

The Bomb's Pretense as Peacekeeper

By JOHN MUELLER

We are to be reminded increasingly as the August anniversary approaches that we live in the shadow of the bomb. Some find this condition supremely beneficial: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher argues that "nuclear weapons have in fact prevented war: it is a balance of terror, but it has kept the peace." Others argue that the existence of the weapons all but seals our doom: In his influential best seller, "The Fate of the Earth," Jonathan Schell dramatically concludes that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will "sink into the final coma and end it all."

Neither of these conflicting views seems valid.

It is clear the existence of nuclear weapons has had a major impact on political rhetoric, on the publishing industry, and on defense budgets and planning. But is not so obvious that the bomb has had a substantial impact on the history of world affairs since World War II. It seems, rather, that the weapons neither define a fundamental stability nor do they threaten severely to disturb it.

It is true there has been no world war since 1945, and it is also true that nuclear weapons have been developed and deployed in part to deter such a conflict. It does not follow, however, that the weapons have prevented the war. Those who assert this assume there is something in the situation that would have led to major war had these weapons not existed. This assumption ignores at least two important considerations.

First, there is the deterrent effect of the memory of World War II. To be sure, a nuclear war would be vastly destructive, but for the most part nuclear weapons simply compound and dramatize a military reality that by 1945 had already become sufficiently appalling: Few with the experience of World War II behind them would contemplate a repetition with anything other than horror. That is, for practical purposes the cost of world war had already reached an intolerable level (some 50 million killed world-wide) before the bomb was perfected.

Second, there is the essential contentedness with which the major powers have viewed the postwar status quo. Unlike the situation following World War I, the only powers capable of starting another major war have been the big victors, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, each of which has emerged comfortably dominant in its respective sphere. While there have been many disputes since the war, neither power has had a grievance so deep that a world war—whether nuclear or not—has seemed an attractive means for setting things right. Although interested in expanding their influence and in pursuing their divergent ways of life, they have consistently backed away from major war as a means to change things.

Major wars are not begun out of casual caprice or idle fancy, but because a power decides that it can profit from (not simply win) the war—the combination of risk, gain and cost appears preferable to peace. Even allowing considerably for stupidity, ineptness, miscalculation and self-decep-

tion in these considerations, it does not appear that major war, whether nuclear or not, has been remotely in anyone's interest since 1945.

However, perhaps the bomb has made a difference at more subtle levels. It is sometimes maintained, for example, that the existence of the bomb has made the communist powers more cautious in their efforts to carry out what they see as the process of world revolution, and that it has made the U.S. more careful in its opposition to these efforts.

But communist tactics have not really differed substantially in the nuclear period from those employed before World War II. Any pressure has been largely nonmilitary or at militarily subtle levels such as political subversion, guerrilla warfare, local uprisings and civil war, levels at which nuclear weapons have little relevance. The communist powers consistently have been extremely wary of provoking Western powers into a large-scale war. Indeed, the most severe provocation, in Korea in 1950, occurred during the nuclear age.

Nor does it seem that the existence of nuclear weapons has caused the major powers to be substantially more restrained in crisis situations than they might otherwise have been. Again, whatever the rhetoric in these crises, it is difficult to see why the unannounced horror of repeating World War II, combined with a considerable comfort with the status quo, wouldn't have been enough to inspire restraint. It is interesting that even in the big "nuclear" crisis of our age—that over missiles in

Cuba—it was as much as anything else the recollected image of the destruction suffered in World War II that appears to have traumatized Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

To be clear: None of this is to deny that the sheer horror of nuclear war is impressive. It is simply to stress that the sheer horror of repeating World War II is not all that much less impressive, and that powers essentially content with the status quo will strive to avoid anything that could bring on either calamity. A jump from a 50th-floor window is probably quite a bit more horrible to think about than a jump from a fifth-floor one, but anyone who finds life even minimally satisfying is extremely unlikely to do either.

Of course nuclear weapons add a new element to international politics: new pieces for the players to move around the board, new terrors to contemplate. But in counter to Albert Einstein's oft-quoted remark that nuclear weapons have changed everything but our way of thinking, it might be suggested that nuclear weapons have changed little except our way of talking and spending money.

If such fundamental stability prevails, it also follows that the concerns of Mr. Schell and others about nuclear weapons are vastly overdone. By themselves, weapons do not start wars, and if nuclear weapons haven't made much difference, reducing their numbers won't either. For those who seek to save lives, it may make sense to spend less time worrying about something so improbable as major war and more time dealing with limited conventional wars, such as the one between Iran and Iraq. Wars of that sort, tragically, are still far from obsolete and have killed millions since 1945.

Mr. Mueller is professor of political science at the University of Rochester.