

What Is It Good For?

In the nuclear age, there can be no just war.

By **Stuart Reid**

A LONG TIME AGO, in a galaxy far, far away—actually, it was 1958, in the Royal County of Berkshire—I was staying with a friend from school one Sunday and, as a treat, his mother took us to Mass at the big American air base nearby. In those happy days, the guy in the guard hut did not pat you down with a metal detector before lifting the barrier. He didn't even ask for ID, as I recall, just leaned toward the driver's window, smiled, asked what our business was, and then let us through with a "Yes, ma'am" and a friendly salute.

The chapel was small, businesslike, perhaps rather austere. Above the altar was an electronic indicator board that would have started flashing THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING, or some such, if Soviet bombers had suddenly been detected heading our way. At the back of the chapel, close to the exit, were two airmen in combat gear—jump suits, maps strapped to knees, lots of zips, foil-wrapped Hershey bars stashed somewhere along with vitamins, Benzedrine, Russian phrase books, Swiss Army pen knives, compasses, possibly pistols, or, better still, revolvers...

"Introibo ad altare Dei," said the priest.

"Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam," said the server.

The two airmen followed the familiar, ancient liturgy, as they had done hundreds of times before. It was business as usual: kneel, stand, genuflect, bow, cross yourself, try not to let your mind wander or your eyes stray, and be ready to scramble if that freakin' sign begins to

flash. It would not for a moment have occurred to these two good young men that there was anything incongruous about being dressed to kill while worshipping the Prince of Peace, and to kill, furthermore, on a scale never hitherto imagined.

Nor, I doubt, would it have occurred to anyone else at Mass that morning. So far as we boys were concerned, everything was not only congruous but admirable and glamorous. This was the real deal. We were in America, if vicariously, among people who came from the same gene pool as Pat Boone and Montgomery Clift, Doris Day and Natalie Wood, Shelley Berman and Bob Newhart, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. To have been a teenager in England in the late 1950s was to have been an American. We were the products of cultural imperialism, and we loved it. No yoke was ever sweeter.

The Cold War was a motion picture or a giant game of chicken or both. The U.S. was James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause." Russia the smirking boy with the comb between his teeth who chickens first but gets his sleeve stuck in the door handle and drives his car over the cliff. But there was more to this than glamour; it wasn't only make-believe. This was a world of certainty, of moral clarity. These airmen were defending us against atheistic communism and therefore against slave camps, mass murder, and nerdy clothes. To us the nuclear deterrent was cool, and it obviously worked because there had not been a world war for at least 13 years. I mean,

duh! (as we had not yet learnt to say). Only wimps and fellow travelers were against the deterrent.

Now we live in another galaxy. In the 50 years since I knelt with those airmen, the world has changed out of all recognition, and then some. The Cold War has ended, and Western values have triumphed. Films that would once have been restricted are now rated PG. There are rock concerts in Red Square. The Mass is in English. Phil Spector has been banged up for murder. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.

Was it worth it? To a liberal capitalist, certainly; to a liberal democrat, perhaps; but surely not to a conservative. The Cold War itself increasingly looks like displacement therapy, or a military-industrial scam. Who now seriously believes that Washington would have risked millions of American lives in a war over Berlin? As for the nuclear deterrent, it's obviously time to join the peace activists. There will always be nukes, of course—you can't unsplit the atom—and while Russia and China have them, it is perhaps just as well that the United States should have them, too. Even so, their deployment signals that you are prepared to massacre civilians, and that is against the rules of war. It is barbaric. It is also stupid, since one of these devices could go off when you are not looking, especially if it were to find its way into the hands of an Islamist or a survivalist with a grudge.

Whatever else he may be, Barack Obama is not stupid, and he can see the downside of deterrent. The president

may not be hanging as loose as he did on the hustings, but the brand looked pretty assured in Prague last month when he undertook to lead the world into a nuclear-free future.

“Today,” he told his Czech brothers and sisters, “I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” No one could object to that. Or to: “[A]s a nuclear power—as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon—the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it.”

Maybe you could object to that last if you were, say, Bill Kristol. Immediately after the Prague speech the son of the father of neoconservatism pursed his lips in the *Washington Post* and wondered bossily whether Obama meant to imply disapproval of America’s use of nuclear weapons in 1945.

The substance of Kristol’s beef, however, was that peace could not be secured the Obama way—by talking to bad guys like the Iranians—but only by spreading “liberal democracy” and encouraging “responsible regimes.” Could he really be saying this? Again? Gulp. Yes, he could. “But,” added Kristol, “we have a long way to go before achieving a world of pacific liberal regimes. George W. Bush’s hope for a world without tyranny is the necessary—though perhaps still not the sufficient—precondition to a world without nuclear weapons.”

If a nuclear-free future is contingent on a string of Iraqs, then forget it: let’s keep the nukes. But maybe things are not as desperate as Kristol fears. Once you removed the glossy packaging, there was less to Obama’s rhetoric than met the eye. At one point he gave us a glimpse of something that closely resembled the Bush doctrine. “Let me be clear,” he said. “Iran’s nuclear and

ballistic missile activity poses a real threat, not just to the United States, but to Iran’s neighbors and our allies. The Czech Republic and Poland have been courageous in agreeing to host a defense against these missiles. As long as the threat from Iran persists, we intend to go forward with a missile defense system that is cost-effective and proven.”

Iran is no danger to anyone, least of all the United States, but in Prague Obama chose to maintain the fiction that the deployment of missile defense shields in Poland and the Czech Republic is nothing more, and nothing less, than good old Yankee altruism. These shields, he was saying, will defend you against nuclear attack by Iran. Oh, yeah? I am grateful to Justin Raimondo for drawing my attention to this report from Prague in the *Daily Telegraph*:

Arena Protivinska, 30, described herself as a ‘big fan’ of Mr. Obama but accused him of ‘hypocrisy’ for urging world peace while also pushing forward with the missile shield. ‘He sounded like George W. Bush saying that we should be afraid in order to justify missile defense.’”

Still, it would be churlish not to acknowledge that Obama did us all a service in Prague by reminding us that America, as the only nation ever to have used nukes, had a moral responsibility to act. The arguments against nuclear weapons have not changed since Hiroshima, and it never does any harm to return to first principles.

The key point, the one that trumps all others, is that you may not do evil that good may come of it. The argument that dropping the atomic bombs on Japan was no crime because it ended the war is no argument at all. Women are perhaps better at seeing this than are men. Here is Dorothy Day’s reaction to the news from Japan in August 1945:

Mr. Truman was jubilant. President Truman. True man; what a strange name, come to think of it. We refer to Jesus Christ as true God and true Man. Truman is a true man of his time in that he was jubilant. He was not a son of God, brother of Christ, brother of the Japanese, jubilating as he did. He went from table to table on the cruiser which was bringing him home from the Big Three conference, telling the great news; ‘jubilant’ the newspapers said. Jubilate Deo. We have killed 318,000 Japanese.

That is, we hope we have killed them, the Associated Press, on page one, column one of the *Herald Tribune* says. The effect is hoped for, not known. It is to be hoped they are vaporized, our Japanese brothers, scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Eaton.

The great English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe was another who recognized the wickedness that had been done in our name. In 1956, while a research fellow at Oxford, she protested vigorously against the university awarding an honorary degree to Harry S. Truman. She wrote an unforgiving pamphlet setting out her reasons for believing that the former president should be reviled rather than honored. Like Dorothy, she was not too sissy to use scorn as a weapon:

I have long been puzzled by the common cant about President Truman’s courage in making this decision [to drop the bomb]. Of course, I know that you can be cowardly without having reason to

think you are in danger. But how can you be courageous? Light has come to me lately: the term is an acknowledgement of the truth. Mr. Truman was brave because, and only because, what he did was so bad. But I think the judgment unsound. Given the right circumstances (e.g., that no one whose opinion matters will disapprove), a quite mediocre person can do spectacularly wicked things without thereby becoming impressive.

Where would we be without women? Men don't like the truth about modern war, which is that it is often both criminal and cowardly. The rot began in World War II when, abandoning all civilized rules of conduct, we terrorized and murdered hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians by using so-called conventional weapons. Then we developed a way of using nuclear power to kill even more people but at less risk to ourselves. Risk-free war is what we now crave, with the almost invariable result that—despite the skill and courage of the poor bloody infantry—more civilians than combatants die when the drums begin to roll. The smart bombs we drop from drones operated from Kissimmee, or wherever, are seldom clever enough to distinguish between a terrorist training camp and a bunch of whirling dervishes at a folk wedding.

The truth is that man is no longer civilized enough to wage war. It's why we lost in Vietnam and Iraq. It is why we will lose in Afghanistan. War doesn't work. "[W]ar is the worst solution for all sides," said Pope Benedict XVI in August 2006. "It brings no good to anyone, not even to the apparent victors. We understand this very well in Europe, after the two world wars." ■

Stuart Reid writes from London.

Right Reflections

Conservatism should oppose the liberal state without becoming statist.

By David Bromwich

CONSERVATISM MAY HAVE given up too much when it became an -ism. "A disposition to preserve," wrote Edmund Burke, "and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Everything else is vulgar in the conception, perilous in the execution." He never called himself conservative. The adjective and the noun both came into English too late for that. Yet synonyms were available, and Burke did not make use of those, either.

Ability, as he saw it, was an expression of active energy—not always a good thing. Disposition, on the other hand, is fixed. It never goes anywhere. So Burke distrusted energy in politics—distrusted (you might say) people and countries that want to be on the move. The last sentence of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* turns from its ostensible subject and alludes to the British Empire and its crimes. This book, he tells the French politician for whom he has written it, is the work of one "who snatches from his share in the endeavours which are used by good men to discredit opulent oppression, the hours he has employed on your affairs; and who in doing so persuades himself he has not departed from his usual office." *Opulent oppression*: as if riches sometimes did things other than buoy up a well-earned mass of property.

"A disposition to preserve" is the central intuition of many Americans who call themselves libertarians. Some of them also call themselves conservatives, but if they say that word, they

know they will spend the afternoon in explanation. Their perception is that you should not have to earn the right to live unmolested. The main harm of property would seem to be its encouragement of self-conceit, but though wary of the danger, the creed of liberty is to live and let live without resentment. The broadness of so simple an appeal is a tremendous political resource, and it makes the libertarian the natural antagonist of people who like to be up and doing things—for themselves, for others. The distinction of person is immaterial, the point is to keep going. But it is shallow to think of such people as liberals. They descend from a timeless party of improvers, and there is goodwill in their energy. Even virtue, however, needs some check.

"I do not like to see," said Burke, "any thing destroyed; any void produced in society; any ruin on the face of the land." Might there be some link between the cause of constitutional liberty and the defense of an environment without which all creation would shrink to a man-made scale? This seems at least a possible convergence of motives between people of diverse beliefs whose largest concern is the protection of a restrained liberty.

It is an odd fact of American society in the past 60 years that a section of the party of improvers—the improvers of wars—have so often called themselves conservatives. There are family dynasties of warriors, of course, especially in the South, who form an undeclared