

On Political Duty:  
A Farewell to Arms Limitation

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In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. It was a crucial moment in Czech history -- a fateful moment of the kind that occurs once or twice in a millennium.

Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.

The Party propaganda section put out hundreds of thousands of copies of a photograph of that balcony with Gottwald, a fur cap on his head and comrades at his side, speaking to the nation. On that balcony the history of Communist Czechoslovakia was born. Every child knew the photograph from posters, schoolbooks, and museums.

Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head.

--Milan Kundera,  
The Book of Laughter  
and Forgetting

God remembered Abraham.

--Genesis 19:29

The air miles between Israel and Czechoslovakia total approximately 1800. What does Jerusalem not have to do with Prague? The answer is that what remains of our patriarch Abraham is much more than a cap on another's head. "God remembered Abraham." This means that others as well could always remember.

To the north of Israel, yet not only to the north, stand régimes, most notably the régime of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which have conspired to agree that certain human beings were never there. But within the country of Israel a tradition lives that is committed to the honor of history. Moral: In our epoch the David of truth still fights against the Goliath of lies.

This moral reads very nice. The reason it does is that it is nice. Already perhaps, sufficient ammunition is supplied to some for any needed revolt against a revolting political pacifism (which is quite other than vocational pacifism). Yet there is a derangement, and it is an awesome one: before our eyes, the moral is being trampled down.

The tragedy of today is that the unending struggle between falsehood and truth (between non-history and history) is being remanded to sub-basements and catacombs. We may, indeed, be forced wholly to repress the struggle, at least for a very long time. The reason for this condition is entirely simple (and impossibly complex): the newest technology of weapons.

## I

A world-decisive phenomenon-event of the twentieth century (after the Holocaust) is the present conquest by technology of the categories of truth/falsehood. The Holocaust was constituent to the process that gave birth to this phenomenon-event,<sup>1</sup>

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1. Cf. Richard L. Rubenstein, The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

but the revolution before us is independent of the Holocaust.  
Let us review what has happened.

Item (as described by Francesco Calogero): An important aspect of the NATO decision of December 1979 and of the recent (October 2, 1981) Reagan decisions on strategic weapons is the introduction of long-range "strategic" cruise missiles [GLCMs]. This air-breathing, low-flying vehicle is small (15-20 feet long, less than 2 feet in diameter), relatively inexpensive, accurate (by terminal guidance), flexible (it can be launched from the ground, the sea, the air), ambiguous (it can fulfill a strategic or a tactical role; it can carry a nuclear or a conventional warhead).

. . . Most importantly, [its] characteristics imply that the secure information on the strategic nuclear arsenal of the other side, that is now available by national means of verification (essentially satellites), will become questionable; thus any strategic arms limitation (by bilateral agreement or by unilateral restraint) will become nonviable, and the nuclear arms race will acquire a runaway character.<sup>2</sup>

Once upon a time life was so easy, not excepting international decision-making. Do you remember back to the paradise of the 1970s? We have it on the word of Moshe Dayan that when in 1973 the U.S.S.R. threatened to join its own troops to the Syrians in the fourth war against Israel, the United States authorities notified the Russians that such action would be met

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2. Francesco Calogero, "Why 'Arms Control' Empowers the Hawks," Christianity and Crisis, XLI, 22 (January 18, 1982), 382; emphasis added.

by American forces equipped with tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> There is no need to record that the Soviet Union drew back.

Through the 1970s, a saving identity of national interest and national praxis could serve to deter the occurrence of unrestricted thermonuclear warfare and indeed help to prevent the outbreak of a major world conflict involving conventional weapons. As late as 1979 Louis J. Halle (Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva) could show how the very great degree of instability that had marked Soviet-American relations at the end of the 1950s was subsequently overcome "not by disarmament but by its opposite." The most powerful force for peace and coexistence<sup>s</sup> between the U.S.S.R and the United States was the increase of, and technical improvement in, thermonuclear weaponry along with effective espionage satellites. Professor Halle drew the then quite correct conclusion that those who automatically equate disarmament and morality had better think twice.<sup>4</sup> The function of the eventuality of thermonuclear destruction in inhibiting (since the late 1940s) a world-level conflagration involving conventional weaponry was linked to the universal fear that a conventional war would most probably mushroom into mutual thermonuclear destructiveness.

Of course, the erstwhile peacekeeping role of thermonuclear technology could not marshall certainty, nor could it last very long.

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3. Moshe Dayan, address at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pa., February 13, 1977.

4. Louis J. Halle, "Applying Morality to Foreign Policy," in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., Foreign Policy and Morality: Framework for a Moral Audit (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1979), pp. 30-32.

Nuclear deterrence was never gifted with stability. But then, has the future of human history ever been guaranteed? The observation of John Maynard Keynes, however apt, is also gratuitous: "In the long run we shall all be dead." For the waging of the general warfare of human self-destructiveness and stupidity against human intelligence and practicality is nothing new (cf. cigarette smoking as the proven major cause of lung cancer). Yet the all-decisive point is that the 1970s are now transformed into the equivalent of ancient history. The ball game is wholly new, relentlessly new — thanks to the practical abolition of effective satellite surveillance as affording the possibility of peace. What is to happen once thermonuclear deterrence has broken down? This is the shattering question, the eschatological question, that addresses the entire world just now.

A few phenomenological-political-moral reflections that arise from out of the all-determining revolution of the early 1980s may be set down. (I pass over a <sup>slight,</sup> whimsical gain: in a time of chronic unemployment the ranks of peculiarly human spies <sup>may</sup> ~~will~~ be granted temporary ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ expansion.)

## II

1. Post-GLCM awareness underlines with cosmic force the judgment, not really new, that the question of political obligation is to be approached primarily from a political-moral point of view, and not in the first instance from a religious or theological point of view. Otherwise, we should find ourselves in a plight similar to that of the physician -- I seem to have forgot his name -- who

instead of prescribing medicine and ordering operations to meet his patients' ills would tell them to/~~do~~<sup>work</sup> various problems in geometry. Such counsel may be identified as in violation of the divine "orders" of reality.<sup>5</sup> The Christian who seeks to do responsible political work must steep herself in political analysis and act only secondarily as a theologian. (It is well known that exercises in geometry will bring comfort to sufferers from gout -- but only after primary medical aid has been rendered.)

2. Within a political frame of reference, secondary attention to religious and theological considerations must not be permitted to become no attention at all. The orientation behind the present remarks lies at the polar opposite of a dualism between the political and religious orders, wherein no place is allowed for what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the relevance of an impossible ethical ideal."<sup>6</sup> Love (agape) is the ever-present normative principle for assessing differing claims to justice. (Extra-theologically expressed, responsible national morality takes form at the nexus of national behavior and national interest. Here also appears the discrepancy between forms of political obligation that are true to the democratic tradition [including the religious teaching of individual dignity] and extreme forms of Realpolitik, wherein raison d'état is made the determinative principle of national policy. In opposition to an exclusivist [idolatrous] "reason of state," it is to

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5. Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative (New York: Macmillan, 1942), Book III.

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper, 1935), chap. 4.



be insisted that "interest forms a part of the binding force of obligation."<sup>7</sup>)

3. We must in any case be freshly vigilant in the presence of those who mix up perfectionist religion and political action, with consequences that are politically and therefore religiously irresponsible. Through the recent demise of world-decisive satellite surveillance, every such mix-up was dealt a moral coup de grace as well, and a resurrection is doubtful for the foreseeable future. Yet there are some who continue to seek, even <sup>in</sup> ~~xxxxxx~~ the very face of today's international crisis-situation, to assign human retrenchment absolute command — for example, the immediate dispossession of mass-destruction weapons<sup>8</sup> — over the indeterminate disposition of the creation's raw materials. By putting present decision-making in front of the day-to-day regnancy of the God of the creation, such effort not only runs the risk of sacrilegiousness (we moderns can probably manage to live with that); much more fatefully, the effort underestimates the potency of human sin and the power of historical fate, two Gestalten that combine to make it most difficult to separate behavior and interest. However, since the coincidence

7. Carey B. Joynt and Percy E. Corbett, Theory and Reality in World Politics (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), pp. 7-11; as against Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, 4th edition (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 246.

8. Cf. the Summer 1981 declaration of the Society for Protestant Theology, Western Germany: "If the use of weapons designed for mass destruction is sinful, the possession thereof as threat and deterrent also cannot be justified in Christian terms" ("Passing the Peace," Christianity and Crisis, XLII, 3 March 1, 1982, 46).

of behavior and interest may also nurture moral obligation, and may therefore be used licitly as an argument against the manufacture and deployment of thermonuclear weapons — just as it may be used equally to favor such activity — we may be advised to turn to historical expectation and historical experience in the hope of resolving the stand-off.

4. One illustrative way to approach the matter is to return to the context of the Nazi Holocaust and its irrelevance/relevance. On the one hand, the Holocaust is wholly extrinsic to the question of the integrity of political sovereignty for the Jewish people. That is to say, if the possession of sovereignty is in and of itself legitimate for Jews, this was the case before the Holocaust and would remain so even had there been no Holocaust. On the other hand, the Holocaust is of relevance in the sense that it has helped many Jews and others to comprehend the consequences of Jewish powerlessness within a world pervaded by the demonic.<sup>9</sup> Today,

a threatened Israel may well take the position (we ought to say, is morally obligated to take the position) that it will not allow a second Holocaust, although the primary decision, one way or the other, will have been the responsibility of its foes. Two thousand years of antisemitic annihilationism would appear to be enough. The ideology of the disposable Jew met its nemesis in the 1940s, in the almost coincident invention of nuclear weapons and the reestablishment of the Jewish state -- a very interesting oddity (cf. Ps. 2:4: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision"). The world will simply have to learn that it can no longer dispense Jewish fate. Following Emil Fackenheim, we [may allude] to the requirement that Hitler not be permitted a posthumous victory. It is instructive to

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9. The demonic is described by Paul Tillich as "the structural power of evil" (The Protestant Era [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948], p. xx).



substitute "the world" for "Hitler."<sup>10</sup>

Other states and peoples, particularly small states and peoples, are being enabled to argue in ~~exactly the same way~~ a not wholly dissimilar way.

5. Unilateral nuclear disarmament remains forbidden to such a nation as the United States,<sup>11</sup> upon a foundation that witnesses the convergence of theology and ethics: the country is not God and hence it cannot foretell the future with absolute certainty. Just as there is probably no way to know for sure that the Soviet Union will launch a preemptive thermonuclear attack (were such knowledge to become availably certain, the only moral course would be to preempt the preemption, unless it were conveniently known with equal surety that Russian second-strike capabilities were wholly invulnerable, in which case it would quite literally not matter what the United States did), so too there is probably no way to know for sure that the U.S.S.R (or the United States) will refrain from initiating global hostilities with thermonuclear weapons. In this overall situation the political recourse left to the Americans (as also to the Soviet Union) is still negotiations and treaty making together with the continuing effort to establish structures of mutual interest that may reduce somewhat the

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10. A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt, Long Night's Journey Into Day (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), p. 146.

11. It would be amusing were it not excrescent to read Edward Schillebeeckx echoing the slogan "Free the world of nuclear weapons, and first of all our own country" as constituting "a responsible historical decision . . . closer than any other to the demands of the Gospel," when the country in which he resides is the Netherlands ("A Time For Prophecy," Christianity and Crisis, XLI, 22 [January 18, 1982], 373).

possibility of mutual annihilation<sup>1</sup>. I do not see that the newest revolution of weapons has wholly obviated this recourse, although quite obviously it has enormously multiplied the risks in all political-diplomatic activity. A consequence is that political-diplomatic action has to be accompanied more than ever by the effort to ensure the invulnerability of second-strike systems — not for their "usefulness" (they would clearly possess no value at all once the enemy were to launch an all-devastating first strike) — but because the opponent's knowledge of their presence might keep on exerting some deterrent effect. Fortunately, this factor can continue to be of salience to human survival despite the loss of decisive satellite surveillance; it <sup>remains</sup> the one currently hopeful condition within the gathering gloom.

6. If it is so that the complexity of the problem of thermonuclear technology now defies any conceivably complex-efficacious remedy we might fabricate, perhaps we are being told to withdraw to some kind of simplicity. Such is the demeanor of Francesco Calogero. Be it noted that this professor of theoretical physics in the University of Rome is anything but a naïve man: he it is who has called our attention to the woeful end of satellite verification at the hands of the GLCM.

The thought I wish to leave with you is that different approaches to arms control negotiations which might ease these difficulties can be envisaged. Perhaps the possibility of achieving thereby more success in curbing the arms race should be explored. What I have in mind can be illustrated by an extremely naïve example. If you try to divide a pie in a fair way between two children, you are likely to make both unhappy, since each one will claim the other has been allotted a larger, or more palatable, piece; an effective way to avoid controversies is the simple rule, one cuts, the

other chooses (and more symmetrical procedures than this may be envisaged). You should not be put off by the naïvete of this example, but focus on its essence; which is, in the arms control context, the idea to negotiate, rather than the specific terms of an agreement, a procedure that, once accepted, yields without further negotiations the operative terms of an arms control agreement. The advantages of this type of approach are known in many real cases, including instances where vital interests of the parties are at stake (for instance, labor disputes); and examples of international character also exist.

It would of course be naïve to imagine that all impediments to arms control and disarmament would vanish if a different format of negotiations were adopted; the question of the political will remains crucial. But the adequacy or inadequacy of the political will, to make progress toward arms control and disarmament, depends on the kind of approach being adopted, whether it is designed to minimize or maximize the chances of getting bogged down and of stimulating, rather than restraining, the arms race.<sup>12</sup>

### III

As the world moves nearer and nearer to the year 2000, political obligation continues to declare to us what we must not do: we must not be political pacifists, we must not cease the political struggle for peace and justice, we must not violate the poor and the helpless. But<sup>is</sup> political obligation any longer able to declare what we must do? Our crisis (danger-opportunity), the crisis of international weapons technology, is how to uncover utterly untried, utterly unheard of ways to separate truth from falsehood, so that the ancient battle for truth will not be lost, and so that life upon Planet Earth may endure. Do we have the resources, the stamina for this task? I do not know. All I know is the name of the struggle. It is the struggle for history, for remembrance, for the remembrance that Clementis is more

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12. Calgero, ibid.

than the cap upon Gottwald's head.

Like the person who comes through a life-threatening illness, we are now made to greet each added day as an unbelievable blessing. How is it possible that any extra days are yet being given to us? The days keep coming along -- first one, then another, and then another. This is a miracle, even should it not last for long. At the end, therefore, places are reversed: the faith that had to play a role second to political analysis and decision-making moves itself, or it is moved, to front and center of the stage that is our thermo-nuclear condition.

Let us celebrate the day. For with each day a faint, new chance is given to save the world.