

Sunday, August 07, 2005

## **Of Bombs, Frogs, and Heroes**

Yesterday, sixty years after the bombing of Hiroshima, hundreds turned out for a memorial in front of City Hall and floated paper lanterns on a pool. Polls show that most citizens in every democratic country want nuclear weapons abolished, yet over 30,000 of them still exist — vastly bigger ones than those that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In a democracy, if most citizens insist, they can get their way. But citizens aren't insisting. Why not?

As usual, the explanation is both emotional and cognitive. People are passive and fatalistic, not agitated, and they aren't sure whether their opinions are completely rational. "Maybe I'm wrong," they admit. "If our president wants these weapons, he probably has good reasons that I'm not aware of. Besides, I'm just an ordinary person. What could I do about it anyhow? I try to keep calm and peaceful in my mind, since I can't make real peace on earth."

That's the song of a boiling frog. If you throw a frog into a pot of simmering water, it will jump out. But if you put a frog into a pan of cool water and start heating it, it will stay there and boil to death. Frogs need a shock to become aware of their peril. Same with people. We've been in this pot since 1945, and nothing has happened to make us jump out. It may take the hostile use of a nuclear bomb to set off our mental alarm.

That could happen at any time. We're damn lucky. Russian and American nuclear bombs are kept ready to be launched within about 15 minutes after any warning that missiles are en route from an unfriendly source. That launch-on-warning status means that any mistaken warning may set off a nuclear war. Indeed, false alarms occur daily, and in some cases have not been discovered to be false until after retaliatory bombs should have been launched. For example, in 1983, during a period of high tension between East and West, Colonel Vladimir Petrov was in charge of a Soviet bunker when the klaxon went off, indicating the start of World War III. The satellite Cosmos, monitoring the skies above US missile fields, had detected five launches — one after the other. If he had obeyed orders, we would have perished. But Petrov refused to believe that anyone would launch a nuclear war with just five missiles, so he disobeyed orders, which is why you and I are still alive today. There are other similar near-launches from false alarms, including one caused by a moon rising over the horizon and another caused by a flock of geese mistaken for a missile. Numerous military experts believe that our luck cannot continue indefinitely. For example, Robert McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense under Kennedy, now urges the United States and Russia (who own 96 percent of the world's nuclear bombs) to dismantle them all.

There was a time when the nuclear states seemed willing to do just that. In Geneva in 1965, negotiations began to draft a nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT). Such a treaty was completed by July 1968 and in 1970 it entered into force. The United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union were among the 43 original parties. The NPT represents a "deal" between the nuclear and the non-nuclear states, with the former pledging to move toward nuclear disarmament and the non-nuclear states promising not to acquire nuclear weapons, on condition that the peaceful benefits of nuclear technologies be made available to them.

Since then, the original five nuclear states have reneged on their promise, while warning all the other countries not to acquire nuclear weapons. This spring, the regular five-year review conference of the NPT collapsed in utter failure. Indeed, President George W. Bush plans to build new nuclear weapons, and the Russians are testing a new intercontinental nuclear ballistic missile, the Topol-M, though their early warning system is aging and becoming less reliable.

These changes are a signal: It's time to jump out of the boiling water. It's time for citizens to compel their governments to end the growing peril. Why isn't this happening? The explanation is emotional. Whereas people often expect the public to over-react in panic and stampede if they hear of a danger, the truth is just the opposite. Panic almost never happens. False complacency, however, is completely normal. If, say, a dam breaks and a wall of water is rushing to your town, the police may drive up and down the streets warning people to flee immediately, but many people will simply ignore the message. However dangerous it may be, denial is psychologically normal. Often people look out the window and decide that it must be a false alarm because the neighbor is still raking his lawn. We follow each other.

It may take a hero to set examples for others to follow. A hero is someone who doesn't follow the crowd but who uses good judgment on his own, and actively works to save the world. Heroes don't even have to be real to be persuasive. We may be moved by a remarkable character in a drama and — especially if we discuss the plot with friends — decide to emulate him. When we're short of real heroes, let's create some inspiring fictional ones.

- Metta Spencer