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Images of Nuclear War and Human Destruction: Psychological perspectives

Abstract

We live on images. Since the Second World War, a fundamental polarity has formed in our imagery – the extinction of the human species versus the creation of a human future. There have been variations on the negative image. One hears of "nuclear winter," of references to a final holocaust. The positive image has been strengthened by the images of the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and the gradual universalization of nuclear concern.

Governmental agencies in the West have attempted to allay the anxiety generated in this polarity by advancing its own images – images of nuclear normality, and nuclear winning. Its most recent effort at image managing is the SDI program. This development promises complete protection from outside nuclear attack.

Hope for the survival of the human species can be seen in two other images. The first is the image of nothingness, which can force the mind to rebel, and work to prevent the reality reflected in the image. The second is the image of the species self. We are all so interdependent that we have a shared self. With shared self comes the recognition of a shared fate. This image of the species self infuses us with a kind of inclusive human possibility, a commitment to humanity whose time has come.

We live on images. I am not speaking of the perversion of the world in relegating it to forms of self- or group-presentation ("improving my [our] image") – though we certainly live on that variety as well. Rather, I refer to collective mental pictures bound up with powerful psychological and historical forces, mental pictures that tend to construct much of what we

consider our reality. These primal historical images can be associated with specific events, or with social and technological developments, and inevitably with new threats and new possibilities.

In the very act of evaluating such imagery, we find ourselves immediately raising issues concerning lived history, or the penetration of the individual psyche (and of large numbers of individual psyches) by historical forces – the fundamental question of that much-maligned (not only by its critics, but in another way by some of its proponents), and yet very real discipline, we call psychohistory. When that piece of history concerns nuclear weapons, however, what penetrates the individual mind can be said to be cosmic in all meanings of that word. Such is very much the case when I suggest, as I shall in the first part of this essay, a series of new variations on the fundamental polarity we have been living with since the Second World War: imagery of extinction of the human species versus the creation of a human future. Nor do the dimensions diminish as I move along in this essay to such categories as the "new nuclear normality," the "new nuclear strategy of winning," the "Star Wars vision," "doubling and genocide," the "new nuclearism," "nothingness," and the "species/self." If politicians describe their messages as one of the "state of the State" or "state of the Nation [or Union]," then my message here is one of the "state of the cosmos."

Images

The first of these images – the most fundamental of all – is that of nuclear winter. Collectively sinking into people's minds is some image to encompass the idea that the use of relatively small numbers of nuclear devices by anyone is likely to bring about the annihilation of everyone. It is known, of course, that scientists differ as to how much megatonnage is necessary to create the nuclear winter effect, in which sufficient dirt and debris block the sun's rays and lower the temperature throughout the world to an extent that plant life, and therefore human life, can no longer be sustained.¹

With the image of nuclear winter taking hold, there are glimmerings – sometimes more than glimmerings – of an ethical shift as well: increasing recognition, at whatever level of awareness, that genocide has become self-genocide; murder on an absolute scale has become collective self-murder or suicide; and what we call "nuclear war" is no more and no less than species suicide, forms of which can be initiated from a variety of places and by a variety of groups on their own or in tandem with others.

The power and credibility of nuclear winter imagery does something else of great importance. It enhances broader dialogue among various factions concerned with nuclear weapons, those thought of as "hawks," as

"doves," or as somewhere (often obscurely) in between. The improved dialogue is made possible by newly shared truths – not to mention the equally shared "death chill" of those truths. These partial ethical advances are in keeping with the many paradoxes of nuclear threat. The grimmest of all messages contains powerful possibilities for expanded wisdom and hope.

A second new image takes us to the edge of psychopathology and evil in our society. I have in mind a certain ideological and organizational marriage from which we can hardly expect healthy offspring. It is the joining of a murderous and apocalyptic political fundamentalism with a specific nuclear form of equally apocalyptic fundamentalism via an ostensibly powerful and privileged survivor elite.

These groups are very much on the social fringe at the moment, but they are serious. They are strengthened by the most direct and pathological form of survivalist death denial.

A third and very different image and event: the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. The award, which reflects highly significant human hungers, was given not to individuals but to an organization that includes many thousands of us throughout the world – and was surely meant to be an invitation to still larger numbers of others, heretofore less active, to join in a quest for peace.

There is a problematic side to the award, which should in no way diminish our joy or pride but does demand our attention. I have in mind, of course, the uproar that followed in connection with the despicable letter, written some years before by Eugeny Chasov, head of the Soviet physicians group, denouncing Andrei Sakharov as anti-Soviet. Much of the protest against the Nobel Peace Prize on that basis was, of course, orchestrated by groups that do not wish the physicians' movement well. But friends of ours were also troubled, as we should be ourselves, for the issue of human rights is very real and will not go away. Neither the international nor the American movement, Physicians for Social Responsibility, is a human-rights organization as such. We cannot however carry forth our program on behalf of that ultimate human right – of individual and species survival – while being indifferent to the suppression of our fellow human beings, all the more so if our colleagues in peacemaking are involved in that suppression, or if some of those whose rights are being violated are also fellow physicians.

We require a politics of peacemaking, one that includes systematic prodding of our Soviet colleagues on this issue, even as we insist upon the absolute necessity to continue working with them for nuclear disarmament.

There is no easy path here, but this politics of peacemaking must include a psychological and political balance, a viable equilibrium between promoting an atmosphere of cooperation with Soviet colleagues on nuclear issues on the one hand and expressing continuously to them our concerns about human rights on the other. We also need to dissociate ourselves from any violations of human rights, wherever they occur. We simply cannot retreat into the role of bystanders, any more than we would accept proponents of human rights becoming bystanders on nuclear weapons issues.

In larger terms of shifting historical and psychological images, we should recognize the extraordinary importance of the Nobel Peace Prize. The committee gave us the prize because our message of nuclear disarmament and peacemaking is increasingly embraced by people and welcomed virtually everywhere. The human hungers reflected by the award, then, include hunger for truth about our nuclear predicament (the physicians' movement has been primarily educational), hunger for an end to nuclear terror, hunger for genuine rather than bogus security and for a clear path to a human future. The award signifies a shift in world consciousness which we seek to recognize and to further. It, then, is part of the collective revulsion toward these murderous devices and those who would use them, part of the collective rebellion of the human mind against an uncontested journey to doomsday.

A fourth new image is another hopeful one: the universalization of nuclear concern. While nuclear devices have always threatened everyone on the globe, this truth is still in the process of achieving full realization. But increasingly East-West nuclear issues have become North-South issues as well. And in this country there have been beginnings of alliances on nuclear-weapons questions with black and Hispanic Americans and with members of various new immigrant groups. The image of threat is earthwide.

To further action that reflects this universalization, anti-nuclear activities must in some way be combined with immediate survival problems in Third World countries. Much more work has to be done on the relationship between the levels of deprivation and violence and the conditions and policies that favour nuclear violence. The pursuit of that connection, moreover, is a step toward integrating what often seem to be contending moral claims.

A fifth, still newer, image has to do with the radical fallibility of the highest technology. I refer here to the space shuttle disaster of early 1986. Few Americans could avoid participation in the pain of that instantaneous transformation of seven highly visible heroes – represented particularly by an enthusiastic and appealing young woman school-teacher – into virtual nothingness. Nor did anyone mistake the fact that the technology (including the capacity of human beings to maintain it in absolutely reliable working order) had failed, and not the voyagers themselves. Nor was anybody

ignorant of the fact that it was space technology. There was the sudden shared national experience of the most sophisticated technology that is in various ways related to the use of, or claimed as defense against, nuclear weapons.²

The New Nuclear "Normality"

From the time of the appearance of nuclear weapons, contradictory claims, frightening truths, and feelings of opposition have all been muted by imposed definitions of normality. These definitions must be understood in the context of the kinds of images just mentioned, since they seek to tell us how to judge ourselves in relationship to such images. For instance, during the 1950s, Herman Kahn and others made judgments in this area that were as bellicose as they were loose, whether made directly or implicitly, that is, the reasonable normal man or woman was to join in a "rational" assessment of how to prepare for and win nuclear wars. Above all, one was to remain calm and sensible, unlike protesters already on the scene who tended to become "emotional" and "unreasonable."

The recent release of a 1956 document reveals the active role of professionals themselves, especially psychiatrists and other physicians, in imposing nuclear normality. William F. Vandercook, a historian of that period, tells of the formation of a special panel called into being in early 1956 by the National Security Council and the Federal Civil Defense Administration in order to evaluate the willingness of the American people "to support national policies which might involve the risk of nuclear warfare." The panel was charged with determining how a nation's civilian population was affected by a general awareness that an enemy "has the technological capability of annihilating such nation," or of the possibility that the two nations in question "could produce mutual annihilation" (Vandercook, 1986).

In their report, *Human Effects of Nuclear Weapons*, which they presented in November 1956, they declared their "firm belief" that it was "possible to prepare effective psychological defenses" for nuclear attack, so that "both the war effort and the National Government would be effectively supported." Moreover, such preparation would enable the populace to overcome their lack of "knowledge and real understanding of basic national security considerations," which causes them to "accept . . . wild exaggerations and misinterpretations." The panel recommended an extensive grass-roots discussion program in an atmosphere of "calm deliberation with less emphasis on the symbols and images of disaster that so often characterize the emergency approach to attention getting." It pointed out that stressing "awareness" of annihilation was harmful, because it leads to "attitudes and behavior of the majority . . . attuned to the avoidance of nuclear war, no matter what the cost" and tends to "weaken public support of policies that involved any substantial risk of nuclear war."

The report abandoned scientific for visionary language in declaring the proposed program's intent, by means of its grass-roots approach, "to draw inspiration from our forefathers and to point our children to the sources which make all American generations one and which raise hope for a new dynamics of the human race." By means of this "patriotic renewal and spiritual advance," nuclear disaster "might become the opportunity for resolute survivors" – so that we could "nerve ourselves to make the very best of the very worst." In actuality, once the words gave way to policy, there was little enthusiasm anywhere for such a grass-roots discussion program. As Vandercok points out, in commenting on the failure of the "human effects" panel's recommendations to be implemented, "It is perhaps impossible to finally convince people that the threat of annihilation is an 'opportunity' to 'make the very best of the very worst.' "

The extent to which professionals collude in nuclear normality also has to be noted. For in that collusion in projects of nuclear normality lies the attempt to control discourse and attitudes, at least in the nuclear weapons sphere. Behind the collusion also lie narrow and technicized notions of professionalism, which allow for an all-too-ready embrace of the role of agents of adaptation to **anything** – even arrangements for species annihilation. Psychology, psychiatry, social science, and medicine are most vulnerable to this kind of perversion because they tend to be given the power to define what is individually or socially **healthy** or ill. We can speak of a "medical-psychological-professional complex" called upon to impose a version of normality.

A major function of the physicians' movement and related groups has been an exposure of the false nature of that "nuclear normality." My related term is the "logic of madness." But, whatever the term, our insistent claim is that the abnormality lies in the conditions for total self-annihilation, and the healthy alternative in changing those conditions and diminishing or eliminating the threat. I believe we have succeeded in pressing the discourse in this direction, as evidenced by the increasing acceptance of these issues by professional societies as proper subjects for evaluation and discussion. More important, there is much evidence that the American people and others throughout the world increasingly – if often still inchoately – reject the preposterous claim that a world of genocidal devices poised for total self-annihilation is healthy and normal. But the moral and psychological struggle over nuclear normalcy is far from over.

A major second-round reassertion of nuclear normalcy can be found in the intellectually and morally scandalous Harvard study, *Living with Nuclear Weapons*. The Harvard group tells us that "living with nuclear weapons is our only hope" and "there is no greater test of the human spirit." Committing oneself to more drastic nuclear disarmament is to this group a "form of atomic escapism," which in turn is labeled "a dead end" (Carnesale

et al., 1983). They stand majestically above such "either-or" thinking; and while they acknowledge that nuclear war would be terrible, they go to some lengths to insist upon the right of imagining, under certain circumstances, a moral use of nuclear weapons, and upon the necessity of living with some "risk of nuclear war." The tone of the book is one of calm authority; its goal, to "inform the people"; its stance, that of a reasoned middle ground between "denying that nuclear dangers exist" and "finding refuge in simplistic, unexamined solutions."

We shall soon, unfortunately, arrive at a third wave of nuclear normalcy – the present wave associated with the Strategic Defense Initiative.

New Forms of Nuclear "Winning"

The large images I mentioned earlier – and, above all, the scientific findings of nuclear winter – impinge on traditional concepts of "winning," but not always in desirable or logical ways. One of the many reasons we need to get out of the habit of calling nuclear genocide war is that wars are associated with winning or losing. Now, however, no mind is fully free of the kind of imagery of extinction which makes clear that nobody wins a nuclear holocaust, that everybody loses, everybody dies. What results is a partial acknowledgement of this truth (statements from even nuclear hawks to the effect that "nobody can win a nuclear war"), and at the same time an aggressive resort to the far and dangerous reaches of compensatory fantasy. The principle of "winning" is embraced more fiercely, even as it becomes more removed, arcane, and bizarre. The fantasy continues to be fed by the fact that the very stockpiling of weapons inevitably contains war-fighting options, that is, plans for fighting and winning a "limited nuclear war."

Now the imagery of winning fluctuates strangely among three different levels. There is first the idea of winning the arms race in a sense of bankrupting the Soviet Union, reversion to talk of winning the actual "nuclear war," and the newest (also the oldest) arena, which we might call "winning the survival." Here the fantasy may take the most malignant form of all. There are fundamentalists who view "nuclear belligerence . . . simply as implementation of God's own design for creation" (Mojtabai, p. 164).

Dividing the world into a "locus of evil" and a parallel locus of good merely enhances the tendency of imagining a mode of survival – and not just acceptable survival, but an ultimately desirable form associated with a "new heaven and a new earth." Nuclear holocaust, then, becomes the agent of realizing the ultimate victory of evil. More than that, these imaginary survivors (in a way that is logical in the very extremity of its absurdity) win the ultimate victory by annihilating death itself.

Again, ironically, that misplaced ingenuity has to do with the power of the human impulse for survival. For we human beings are the creatures who must strive to maintain not only the continuity of life (on the order of the evolutionary function of other animals) but the **feeling of life, the sense of vitality, the experience of surviving.** So strong is that inclination that we will express it no matter what, sometimes in ways that could, if carried through, subvert the very possibility of actual survival. There is the increasing imagery of a new Adam and Eve, a surviving man and woman who can, after nuclear holocaust, succeed in repopulating the earth – in the process improving greatly on its prior human populace.

As nuclear winter takes hold in our psyches, images of winning are directed increasingly toward winning the survival. They move in the direction of a perversely mystical realm, indeed one of true nuclear escapism and worse. For they become the means by which nuclear threat combines with primal imagery of death and rebirth to form a **malignant myth of regeneration via nuclear holocaust** – that is, of regeneration where there is no life at all. Here, too, Star Wars is very much at issue; and I can no longer postpone looking psychologically at that odd set of arrangements.

Star Wars: The Culmination

Star Wars clearly constitutes the overarching, all-inclusive image fantasy of our nuclear age. At the heart of the Strategic Defense Initiative is a denial, indeed a magical reversal, of what is in actuality the central truth of the nuclear age: total, universal vulnerability. Our psychological understanding of Star Wars begins and ends with its aggressively elaborate scheme for refusing and circumventing precisely that simple but devastating truth.

In earlier work, I stressed a series of illusions specific to the nuclear age (for more detail, see *Indefensible Weapons*, Lifton & Falk, 1982): the illusion of limit and control (especially the claim of limited nuclear war); the illusion of foreknowledge (that knowing what to expect would help you); the illusion of preparation (the efficacy of evacuation plans and the like); the illusion of protection (the idea that shelters would save your life); the illusion of stoic behaviour under nuclear attack (Boy Scout-like dedication to helping others and avoiding undue [by Herman Kahn's criteria] "hypochondriasis" in relation to fear of radiation effects); the illusion of recovery (the unseen hand that would rebuild annihilated cities and towns); and the illusion of rationality (in scenarios of nuclear buildup and warfighting).

But just as these nuclear illusions were beginning to lose their hold on many (by all evidence, the majority, of Americans), along came Star Wars and replaced these separate deceptions with a single, encompassing

"grand illusion" – an all-consuming expression of collective fantasy. While the prior, separate illusions had touched on the unacceptable fundamental truth of universal vulnerability, the Star Wars "grand illusion" dissolves that truth more comprehensively.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the Star Wars "grand illusion" and the findings of nuclear winter. Nuclear winter provides a grim cosmic truth; Star Wars, a reassuring cosmic falsehood. One cannot say that Star Wars is a direct response to nuclear winter, but they are part of the same apocalyptic currents of threat – the one honorable in its truths, the other corrupt in its illusion.

Star Wars is the ultimate technological fallacy. The entire program is based upon technicism, upon an absolute embrace of technology for warding off an ultimate threat to human existence. A **technology of protection** is now to counter a **technology of destruction**, and human beings become virtual bystanders in this cosmic confrontation.

Technology is seen, to a new degree, as literally replacing human responsibility. In that sense, we may say that our very humanity is sacrificed on the altar of technology worship. Here one must distinguish between small kernels of truth in the Strategic Defense Initiative: its actual possibilities for destroying some missiles, for preventing a certain percentage of them from reaching their targets. It is the overall technological mission of total protection that is newly radical in both its illusion and its dehumanization.

More than that, Star Wars, under the guise of being a "nuclear shield," actually has the effect of a guarantee that the nuclear arms race will continue. Deployment of the system would create an **endless** psychological action-reaction sequence to that effect. Critics of prior versions had begun to expose the danger of such action-reaction sequences. And, in that sense, Star Wars is nothing short of a rescue operation for global nuclear terror.

It is also a **moral crusade** – in fact something of an ultimate moral crusade in its claim that it, and it alone, has the means of doing away with the nuclear demon. Recall President Reagan's speech introducing Star Wars: "The human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence." And a little later: "I call upon the scientific community who gave us nuclear weapons to turn their great talents to the cause of mankind and world peace; to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete."

By use of the rhetoric of moral crusade, and probably believing in his own rhetoric, the President "comforted a lot of people," commented E.P. Thompson, "and made them feel patriotic and altruistic about spending

billions more dollars on military ventures" (Thompson, 1985, p. 26). The Star Wars moral crusade inevitably draws upon the expanding international revulsion toward nuclear weapons. Proponents have suddenly discovered that it is "immoral" to threaten to destroy millions of people with these weapons, that they are indeed a "scourge."

It is common knowledge that early enthusiasm for Star Wars drew precisely upon such sentiments previously associated with the nuclear freeze movement. Have the arms race proponents been converted? Are they now with us in moral judgments? The answer to these questions is hardly affirmative, but not simply negative either. Rather, it is some of both. It is affirmative in the sense that they share with us some of the truths of nuclear winter and can, via Star Wars, permit themselves previously suppressed moral judgments about nuclear destructiveness. But the negative side to the answer lies in their uninterrupted commitment to nuclear weapons just the same. It is as if we in the peace movement have half-succeeded with them, in a way that is both dangerous and hopeful. The danger lies in extreme impulses to cover over those moments of insight about nuclear vulnerability with ever more energetic efforts on behalf of Star Wars (and therefore of the arms race). The hope lies in pressing the half-conversion into a fuller one – not in the sense of people changing completely, so much as of their opening themselves more fully to the truth of nuclear age vulnerability.

The claim of logic, sanity, and rationality of Star Wars is almost self-evident. What could be more "reasonable" than to render the nuclear scourge "impotent and obsolete"? Moreover, the very technicism of Star Wars gives its version of nuclear normalcy greater potential impact, in that one is invited, in effect, to sit back and relax in the comfort of the nuclear shield. In this new self-righteous claim to normalcy, the insanity lies in prior nuclear systems, and, after all, what is more sane and normal than to want to be shielded and protected?

The image of winning, though the opposite of the Star Wars claim, is nonetheless close to the surface. Clearly inferred is the idea that our superior Star Wars defensive shield will keep us strong, stronger than the enemy, better able to defend ourselves and to "prevail." The inference is strengthened by the first-strike imagery immediately associated with Star Wars. The defence, then, by a nuclear adversary becomes readily seen to be part of a first-strike plan – since one would be protected against retaliation – and therefore as an incentive for that adversary to mount its own nuclear strike prior to the other's planned first strike. For once one denies or suppresses the central truth of nuclear vulnerability, one sets in motion imagery of winning. And in this case the denial of vulnerability gives rise to a grandiose system that, as we shall see, has crucial nuclear components – to a new nuclear triumphalism. Now we will surely triumph economically in the superior Strategic Defense Initiative technology we are

capable of building, and will contribute to the "regeneration" of American values and people. Star Wars reasserts prior imagery of winning but goes further in invoking a more mystical tone of triumph.

This futuristic expression of ultimate technicism contains a deeply nostalgic dimension. The nostalgia, of course, is for a past sense of relative invulnerability – for a time of less extreme, one might say, softer technologies. Itself a child of the technology of annihilation, Star Wars expresses a longing for a time when technologies were not associated in our minds with that imagery of doomsday.

That nostalgia is fed by manipulation – by what nuclear strategists themselves refer to as "perception." Used in that way, perception can mean impressions that are contrary to actuality but cultivated by those making policy, because they consider such impressions to be desirable.

Great talent has gone into the call for Star Wars, but it is the talent of the populist ideologist, as E.P. Thompson characterizes Reagan, a man indeed attuned to the American viscera in resisting the truth that we too can, like everyone else, be completely annihilated. That kind of talent can be a formidable enemy of truth, precisely because of its psychological power to mobilize untruth – in others, of course, but also in oneself.

Ultimately, Star Wars is a cosmology – a matter for theologians as much as for psychologists or political theorists. As one studies diagrams and descriptions of its layers and manifestations "out there," as one follows the blips and beeps of the booster phase, the phase of mid-course interception, and the terminal defense phase, one gets the sense of nothing less than a theological nightmare. It is the kind of constellation one might imagine encountering in connection with the troubled sleep of a sensitive theologian worried about the fellow human beings straying from their Creator and becoming subject to new forms of idolatry. Idolatry is sometimes described as "the worship of a physical object, usually an artifact, as god." It can also be the worship of phantoms, images, things – of false gods, and includes the deification of forms or appearances that are "visible but without substance." Idolatry tends to include "immoderate attachment . . . or veneration . . . that approaches that toward the divine power" (American Heritage Dictionary; Oxford English Dictionary; V. Firm and Encyclopedia of Religion, 1945).

In the case of Star Wars, the new idolatry is of completely unprecedented dimensions in scope and consequences, and it emerges from a national call articulated by none other than the head of state. Given that endorsement, along with its pervasive wishfulness, no wonder that so many people can find Star Wars to be at some level persuasive, comforting, or even inspiring, whatever their nagging feelings that the whole thing may be a fraud.

In short, Star Wars is all things to all men and women. Surely nothing in national life is free of its potential influence – theological, psychological, military, political, social, economic, and educational. No wonder so many are tempted by its combination of money, career advantage, and idealism. Above all, Star Wars is notable for the extremity of its dualities. It stirs deep longings for peace and security even as it powerfully perpetuates the arms race and the most dangerous consequences of that race. It also represents two antagonistic sides of the mind. One such purpose, or survivor mission, I have heard described seems incontestable: Reagan's sense that he must restore American greatness and defeat the Soviet threat. But the other survivor mission I have heard described has to do with a man leaving the highest attainable office at an advanced age, so that his only remaining constituencies become God and history – and who wishes to achieve his peace with both as a man of peace, as one who helped stave off the dreaded nuclear event. My point is that it is possible to hold to both missions – the combination rather precisely consistent with the fundamental Star Wars contradiction. The capacity to tolerate that contradiction may well be increased by a kind of end-time backup. Should others fail to embrace one's Star Wars vision, should peace efforts meet with insurmountable difficulties – or should there be an escalation of Manichean judgments concerning Soviet evil and American virtue – should that dreaded event for any reason draw closer – well, that may simply be an expression of Providence, something preordained and perhaps even necessary.

The human mind has also the capacity to dispel illusion, to reject specifically the Star Wars "grand illusion," but there are impediments to that life-enhancing course.

Doubling and the New Nuclearism

How can specific individual strategists and policymakers continue the nuclear buildup in the face of their knowledge of nuclear winter truths and Star Wars falsehoods? There is no single answer, but my work with Nazi doctors has provided an important clue for understanding the psychological behaviour of people who have become associated with actual or potential mass killing. Doubling involves the formation of a relatively autonomous second self, which becomes involved in the killing activities or projections. I must immediately make clear that I am not equating nuclear strategists (or anyone else) with Nazi doctors; rather, I am applying a principle, a psychological mechanism, which, like any such mechanism, can occur in different people in a great variety of situations. We may thus speak of a "nuclear weapons self" as existing somewhat separately from the strategist's ordinary self, as being a part-self that functions as an entire or inclusive self, aiding one to adapt to the working world and subculture of nuclear strategists. It helps the strategist to avoid death anxiety, and above all, protects one from feelings of guilt – not by eliminating conscience, but

by what I call a "transfer of conscience" to one's nuclear weapons commitment.

The pattern is greatly promoted by group process – by what psychologist Irving Janis has called "groupthink," the shared, unexamined suppositions required by individuals if they are to remain functional and "credible" members of a group. Crucial to doubling is shared ideology, so that even in strategists who claim to be pragmatic, or who are technicians in their mind-set, there can be fundamental underlying imagery of pervasive Soviet evil and contrasting American good. Assumptions of male strength, or *macho*, can enter into this ideology. In my view, the key ideological element is the continuing attachment to the weapons themselves: the ideology of nuclearism, within which the weapons are depended upon and clung to for strength, protection, and threat, whatever the evidence that they do only the last, and that they themselves are the instruments of genocide.

Star Wars greatly magnifies this institutional nuclearism by its vast call for societal participation. By establishing a bureaucratic net in regard to nuclear weapons, Star Wars renders nuclearism a **societal phenomenon**. Hence the enormous impetus to the doubling process in strategists, to the formation of a **comprehensive nuclear weapons self**. That second self becomes widely "baptized," in the term used originally by Pierre Janet, in describing how a new self or element of self, when recognized and addressed, becomes a lasting entity. Star Wars also eases the transfer of conscience – the claim to idealism on the part of nuclear strategists – the focus on one's duty or moral requirement, to build both the weapons and the "defensive shield." Those ideological prods can of course be reinforced by lures of money, prestige, and influence, all of which contribute to the doubling process.

Policymakers and strategists epitomize attitudes and patterns rampant throughout society. Strategists in that sense, by means of the nuclear weapons self, do the "dirty work" of the larger group. But the process is by no means passive. Their doubling enables them to become not only the bearers of societal illusion but the active agents of ever-expanding falsification. By means of doubling, they internalize that illusion and falsification – that is, make it part of a functioning self.

Nothingness

Where, then, is the contemporary imagination to find the wisdom to abandon nuclearism and doubling, to reject visions of winning, and to transcend false definitions of nuclear normality? For me, the beginning answer lies in the confrontation of nothingness. Only by moving in that direction can the imagination begin to grasp the totality of nuclear devastation, the truth of nuclear winter. Hiroshima and Nagasaki again serve

us here, even though they were victimized only by "tiny" (by present standards) and single nuclear bombs.

There are a number of traditions of thought and experience that stress concepts of nothingness. In religious practice, there is the *nirvana* of Buddhism and Hinduism, and specific forms of Zen Buddhist meditation as well as various forms of Christian mysticism. Secular expressions of nothing or "non-being" occur in different expressions of existential philosophy, notably in Heidegger, and have been depicted novelistically by Sartre. But all of these traditional quests for nothingness reflect the human imagination at work on behalf of itself. Nothingness clears the mind of impurities, permits fusion with a deity, frees one from the endless burden of reincarnation, or, in its very contrast with true being, provides a means for the self to achieve freedom and identity. That is, there is always **something** on behalf of which nothingness has value.

Nuclear nothingness has no such redeeming virtue. It is just that – **literal** nothingness, an end to human existence and to the existence of most other animal species and to plant species as well. The mind not only rebels against such a stark image, but has no experience with which to conjure it up. Human language and imagination, adaptive functions that they are, tend to be bound to the flow of life and of continuing human events. We can and often do imagine interruptions of this flow, and we frequently experience various forms of inner deadness. But that kind of imagination and experience takes place within a context of a larger flow of ongoing events, a context of expectation that life will somehow resume or continue.

We regularly imagine a human world that continues without us as individuals (which is why we take out life insurance, make out wills, and in other ways provide for people and projects that will outlive us). In that post-self world, the self's influences and contributions, however modest, continue to reverberate. That is very different from there being no human world at all – and precious little world of anything else. The latter is what defies our imaginative capacity – so much so that literal nothingness may be a contradiction in terms.

The Species Self

Are we in the process of carving out a new sense of self that might contribute to our survival as a species? It does not look much that way, but perhaps one is being thrust upon us. If we return to the principle that we live on images, that the self is affected by powerful social and historical currents, then we must assume that important things are happening to the contemporary self. We cannot be without some awareness of the threat of the nuclear end – an awareness that lives in the self with an odd mixture of vagueness and amorphousness on the one hand and a quality of deadly

absoluteness on the other. Nuclear threat becomes inextricably bound up with everyday concerns. One may therefore say that nothing the self manifests – no specific tendencies or symptoms – can be attributed solely to nuclear threat, but also that nothing in the self's existence is completely free of that shadow. Notably in question are long-term enterprises, relationships that are concerned with a personal and collective future. There is evidence that, within this duality – the double life of normal existence on the one hand and imagery of extinction on the other – nuclear awareness is increasing. The trend is toward greater legitimacy in acknowledging that terrible shadow, in sharing one's perceptions of it with others.

Inevitably, that process leads also to increased recognition of the principle of shared fate. I have long held that this principle should be the cornerstone for our approach to the Soviets, individually and collectively. Now, with the help of the findings that forecast nuclear winter, we extend the arena of shared fate to every inch of every human life on the earth. Insofar as that realization takes hold, it contributes to an individual sense of a more inclusive self, of a broader human identity. I can feel myself to be increasingly not just an American but a human being bound to all other human beings. As that sense of self becomes integral to my psychological function, my attitudes and actions – my private life and my public ethical and political commitments – become profoundly influenced by it. We can then speak of the emergence of a species self, of a self-concept inseparable from all other human selves in sharing with them the ultimate questions of life and death. The species self permits a more inclusive human identity. The sense of species self also helps me to understand why I must continue to work closely with my Soviet medical colleagues even as I take a stand against Soviet victimization of heretics and Jews; I must take my stand against both American and Soviet nuclear arms buildup and against actions by either country that threaten the peace and increase the danger of nuclear holocaust. Within that sense of species self, I must struggle to balance these commitments and make the best ethical and political choices I am able – with that species self keeping me mindful of the human beings involved in stands on survival and justice. This broadening and deepening of an inclusive sense of human self is one of the most fundamental sources of hope available to us. The species self makes its claim on more and more people throughout the world. It is spreading, recognized, legitimate – and, as we know, desperately needed everywhere.

This inclusive sense of self does not provide any specific politics or religious convictions or organizational focus. It does not replace necessary risks and struggles, tough decisions and difficult actions. Nor, in itself, does it get rid of a single nuclear weapon or solve a single international dispute. But the species self infuses us with a special kind of inclusive human possibility. It tells us that a commitment to humanity – and the struggle against nuclear weapons is never anything less – is not only an idea but a psychological and political principle whose time has come.

NOTES

1. Recent scientific findings (from mid-1986) have been raising questions about some of the earlier reports on the phenomenon of nuclear winter. While much remains to be learned – and various additional scientific studies will tell us more – there is a danger of using such findings to reassert prior nuclear weapons policies and to minimize the destructive effects of a nuclear holocaust. In a psychological sense, the issue is not whether we can prove that a phenomenon called "nuclear winter" would destroy all life on earth. Rather, that phenomenon epitomizes the idea of the "nuclear end." Even if it turns out that nuclear winter is unlikely to occur, the rest of the effects of a nuclear holocaust are sufficient to warrant a concept of the "nuclear end." And, as Carl Sagan and others have pointed out, there are always additional possibilities of destructive effects that so far we have been unable to identify.
2. The Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, which occurred after this essay was completed, contributes (as discussed in the introduction) to a particularly profound and fearful version of technological infallibility, one which is compounded by *nuclear* disaster.

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