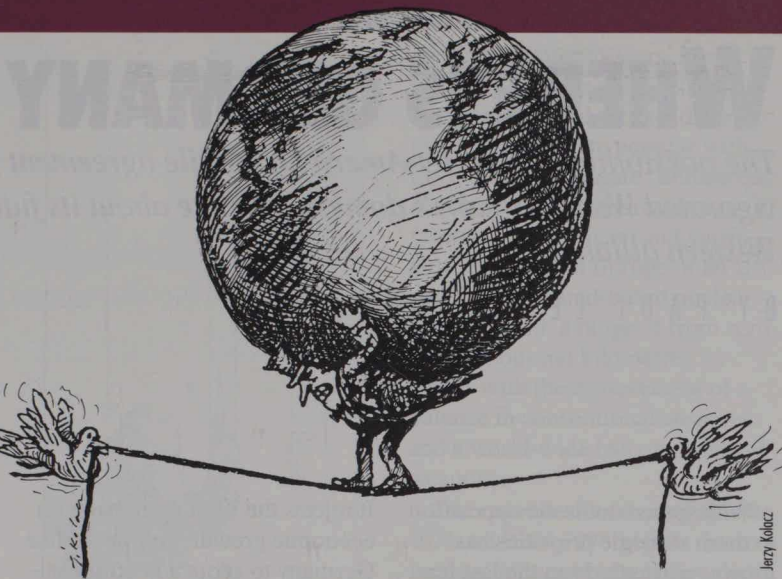


has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes." Such extraordinary power was, in some sense, frightening, but at least it was in good hands. As Truman put it in his Navy Day speech of 27 October 1945 "In our possession of this weapon, as in our possession of other new weapons, there is no threat to any nation . . . (Our) possession . . . of this new power of destruction we regard as a sacred trust. Because of our love of peace, the thoughtful people of the world know that trust will not be violated, that it will be faithfully executed."

These were early assertions of themes and presumptions that have become commonplace in American thinking about nuclear weapons. There is the notion that the United States has both the right and the duty to act in the interest of *all* mankind. American state power, unlike the power of other states, should not be distrusted. Since US intentions are benign, its military capabilities pose no problems – except for "aggressors." Only "evil" powers have any grounds for fearing American strength. Nuclear weapons, according to this view, are unobjectionable when held by a strictly defensive power, such as the United States.

It is even claimed sometimes that the non-threatening nature of the American arsenal is acknowledged by adversaries. Eugene Rostow, a former Director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, wrote in 1984: "The Soviet government has long understood that it does not face the risk of armed attack." "We can be sure," asserted the authors of *A Forward Strategy for America*, a strategic text published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in 1961, "that Soviet strategists understand full well that the US overseas base structure is a defensive-retaliatory instrument and not an offensive-preemptive one. They can properly estimate our strategic intentions."* (Preemption, in fact,

*Robert Strausz-Hupé, William R. Kintmen, Stefan T. Possony, *A Forward Strategy for America*, New York: Harper, 1961.



as David Alan Rosenberg and others have shown, was a crucial component of US strategy.) The essential notion in such thinking was that foreigners ought to understand America in the same way that America understands itself. As former President Richard Nixon remarked in 1984, "I know the Russians. We don't have to convince them that we are for peace. They know that." He concluded from these propositions (as have many others) that American military superiority was in the interest of world peace.

THIS PERVERSIVE MORALIZING OF superpower relations has had several consequences. First, it has discouraged a realistic and judicious examination of both Soviet intentions and likely Soviet responses to US initiatives. The other side of the coin of presumed American righteousness is the image of an incorrigibly aggressive and sinister USSR. One stark image demands the other. Conceptual opposites have fed on each other. The result is a profusion of worst-case assumptions about the Soviets and an indifference to studying actual Soviet policy and objectives. If one already knows what drives Moscow (e.g., the quest for world domination), there is no need for laborious enquiries into the complexities of Soviet politics. Moreover, these moral presumptions lead to recurrent misanticipations of Soviet responses to American "defensive" nuclear buildups. There has been a tendency, rooted in moral presumption, to treat Soviet culture with contempt and to depreciate or

be indifferent to what it can or is likely to accomplish. Moscow, however, has not only declined to be tamed or morally cowed; it has always matched Washington's upping of the nuclear ante, thereby undermining further Western security.

Second, moralizing has militated against diplomacy. It has deflected attention from the possibility of collaboration based on mutual interests (such as the prevention and management of regional crises) by its stress on the alleged incompatibility of fundamental values. It has made it difficult to reach any accord that fails to enshrine American predominance: After all, can one really expect a moral superior to be content with parity? And the consequence of such moralizing has been a number of missed opportunities – opportunities that have arisen to reduce tensions and restrain the military rivalry. One of the major missed opportunities occurred in the later 1950s, when a reformist and de-Stalinizing Nikita Khrushchev was in charge in Moscow and making a variety of promising overtures. Moralism inhibited the sort of positive US responses which, in the long run, would almost certainly have enhanced American security.

Finally, presumptions of moral superiority encourage a confusion of ends and means. If one's purposes are inherently good (e.g., the defence and extension of "freedom"), the military means chosen to achieve these ends will likely be considered more legitimate than the same means in the hands of other states. Only the

adversary's nuclear arsenal is truly threatening, for on "our side" the honourable ends justify the lethal means. There is a deep reluctance in America to view the superpower relationship in terms of self-interest and the reciprocity of threats and counter-threats – that is, in classically power-political terms. Moreover, this disposition to moralize politics has led to ironic results. For while the United States prides itself on its "reverence for life" and high estimation of human rights, it is Washington and most of its allied capitals that have highlighted the utility of nuclear threats and championed the political value of technologies of mass destruction. The civilized West has been in the forefront in promoting remarkably uncivilized means of waging war.

IN THE SAME SPEECH IN WHICH HE spoke of the atomic bomb as a "sacred trust," President Truman also offered an admonition. "For our own part," he said, "we must seek to understand the special problems of other nations. We must seek to understand their own legitimate urge toward security as they see it." This was an observation that was both politically wise and a precondition for effective American diplomacy. Unfortunately, it was a seed that fell on hostile soil. Ideological righteousness and chauvinist dogmas continued to flourish, and they were not confined to Bolsheviks. In their American populist expressions, reinforced by a pronounced technological hubris, we find some of the roots of a frenzied arms race that is still largely out of control. Pride may, in a sense, be a healthy emotion; but undisciplined nationalist pride has been a persistent enemy of the American national interest. □

Further Reading

- Gordon Craig and Alexander George. *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Fred Kaplan. *The Wizards of Armageddon*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.
- Steven E. Miller, editor. *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence*, essays by Bernard Brodie, Robert Jervis, David Alan Rosenberg et al, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.