive* of community, and of many other basic traditional values. It's a good time for post-liberals to inject a critique of growth into the populist movement. (A fascinating first attempt to do just this is John Buell's article, "The Poverty of Growth," in the current issue of *The Progressive*.)

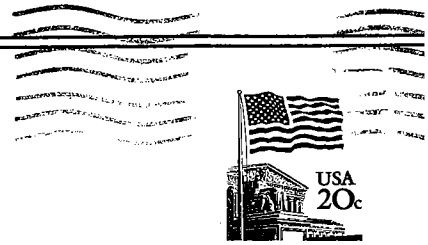
- Populists refer again and again to "the people," or to "ordinary people." But they have a very narrow conception of who "the people" are.

  Boyte and Evans speak of the "impossibility of generating any truly broad-based movement out of [a] middle-class political and cultural stance." But isn't this a largely middle-class country? Left populists speak of "the people" as if they consisted mostly of the locked-out. And Viguerie presents us with a radically different laundry-list of "the people," as follows: "sagebrush rebels, outdoor sportsmen, anti-crime groups, religious conservatives, gold bugs, gun owners. . . ."

  In the 1890's, the populists—largely farmers—really *were* a majority movement. Before today's populists can make that claim, they are going to have to figure out how to appeal to the comfortable-to-affluent middle class majority.

Populist Caucus c/o Rep. Tom Harkin, 2411 Rayburn H.O.B., Washington DC 20515; Populist Conservative Tax Coalition c/o The Viguerie Co., 7777 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church VA 22043; Harry Boyte and Sara Evans, "Cultural Radicalism, Populism, and Democratic Culture," Socialist Review *(May-August 1984), 3202 Adeline St., Berkeley CA 94703, $5/issue.*





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SEATTLE, WA. 98105