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THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE
(U.S. - Soviet Relations From My Point of View)

If the events of the past twelve months in the Soviet Union were unthinkable only a few years ago, there was an even more unthinkable alternative out there called thermonuclear warfare, the threat of which we have been living with for more than 30 years. Now, praise be, that prospect appears to be diminishing with every passing day. Granted, there remains the serious threat of accidental nuclear launches and the problem of third world proliferation, but the possibility of a major power nuclear exchange now appears remote.

The central fact of the now concluded cold war is that communism has lost its ideological basis and is now powerless as a driving force against democracy and international capitalism. Its failure in the Soviet Union robs the Marxist theory of any claim to validity elsewhere in the world.

This is a momentous event in the history of the world.

In Europe, we now have the former communist states applying for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the mechanism created to defend against possible aggression by those very nations. And Boris Yeltsin has been quoted as saying that his Russian Republic may even join NATO!

We in the West can rightly say we won the cold war, but in truth the whole world is the winner. The avoidance of nuclear warfare is a victory for all mankind.

There remains the arduous task of dismantling tens of thousands of nuclear weapons world-wide and disposing of biological and chemical stockpiles capable of destroying the entire human race many times over. At the same time we must continue to provide an adequate national defense in an age uncertain at best.

In this connection, I saw a report two weeks ago that described the U.S. On-Site Inspection Agency as one of the few remaining "growth agencies" within our defense establishment. More on this later.

In winning the cold war we had many heroes and a few casualties along the way. Within the framework of debate begun immediately after World War II, we elected our political leaders and spent our resources in ways calculated to safeguard the American people from the hazards of communist and communist inspired aggression. Until Saddam Hussain there really were no non-communist military threats of consequence.

During this forty-five year period we spent more than half of our national budget for military and related national security purposes. In recent years this has been in the range of \$300 billion annually.

This long and costly struggle has taken place in the context

of a wide-ranging political debated concerning U.S.-Soviet relations, the issues of which were first laid out in a 1947 report entitled "The Source of Soviet Conduct," by George Kennan. Having just returned from his assignment as ambassador to the Soviet Union and with many years of experience as a career Foreign Service Officer, Kennan was widely regarded as our foremost expert on Soviet affairs. In this report Kennan described the ideological forces driving the Soviet policies and cautioned against any hope that the west could expect to deal peacefully with the Soviet Union. He recommended that the U.S. adopt a policy of "firm containment" and counterforce while seeking a long-term coexistence until the Soviet Union collapsed from the weight of internal problems. During this time, he said, American values will prove to the world the worth of our nation.

A new secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, took a stronger stance. American policy, he said, should be "to subvert and overthrow Communist power."

Kennan, in retirement from the Foreign Service, warned that the Dulles Doctrine was likely to end in failure and war.

The differences between these two positions have framed much of our policy debate in the years since. We have had extremists on both sides. We have had Doves and Hawks of varying stripes on every major issue throughout the cold war. More weapons or fewer? Larger weapons or less destructive? Loyalty oaths or freedom of conscience?

At times the political arena became quite heated. Kennan himself was vilified by extremists who viewed "containment" as "cowardly" and "communist coddling."

In most cases the Hawks have prevailed on policy issues but the execution of those policies has been marked by restraint and care not to present the enemy with a fatal confrontation.

As for our highest political leadership, we have to conclude that every president from Harry Truman to George Bush merits a gold star for keeping us out of a big one. In this respect, I commend to you a book by McGeorge Bundy published in 1988 entitled Danger and Survival ; Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years. This is a truly encyclopedic account of weapons development and includes a compelling chapter on "Lessons and Hopes."

1988 was too early to see the end in sight, but Bundy did point to a "special hope in Gorbachev's glasnost." (p.615)

Also, Bundy points out that the decision to do the intense research leading to the development of the atomic bomb was made by President Roosevelt in October of 1941, but of course he was not present when the first bombs were used in late 1945. So Truman became the first White House custodian of the nuclear trigger.

Incidentally, McGeorge Bundy was one of my professors at Harvard during the early fifties and I rate him the most

brilliant person I have known, present company excepted. He was certainly the brightest star in the Kennedy constellation, where he served as National Security Advisor to the President.

Bundy ranks the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 as our closest approach to the brink and believes our chances for peace improved with each decade thereafter.

Among all the presidents, it may be that Eisenhower did the very best in controlling events and shaping national policy for the cold war. He did not get too excited when the Russians demonstrated a ballistic capability before we did in 1957. He knew the Army had a Redstone rocket that could be made ballistic if we wanted to do that. He also had a knack for keeping our Defense posture and military activities in balance with world requirements. The deliberate, controlled build-up of American missile technology in the 1950's was in a way a tribute to Eisenhower's practical grasp of our military needs and capabilities. Although there were strong political debates over Eisenhower's alleged neglect of conventional military forces, his design for strategic forces was virtually unchanged by the Kennedy administration. (Eventual force levels were set at 1,000 minutemen, 656 Polaris submarine-launched missiles and some 500 bombers. When Eisenhower left office at the end of 1960 there was a stockpile of 18,000 warheads.)

None of the presidents seemed to have done anything to limit the numbers of nuclear weapons produced during the cold war. Indeed, after a frantic effort to build up a prudent stockpile of

nuclear weapons in the face of increasing Soviet hostility we went from zero on April 3, 1947 to 50 in mid 1948, 200 in the summer of 1949 and 400 by the end of 1950. Thereafter the weapons grew in both quantity and sophistication.

These numbers are startling in retrospect for many reasons, but mainly because so few individuals have had access to this type of information throughout the entire history of the nuclear weapons program. Beginning with Truman, a tight secrecy has prevailed with very few individuals being informed as to numbers. The president's closest advisors and the highest policy officials of both the State and Defense Departments have simply not been given this information.

The policy implications are enormous. In the mid 1950's, for example, I was told "off-the-record" that the U.S. could not use nuclear weapons to counter the Red Chinese Army intervention in North Korea because we only had two warheads in our stockpile. That we had 400 is a startling revelation!

We learned later from Eisenhower's diary that he deployed nuclear capable forces to Okinawa and got word to the Chinese that they would be used if necessary.

Incidentally, that zero number in 1947 was recorded in the first report of the civilian chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission to President Truman. When the military managers of the wartime program turned over their responsibilities to the new peacetime organization there were in fact no assembled weapons.

The war was over and now it was time to convert this genie to useful peacetime purposes. There were components, of course, which could readily be assembled into weapons. All of this of course remained a close secret for many years.

As the program progressed an extraordinary build up took place as the civilian Atomic Energy Commission built the bombs and warheads for the strategic bombers and growing numbers of strategic missile systems. As one Commission scientist put it later: "Without debate...we concluded that the principal job of the Commission was to provide atomic weapons and good atomic weapons and many atomic weapons." (p.203)

At the same time a parallel build-up of conventional non-nuclear forces took place and a conventional capability was developed and has persisted in all three military services. In effect we separated our nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities to an extent that we could use the latter without necessarily involving the former.

Needless to say, we reached strategic nuclear superiority over the Soviets in short order and soon there was a consensus at home and abroad that our was an overwhelming superiority. We did not have a monopoly of the type we had enjoyed until the mid-fifties but our superiority was always clear and well known.

During this period there was wide-ranging debate over the application of our superiority. Within the military each service sought its own appropriate mission and competed for larger shares of available resources. Both within the military and without the

doctrinal issues were addressed. Eventually there emerged an acceptance (if not consensus) of the idea that our nuclear weapons should serve first as a deterrent against a Soviet attack against the U.S. or its allies and secondly to insure our victory if deterrence failed. While the military build-up was taking place to counter the Communist threat of Soviet Russia there emerged a concern in the United States that our civilian population could be seriously endangered by the very nature of nuclear weapons. The more we learned about these weapons the more concerned we became.

In the summer of 1960 I penned the words "The specter of nuclear war haunts the world." I wrote this in the introductory section of a Congressional committee report as a play on the words of a more famous writer by the name of Karl Marx. While Marx in 1848 was talking about the impact of his philosophy "haunting the capitalist world like a specter," our committee was writing about the possible need for blast shelters and radiation protection for the American people.

One year earlier I had written in a report for another Congressional committee: "For the first time in history American communities have become a part of the main battlefield of a possible future war."

These two reports were entitled "Biological and Environmental Effects of Nuclear War" and "Civilian Defense Shelter Policy and Postattack Recovery Planning." Together they represented the bulk of my professional experience over an extended period of

time and constituted the official responses of two Congressional committees grappling with the unthinkable consequences of a possible nuclear war. An earlier report, prepared in 1956, was entitled "Civil Defense for National Survival."

During this particular period I remember experiencing a great deal of frustration, if not despair, because the grisly facts we were dealing with - all of it in public hearings - seemed to be largely ignored by the public and the highest levels of our government. We went through every scenario of nuclear war and found it almost impossible to envision a viable society in a post-attack world. Please, make deterrence work !

It was in this context that Herman Kahn coined the phrase "Thinking About the Unthinkable." His book entitled "On Thermonuclear War" is a masterpiece.

Years later I was very interested to learn that President Eisenhower had made up his mind as early as 1950 when he commanded NATO that containment and deterrence of Communist aggression was the only logical choice. During his presidency he relied on hawks to carry out his policies but he was careful to avoid a confrontation that would lead us into the abyss of nuclear war. Eisenhower, as it turned out was really a dove.

As we now turn our attention to the post-communist world, one might be tempted to say that the specter of disarmament haunts the Pentagon, but in truth it is clear that our military establishment still faces a difficult task. The treaties already

on the books and the arrangements now being negotiated would seem to indicate that the U.S. On-Site Inspection Agency will become a most prominent instrument of national security policy. The business of the day is now the destruction of weapons and not of societies.

I think we may safely say that the world is now free of the specter of communism.

Also, I believe history will judge that George Kennan was right, both in his understanding of the Soviet Union and his prescription for American Policy. In 1947 Kennan described the Soviet Union as "an amorphous mass of human beings" held together by the discipline of the Communist Party. He stated that "if disunity were ever to seize and paralyze the Party, the chaos and weakness of Russian society would be revealed in forms beyond description." "Soviet Russia," he said, "might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies." (Kennan, American Diplomacy 1900 - 1950)

Summary Quotation p.127

"It would be an exaggeration to say that American behavior unassisted and alone could exercise a power of life and death over the Communist movement and bring about the early fall of Soviet power in Russia. But the United States has it in its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to

observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power. For no mystical, Messianic movement - and particularly not that of the Kremlin - can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs.

"Thus the decision will really fall in large measure in this country itself. The issue of Soviet - American relations is in essence a test of the over-all worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.

"Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this." (p.127-128)