

Living on the Brink, Again

By Jonathan Schell

(Given During an FPIF-sponsored Conference on Weapons of Mass Destruction, on November 26, 2001.)

I would like to begin by calling attention to two events that are obviously highly pertinent to our subject. And the first is the obvious one, of the recent Bush-Putin meeting at which President Bush informed Russian President Putin that it was the policy of the United States to reduce its nuclear arsenals by about 2/3 over the next ten years, and Putin who is a little evasive, seemed to reciprocate, but wasn't quite so clear. Bush was not interested, as we know, in putting that arrangement in the form of a treaty. He said that to have to just write everything down would be inappropriate to the new relationship based on trust. It hadn't occurred to me when he looked into Putin's eyes and into his soul several months ago and found that he could trust this man that this meant the end of nuclear arms-control treaties. In the early 1980s, President Reagan said we must trust but verify; Bush just seems to want trust.

The second event was the announcement by Osama bin Laden that he possesses nuclear weapons and intends to use them against the United States. I listened rather closely to what President Bush had to say about that, and he has spoken to it twice. The first time he said that if Bin Laden does not have nuclear weapons, United States will prevent him from getting them, and that if he does, the United States will prevent him from using them. And the second time at a press conference with Pakistan Prime Minister Mussarraf, himself a recent possessor of nuclear arsenals, Bush was asked about Bin Laden's possession of nuclear weapons, and he answered, "Well, Bin Laden is a very evil man." As he likes to say, "the evildoer," but he did not concretely address the subject. So, I couldn't find anywhere in the U.S. government response an assurance that Bin Laden does not have those weapons, even though you do hear seeping out from sort of expert sources that probably he doesn't.

Looking Back a Century

Anyway, now to my longer story. I would like to take it clear back to 1914, and I'm going to use a

framework of a few dates that I think would be useful for locating our present moment. The decade that led up to the First World War, which broke out in 1914, is one that had a very surprising resemblance in many respects to the decade that now definitively has ended, the 1990s. Both decades at the beginning and the end of the century were characterized by democratizations in several parts of the world, liberalization, economic globalization, and imperialization—all of which in those days they used to call "progress." All of that was interrupted by the rending shock of the war that broke out in 1914. Permit me to quote what Hannah Arendt, writing in the 1950s, had to say about the decade at the beginning of the 20th century: "Europe was much too busy expanding economically for any nation or social stratum to take political questions seriously. Everything could go on, because nobody cared. This state of affairs lasted exactly until 1914 when, through the very fact of war, the providential character of economic expansion fell apart."

If you exchange the date September 11, 2001 for 1914, I don't think you have a bad description of the 1990s. Certainly both periods ended with incredible suddenness by a huge shock. In 1914 what was set in motion at that time was by no means only of the First World War, although that itself with its many millions dead was shock enough. It also set in motion a kind of spiral of state violence that was to disfigure the twentieth century down to its end, and to form a main theme of political life during that time. And as we know from history, the First World War so severely destabilized many countries that we saw the rise in the Soviet Union, of Bolshevism, which historians think would have been impossible without the terrible defeat of the truly immense—14-15 million man—Czarist army. Likewise, the rise of Nazi Germany had everything to do with the shock delivered to that society, on top of which were imposed the onerous peace terms at Versailles in 1919.

The rise of these two totalitarian powers, each of which slaughtered tens of millions of people, led into

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the Second World War, which was murderous on a scale of magnitude even greater than the First World War. Total war and totalitarianism proved themselves to be brothers under the skin, and each fed on the other. But I think it's fair to say that the driving force here was war, which was steadily absorbing the fantastic scientific inventions of that period—submarine warfare, air warfare, tanks, radar, and so forth. And, interestingly, almost none of this was foreseen as it happened. It's only really in retrospect that any of this seems to hang together and to tell a story.

Turning Point at Hiroshima

In any case, this spiral of violence, to race ahead here, reached a very strange and unexpected turning point in the summer of 1945, with the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. On the one hand, the bomb represented a culmination of that rising spiral of violence. In fact, it represented the absolute maximum of achievable violence for human beings since it placed our entire species at risk of its extermination. And there was nothing, in that respect, any further technical invention that could really add, except to multiply the overkill, which was already astronomical. Yet, on the other hand, this culmination also represented a kind of cessation, or pause, in the terrible violence of the first half of the century. It seemed to have something to do with stopping, or holding back, the cycle of world wars, that had taken place in the first half of the century. And this, of course, was that glacier pause, lasting down until roughly 1990, known as the cold war.

In part that was because an understanding did develop in that time, that this technology, once it had been built up to its world menacing proportions, was really unusable for any political purpose. And in fact, the phrase "nuclear wars" many have said is a kind of an absurdity, because war had always been, historically, a contest of force, in which

one side lost, and the other won. In so-called "nuclear war" there are, of course, no winners, or even any losers. There is simply oblivion for all.

It is equally true the cold war was not so cold. What people called at the time the "periphery"—Ethiopia, Angola, Vietnam, Salvador, Guatemala—you might say were the displaced hostilities of the great powers who found themselves unable to engage directly without blowing themselves off the face of the earth. This displaced hostility brought mayhem and chaos to the poor and weak around the world. And in these areas, the cold war would really be better described as a kind of hot peace.

Nevertheless, it remains true in what had been, for the century up to that time the central cockpit of war, mainly the European theater, things remained somewhat quiet. It's as if the violence of the century, which had been increasing up to that point, had in a manner of speaking, been centralized into a single location. It was compacted, into a single, annihilating machine consisting of the really interlocked nuclear arsenals of the two sides of the cold war. And these powers in a sense worked out a kind of deal. Although the staggering arsenal was available for use, if you did use it, you had to use all of it. In which case, you would bring on annihilation—your own as well as everyone else's. Therefore, this was the whole point in the arrangement that it was better not to use it at all. And such was the logic of nuclear deterrence—the dominance strategy of the age. Otherwise known as "mutual assured destruction," a bargain with the devil if there ever was one. I want to add that while this arrangement provided a certain precarious safety, at the same time it held the world poised over its utter destruction, at twenty minutes from any given moment. This arrangement was very prone to delusion because it was very easy to forget that the supposed safety was brought by this continuous threat of annihilation, which could occur at any minute.

And yet of course, during the cold war, that did not happen. Maybe there was some prudence, maybe some skill, maybe a lot of luck was involved.

This brings me down to the turning point whose ten year anniversary was the original occasion for this conference: the end of the cold war. At that time, of course, there was a great deal of good news. For one thing, that terrible, concentrated global hostility of the cold war relaxed and was diffused. For another, no other great new global rivalry rose to challenge the new peace, as the cold war had, after the peace in 1945. There was no, strictly speaking, defeated power waiting in the wings for vengeance, as Germany had after 1918. We embarked on what I regarded then, and regard even more now, as a period of deceptive calm. And this is the period, the 1990s, that so much resembles the first decade of this century, which definitively ended on September 11. Once again, liberal democracy seems to be spreading free trade, spreading globalization, and we entered a period in which economics seem to dominate politics to the point in which politics as a whole almost seem to have forgotten whether we are speaking of a domestic or a foreign policy.

The Deceptive Calm

Well, what was the problem then? Where in this period of deceptive calm of the 1990s were we in this history or story of the development of violence that began in 1914? Was that story in fact over, as many people were saying? Had we reached the end of history as it was famously said?

Just to capsule it very briefly, I think there were two largely overlooked problems. The first was the cold war periphery, formerly called the third world, but now nameless. This area was boiling with dissatisfaction, and in many cases local violence bordered on anarchy and even included episodes of genocide. Formerly speaking, European colonialism had

ended, but the sequel had not turned out to be very inspiring. For one thing, globalization turned out to worsen, not improve, economic equality. And increasingly the world was divided into a kind of overclass, in the developed countries and the global underclass, the so-called developing ones.

The second was how the issue of weapons of mass destruction simply dropped out of sight: the issue was almost completely unaddressed. Nuclear arms control, for one thing, was absolutely stalled. And in the meantime, chemical and biological weapons were rising up to accompany their big brother, the nuclear weapons. And so it was with the ignorance of these two problems that the deceptive calm that existed even during the cold war deepened considerably.

However, there were some who said it even at the time. You didn't have to be a Cassandra to see that the point of intersection between the resentment and fury of the world's underclass and the fantastic destructive power of modern technology would be a crisis bound to overthrow the deceptive calm of the post-cold war period. And that is what I think happened on September 11.

Now, you will remember that as soon as that happened, a thought sprang unbidden into millions of minds, instantaneously. It was not a spin thing, or a TV thing. It really was something that flashed into millions of minds and the thought was that the world has changed forever. What was left unclear was how the world would change, and what exactly was that change, and why had that thought flown into so many minds at once. The reason was that people felt if those two great towers—which we would be able to see, out this window, if they were still there—if those two great towers—which were perhaps the most impressive human artifacts certainly in the United States and maybe in the entire world—if those could just melt away and vanish in 3 or 4 seconds, what

was safe? What could not vanish? What could not melt away? And I think that feeling, of the utter fragility and mortality, if you will, of the human and, in fact, the natural world, was what people felt in their bones, if not in their conscious minds, when those towers went down.

The point is that this is true. And it has been true since 1945. The difference was that people now felt it viscerally, in their gut. They've tasted it, so to speak. So really, looking back, it wasn't so much that the world had changed. It was as if after a period of sleep, people began to wake up and see the world as it really is and long has been.

And yet, at the same time, there have been changes. And the story that I have been threading this talk on has continued and advanced. And it's important to understand what those changes are. During the cold war, the violence of the earlier part of the century was in a sense concentrated into a kind of poison, of fantastic virulence, that it was thereby removed for a while, and kind of put on the shelf. Fortunately, we got through that period and we didn't destroy ourselves. What I think is happening now is that this concentrated violence is beginning to seep back into the world. It's losing the all or nothing character that it had in the cold war. But this change does not mean a return to conditions like those in the first half of the 20th century, before 1945, in which large conventional wars were fightable, and were fought. The shift from conventional weapons to weapons of mass destruction that happened in 1945 has not been reversed, and therefore what is seeping back into the world now are the weapons of mass destruction.

The New Proliferation Threat

In concrete terms what this means is nuclear proliferation. The proliferation of the biological and chemical weapons, and proliferation means not only states, such as India and Pakistan. And it is not

only Iran or Iraq that seem to be seeking this technology. It means our old friend, Osama bin Laden, who does not have his hand on nuclear weapons now, but would dearly love to, and there are many out there of his kind who would like to do likewise. And of course, it is not nuclear weapons alone that are sought, but the repulsive little siblings in the family of weapons of mass destruction, the chemical and the biological weapons.

So, what's happened, I think, is that after a decade of vacation, we're back at the brink. But actually now, there are many brinks. You remember that in the cold war, the brink was a clear precipice that divided East and West, and either you had to go over it all the way, or not. It was apocalyptic and overwhelming, and maybe for that reason in part, we didn't cross it. Now, annihilation is different. The brink is really like cracks in glass in our world, and there are many brinks. One of them runs just to the south of here, down where the World Trade Center was. Others run through the New Jersey suburbs, the Washington, DC post offices, television network mail-rooms, and now through a town in Connecticut where the 94-year-old lady, Otilie Lundgren, has been killed by weaponized anthrax. These brinks run also through Pakistan, where there are several dozen nuclear weapons now in existence, as well as New Delhi, and other places around the world. All of this is new. And what unfortunately has happened is that the very clear brink, that very clear dividing line, between conventional and nuclear war, in which there was a kind of safety, not very much perhaps, but certainly a kind of safety, is now getting blurred by the new weapons of mass destruction. They're spreading into new hands, by the loose nooks that are leaking out of the Soviet territories, out of Russia, are blurring it.

And yet all these threats, these new forms of the threat of annihilation that are emerging and becoming visible, are unfor-

tunately not replacing the old one. That's the crazy part of the situation, because these new weapons has in fact been added to the old, and this brings me back to the Putin-Bush announcement—of their parallel declarations to reduce nuclear weapons. They spoke of going down to 1,700 to 2,300, maybe on the order of 2,000 nuclear weapons. Now we hear from our government that this not only takes us out of the cold war, but it takes us out of the post cold-war period. False. There is not city in the United States or in Russia or in anywhere that can not be destroyed by one single nuclear weapon. Two thousand is plenty of overkill.

In other words, we not only now live in a world similar—not politically but in the technical sense—to that of the cold war, in which we depend on mutual annihilation for our safety and our relations with Russia. But we now propose to live in that world for the next ten years. So when the next anniversary comes around for this conference, we're still going to be in exactly the same situation with regard to the big nuclear arsenals. There will be fewer, there will be less overkill, that will be good, but there will be plenty of overkill left.

If you want to understand the magical, the glamorous, the unshakable appeal that nuclear weapons have for the leaders of states and others, just start asking yourself why it is that in ten years time, we wish to live under the threat of instant annihilation from that rotting old arsenal in Russia. They're not willing to give up our arsenal in order to rid ourselves of that threat. Now if you can explain that back, I think you would be getting very close to the reason why these weapons have such a grip on the imagination of those who have them.

I would be very much remiss if I didn't share with you the direction that I think is the right one and the one in which we should go:

First, we can not look at the different aspects of the issue of weapons of mass

destruction in isolation from one another any longer. They have to be seen as whole.

Second, the U.S-Russian decisions about their arsenals are going to set the pace for the whole show. If we decide that we have to have 2,000 nuclear weapons in the year 2010, we are guaranteed that other poorer nations will say, as India has already said, that they don't want to live with nuclear apartheid. The two-tier world, to use a phrase beloved by the strategist, is an unstable world. It's got to go one way or the other. Either it's going to go to zero nuclear weapons, or it's going to go to a much fuller proliferation.

Third, proliferation in our day does not mean proliferation to only countries. This applies to all three types of weapons of mass destruction. It means proliferation to groups that are not countries, such as al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the others. Because in a world of proliferating weapons of mass destruction and blurring brinks that I've been speaking about, the globe is awash in this technology. And we're not going to be able to get it under control.

In conclusion, control in this case begins at home. I do not think we can be serious about nuclear, biological, and chemical terrorism, if we're not serious about nonproliferation. And I don't think we can get serious about nonproliferation until we get serious about the existing possession of these arsenals, which means the possession of them by the eight nuclear powers, led by the United States and Russia. So, from my point of view, there is no solution to this fresh wave of rising danger without a commitment, starting with the United States, to proceed to a world without nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction. It's a tall order, I know, but I think it's the clear need of our time.

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