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Truth and Consequence:
Reflections on Catastrophe, Civil Resistance, and Hope

My Anguishing Secret

January 26, 1984

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The anguishing secret that I hold to myself, that isolates me, that I feel I must disclose to the public yet which I fear to express, is that with regard to planning for nuclear war that would kill hundreds of millions of people instantly and result—via nuclear winter—in billions dead, "We are like the Nazis. We are doing something worse than the Nazis."

The answer to this is: "At right, yes, the scale is worse. But it's entirely different: because the intent is different. What we are doing is for the best of reasons, or at least acceptable reasons, though mistakes are made and there are excesses, along with blindness, shortsightedness, distraction, inertia. And the Russians are doing the same, and there is reason to be fearful of them—weren't you just as fearful once, and were you entirely foolish? All in all, our leaders have no real choice ..."

But there is an answer. Why be fearful of saying it? Because it is very bad news; it is agonizingly painful to hear, and say, and believe. It does not make one more happy or hopeful. Quite the contrary. Times are hard enough for everyone without this. And it is—for patriots like me—very hard to believe, very out of key from everything we learn from authorities we have trusted, and from the news. So to say it is to evoke, at best, skepticism, loss or crisis of credibility. Above all: to insist that there really is an analogy with the Nazis, or with Stalinist Russia, is taken by Americans to be so out of touch with reality, so obsessed with hatred for America, so wildly insulting and wrong, that merely to utter this thought is to discredit oneself.

For the fact is that our leaders do have choices and they frequently exercise that freedom of choice in a direction that seems -to me, though not to Reagan, who believes he has made the world safer- to enlarge the probability of extinction.

Our leaders do not do this with the intent to exterminate any group unconditionally. But they are conscious -more than they let on- that the effect and intent of their choices is more credibly to threaten extermination under some circumstances, "precisely in order to deter, to avert those circumstances arising". For this reason, they continue to invent, design, produce, and deploy new technologies of destruction and extermination, to demonstrate their own commitment to carry out these threats and preparations "if necessary".

The increased risk of actual extermination resulting from all this does indeed reflect that the Soviets are doing it too. But if extermination does come about, it will not be wholly unplanned, unintended, or unavoidable - in the sense of an earthquake, a meteor, an increase in sunspots-- as it will be linked directly to human policy.

It will reflect the efficient, obedient, self-adjusting implementation of national plans called for and approved, in secret, by our national leaders (along with the Soviets), consciously designed and intended to exterminate humans and destroy cities. It will occur under the very contingencies we have long foreseen as possible, though never certain or desired. The result will be what our leaders foresaw and accepted at least as a risk -though it will be worse than they imagined.

And they are making these choices for reasons that they do not dare to tell us: not because they are "evil" or wholly self-serving reasons, though an observer can perceive more influence of ego in their motives than they themselves may realize, but because they know that these reasons would seem grossly disproportionate and inadequate to the risks being accepted.

They explain this discrepancy to themselves by judging that much of the public overestimates the dangers and fails to appreciate the stakes involved. So they don't tell us.

Those who think of themselves as sophisticated and subtle analysts of complexity tend to have an overly simple moral conception: Good people don't do very bad things. Therefore when they hear my account of what our leaders are actually planning and doing, with considerable awareness and intentions that they conceal and lie about, these analysts react as do uncritical members of the public. Either:

1. I am wrong, these plans and threats were never made.
2. I must be saying that the leaders are monsters, evil men, since that is simply implausible, unbelievable.
3. The short-run intent must be entirely different from what I describe. Since good men could not be that "corrupt" there must be considerations I am ignoring. They must be responding to pressures or acting inadvertently on the basis of bad info..

The connecting thread: the leaders could not be responsible to the degree my analysis implies. "They must feel they have no choice."

Well, in fact I have come to realize that it is true that the leaders commonly feel that "they have no choice." This feeling allows them not to feel responsible -hence guilty- even if things go wrong and worse does come to worst. But their basis for feeling that way is less compelling to the observers than it is to them. And they are aware enough of this possibility that they take care to conceal facts and alternatives and estimates that might suggest to others their real intentions or the existence of a degree of freedom and responsibility. Not because they have a guilty conscience or feel culpable, reckless, or irresponsible, but because they suspect some others would find them to be so.

Indeed, this conscious risk they take of being regarded as criminals, gamblers, or wrongdoers is part of their sense of pride, of courage and loyalty and patriotism, a basis for their self-esteem and good conscience like that of the patriotic spy, the volunteer fall guy, the Grand Inquisitor -*Beau Geste*, *The Four Feathers*- or the Watergate team.

What has to be understood, explained -and shared with audience- is that good men, decent men and women, can not only act to evil effect but also can do so with a great deal of awareness and purposiveness. They can keep a secret and tell lies about it, all without any intent to add to the evil in the world.

Part of the explanation: their obedience, desire to belong to a team, an organization, a nation, to be loyal and patriotic, to be appreciated and meaningful and useful. Another part, related to this: their desire and ability to believe -what may seem incredible or unrealistic to others- that they are working to avert or reduce a "greater evil otherwise inevitable, that they are working with the "cruelty" of surgeons, for the good of the community. Such beliefs are not always unjustified.

Without this realistic understanding of intent, we can neither appreciate the degree or nature of our real, existential risk, nor act skilfully to change it and ourselves.

The point is that -in addition to all the risks of accident, Soviet attack, Soviet first use, third-party use of nuclear weapons, proliferation, madmen, false alarms, unauthorized action, all of which are real and growing-- we live with a real risk that a president we have elected will, in some future crisis or limited war or confrontation, decide to initiate what he hopes will remain a limited nuclear attack with tactical nuclear weapons. And that the response of the Soviets or others to this will lead to an escalating, two-sided nuclear war, with a strong possibility that one or the other side will initiate an all-out strategic preemptive attack.

The president's decision, as deliberate and calculated as is humanly possible in the conditions of intense crisis, will be shaped in this direction by the existence of plans, weapons, trained operators, and deployment capacities designed precisely to carry out such an initiative by a US. president. Recent decisions, like past ones, on design, production, and deployment, as well as operational planning, have markedly increased the chance that a president will so decide. No other risk to our security and survival is greater than this one.

Yet these preparations have not been made by any president because he wanted to initiate nuclear war, on any level. Some presidents whose preparations were crucial --

Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, perhaps Truman after Hiroshima and Nagasaki-- have abhorred nuclear weapons and been determined never to initiate their use under any circumstances. But even these examples were persuaded -in the context of major political pressure- that they should not reduce the credibility of U.S. threat-commitments, or the presidential capability to make credible threats.

Their hope was never to have to carry out such threats. Their best chance of avoiding that, they were persuaded, was to act precisely as if they desired and intended to carry out those threats under specific circumstances. So that is what they did: taking the same preparations as other presidents who may have been much less reluctant to initiate nuclear war "if necessary" at least at the lowest end of the scale.

Various short-run, political, or diplomatic advantages to these particular humans and their administrations can also be seen influencing their choices in these budget decisions or crisis moves. These actions, along with Soviet reactions or parallel moves, uninhibited by negotiated or tacit agreements halting the process, have almost surely increased the risk of nuclear war for the whole species. But these influences are almost surely undersated by the high-level participants, in comparison with benefits to the nation and the strategic world -perceptible mainly to themselves.

The moral: Do not give decent, well-intentioned humans at the apex of large, hierarchical organizations instruments of mass destruction that may be wielded as solutions to narrow, parochial, egotistical, short-run problems, which challenge their perceived success or position of control. These men are all too likely to discover, in such circumstances of duress, that the long-run strategic interests of their nation and humanity demand and compel their use of all instruments at their command. When their job or the core of their self-esteem is threatened, or, acting under orders, they are told that the survival of the system they serve is at stake, humans are easily persuaded that the destructive

consequences of using what may be an "effective" instrument constitute a "lesser evil" whatever those consequences are.

"Even an unloaded gun will go off eventually" - Russian proverb

If God did not want nuclear wars to occur among humans, he should not have arranged there to be an element that emits two neutrons when fissioned by one neutron.

For almost forty years, American presidents --and many of the scientists, servicemen, and political analysts who work for them- have been pursued by the nagging thought that unlimited destructive power must be transmutable into political power. They have searched steadily for ways to do this, with some success, though the Philosopher's Stone of influence commensurate with the destructive capability has been maddeningly elusive.

Version 30.7.2026
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