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creating consensus for a nuclear-free future

NPRI
Charles Sheehan
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Out of the Fog

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Howard Moreland, Los Angeles Times

02/15/2004

<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-op-moriland15feb15,1,6149226.story>

Howard Moreland, a former Air Force pilot and congressional military policy analyst, is the author of "The Secret That Exploded."

WASHINGTON — On Sunday, Jan. 25, I shook hands with Robert S. McNamara for the first time. I thought it would bring closure. It did, sort of.

During the first decade of my adult life I nourished a fantasy about doing him bodily harm if I got close enough. Someone actually did try to throw him off the Martha's Vineyard ferry during that time. I would not have gone that far, I'm sure.

Now I'm 61, and he's 87. We are comrades in the ban-the-bomb movement. All is forgiven, although a Jimmy Swaggart depths-of-the-soul apology would be appreciated.

In the biographical film "Fog of War," McNamara argues that Vietnam was President Johnson's fault, not his. But I didn't broach that subject in our brief conversation. I thanked him for coming to Helen Caldicott's "Three Minutes to Midnight" conference on nuclear war policy.

The purpose of the conference was to explore the well-documented argument by former missile silo officer Bruce Blair that Cold War nuclear alert mechanisms have not really changed. The air defense people in Colorado still have three minutes to evaluate evidence of incoming missiles and notify the president. If the checklist gets that far, odds are that you and I will be dead within the hour.

McNamara was invited to be a speaker, but he declined, citing lack of expertise. He did, however, sit in the second row and stand in line at the floor microphone after a couple of the panel presentations. From that humble position, he challenged a panelist to summarize U.S. nuclear policy in a sentence.

On hearing a hedged answer, he supplied the one he was looking for. It went something like this: "We will initiate the use of nuclear weapons against a nonnuclear state or a nuclear state whenever we believe it's in our interests to do so — leave that out — whenever we wish to do so. I can't understand how anybody could ever believe it's in our interests to initiate the use of nuclear weapons against anyone."

The panelist thought McNamara was going too far. After a heated exchange,

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he accused McNamara of being "stuck in the 1960s."

In one important aspect, I suppose we all are.

Vietnam is history, but that decade's massive buildup and deployment of solid-fueled ballistic missiles, first by the United States on McNamara's watch, then by Russia, still makes life in America a minute-by-minute affair. Although Russia and the U.S. are no longer enemies, we still have plans and hardware in place to blow each other up on very short notice.

Meanwhile, both sides continue to experience technical false alarms, warnings that the other side has launched a first strike. We have to take them seriously because each side is fully capable of launching all its missiles without warning. Readiness could be the reason we all die. We seem unable to stand down the strategic forces.

McNamara was in effect advocating a "no-first-use" policy from the conference floor last month. Such a policy would eliminate the need for our preemptive, or first-strike, capability — which is most of our nuclear force. Its physical removal would eliminate the main incentive for Russians to be button-happy. After that, we could "de-alert" the remaining retaliatory forces.

We could empty the Minuteman silos, leaving their covers open for satellite inspection, and deploy our Trident submarines near Antarctica, beyond the range of Russia, from which position they could move northward at their leisure, to murder northern Eurasia if it came to that. Both sides would then have adequate time to evaluate any warning of attack, while retaining the option to enact revenge later.

The Russians would almost certainly follow the U.S. lead in arms reductions, but it would not be necessary. These unilateral steps by the U.S. would greatly reduce the only real threat to our national survival.

So why hasn't this problem been fixed? Bureaucratic inertia is the usual explanation. The appropriate authorities haven't bothered to tell the doomsday people to find another line of work. But nearly 15 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. What are we waiting for?

Perhaps the arsenals were never really about the grand competition after all, or even about national security. Perhaps they were, and are, their own justification. This we know: The balance of terror has outlived every rationale. It survives as a pointless dance with death.

Caldicott still has the movie-star looks and Australian accent that were elements of her charisma a quarter of a century ago, when she and I traveled the antinuclear lecture circuit in New England. I burned out. She persevered and established the idea of nuclear war as a public health crisis. As a result, the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize went to International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

The conference gave me thoughts of maybe putting more effort into saving the world. There's still work to be done, and I have experience. At the end of the second day, I went home and threw up. My malady was a microbe my 95-year-old father-in-law brought home from his senior day-care center. Some of the staff had similar symptoms. It seemed an appropriate response to all the talk of the horrible things people might do to each other in a matter of minutes.

God bless Helen Caldicott and her troops, including, even, Robert McNamara.

And God help us all.

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