

THE HISTORIAN AND THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE

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At its annual business meeting in December 1982, the American Historical Association went on record in favor of an immediate halt in the "production of any new nuclear weapons systems at this time as a policy prejudicial to our national security and to the pursuit of peace." The February 1983 issue of AHA Perspectives notes that the members of the association's Council reluctantly approved this resolution, which was adopted by a large majority of those attending and voting at the annual business meeting.

All of us who teach history in the nation's colleges and universities must now ask ourselves: Should we endorse the stand taken by the AHA and do all we can to promote this position in our classes? Or should we resist this intrusion of contemporary politics into the academic world and ignore it?

I believe that the AHA "nuclear freeze" resolution raises issues that must be faced by all historians. There are two distinct questions involved. First, is it appropriate for the AHA and for American historians generally to take a position publicly on the nuclear arms race? Is there any one "correct" historical position on contemporary policy matters around which a true consensus can be achieved and promoted? Secondly, is the position taken by the AHA a reasonable and defensible one, or is it open to serious question?

I

I think that there can be no question that historians as individuals can and should take positions on all issues of national policy. We are citizens as well as scholars, concerned Americans as well as teachers, and we must have the right to express our beliefs and views freely. The nuclear arms race is one of the great issues of our time and one on which nearly all have deeply-held feelings and convictions.

The difficulty, as I see it, is in the assumption that there is one correct historical position, and only one. All historians might agree that a nuclear war would be a great human catastrophe and that everything possible should be done to avoid its occurrence. But from that starting point on, there is bound to be disagreement. Some would advocate bilateral arms reduction talks with the Soviet Union; others would prefer United Nations disarmament efforts; still others would opt for heavier defense spending as the best way to avert nuclear disaster. Some would cite Munich and appeasement to argue that only through military strength and diplomatic firmness can war be prevented; others would argue with equal certainty that Vietnam proved the folly of relying on military force to achieve peaceful ends. The lesson of history, in other words, is not at all clear.

Editor's Note: Robert Divine's essay deals with an important, yet controversial, issue facing the history profession. We would invite thoughts and reactions from the readers of Teaching History. Professor Divine invites comments from anyone who wishes to enter into dialogue on the subject, or respondents can write to the Editor of Teaching History who will solicit Divine's reply for use in a "point/counterpoint" exchange in the journal itself.

The concept of historians taking a single, official position on such a complex question as the nuclear arms race is presumptuous in the extreme. The AHA resolution assumes that all historians agree, to cite its preamble, "that in modern history all large scale accumulations of weapons by rival powers have invariably led to the worsening of their relations, and usually to war." Any historian I respect would blanch at the word "invariably" and immediately begin to argue that in the case of the United States, at least, most of our wars were preceded by a conspicuous lack of military preparation, or at best, only a very belated effort to arm the nation just before the outbreak of hostilities. As any graduate student could attest, controversy, not consensus, is the hallmark of historical scholarship. We are still arguing over the causes of the War of 1812, over the factors that led Wilson to advocate war against Germany in 1917, and over the responsibility of Franklin D. Roosevelt for Pearl Harbor.

It is equally presumptuous, in my opinion, for historians as a group to give the President and the Congress advice on national policy. In the first place, I doubt that a resolution of the American Historical Association carries much political weight, especially when compared to one adopted by the American Federation of Labor or the National Association of Manufacturers. The leaders of the nation are not accustomed to consulting with the historical fraternity to trying to hammer out current policy. More important, I think that the leaders are right in bypassing historical judgment. Despite the oft-cited aphorism by George Santayana and despite Ernest May's eloquent pleas in Lessons of the Past for giving historians a role in the policy-making process, we have relatively little to offer. Each historical situation is unique, and while certain common themes reoccur and clear parallels can be drawn between present and past events, rarely does history provide us with a ready-made answer to contemporary dilemmas. In fact, attempts to find simple formulas in history have led the nation grievously astray. In the 1930s, the belief that one-sided American policies had led to our entry into World War I produced the Neutrality Acts, which, as FDR warned, helped accelerate the coming of war by encouraging Adolf Hitler to proceed with his plans for aggression. More recently, the so-called "lesson" of Munich was a prime factor in the escalation of the Vietnam War. Neither John F. Kennedy nor Lyndon B. Johnson, who lived through the 1930s, wanted to be known as the Neville Chamberlain of his era. A soft policy in the 1930s helped lead to the outbreak of World War II; a hard policy in the 1960s was directly responsible for the tragic Vietnam War. There are no universal lessons to be drawn from historical experience; it all depends on the time, the place and the circumstances. The historian is as fallible as anyone else in designing solutions for bewildering contemporary problems.

It is my belief, then, that the historical profession should not speak with one voice on national issues. Rather individual historians should feel free to speak out as citizens, advocating views and policies they feel are sound and in the national interest. But they must make clear that they are fallible individuals, not professional prophets, and that their ideas have no greater weight than those of other concerned citizens in a democratic society. It is most important that historians show restraint when they address these complex current issues in the classroom. It is certainly reasonable to draw parallels between the past and the present when teaching history; but teachers have the responsibility not to impose their values on students. The usual injunction to show all sides of the issue, to stress the complexity of human affairs rather than oversimplifying; and above all to treat opposing views with tolerance and compassion applies most clearly when the historian ventures from discussing the problems of the past to those that trouble our society today.

II

Beyond the abstract issue of the historian's role in debating current policy issues, I have great difficulty with the actual content of the "nuclear freeze" resolution adopted by the AHA. Here, on a subject where clarity and precision are above all vital, the authors of the resolution call in very general and overarching terms for what appears to me to be unilateral disarmament.

The resolution begins with three premises, none of which is self-evident. In essence, the authors assert that an arms build-up has been shown historically to lead to war rather than to peace, that instead of leading to negotiations the increased weapons' build-up during the Cold War has led to an escalating arms race, and that this escalation has been responsible for preventing an improvement in Soviet-American relations. (The unstated assumption appears to be that without a nuclear weapons race, there would be no conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, and thus no Cold War or danger of nuclear catastrophe.) From these premises, then, the authors of the resolution conclude with their call for a cessation in "the production of any new nuclear weapons systems at this time as a policy prejudicial to our national security."

The vagueness of the language is regrettable. Does this call for a freeze on the introduction of "new weapons systems" apply only to the United States? If it does include Russia, then why the reference to "our national security" instead of world peace and well-being? Why does the resolution refer only to "new weapons systems" when the basic premise is that all nuclear weapons are dangerous; would it not be better to call for the halt in production of all nuclear weapons if these things alone are the primary cause of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union?

The most astonishing thing about the resolution is what it fails to say. Nowhere is there any mention of inspection or any bi-lateral or international mechanism to achieve the resolution's goal. The nuclear freeze resolution adopted by the House of Representatives, and all responsible arguments by private groups that support it, stress the qualifying phrase, "mutually verifiable." The freeze that most people support is at least one that is to be negotiated with the Soviet Union and that will have some guarantees that both sides will observe it. Yet the American Historical Association resolution incredibly calls for the United States to stop producing any new nuclear weapons systems as a gesture for peace, without asking for a similar move by the Soviet Union. The AHA resolution is thus out of step with even the main body of the nuclear freeze movement in the United States; it calls for nothing less than a form of unilateral disarmament.

III

What then should the individual historian do who is concerned about the terrible danger of nuclear war? I have no universal answers, but let me suggest several possible options.

One can join the nuclear freeze movement and argue that the United States, as the nation responsible for developing the first nuclear weapons and using them against civilians, bears the obligation to mankind to take the first meaningful steps to halt the arms race. If you believe that the Soviet Union has simply been responding to American behavior, first in building the atomic bomb by 1949, then in following our lead with the hydrogen bomb, ICBMs, MIRVs, cruise missiles, etc., it is reasonable to

conclude that we should take the lead in a gradual process of deescalation. Reaching agreement not to produce and deploy a new generation of land missiles, such as the MX, would be a good first step to test out this hypothesis. If in fact the Russians would agree to such a limited freeze, then we could move toward reducing the existing nuclear arsenals of the superpowers.

A second possibility is to proceed along a similar but more cautious path and try to return to the SALT process of the 1970s. The first SALT agreement limited the deployment of ABMs and placed a temporary ceiling on offensive missiles. SALT II was designed to impose equal numerical limits on offensive weapons and to set ceilings for each type of launcher, from land-based ICBMs to submarine missiles. Growing opposition in the United States Senate and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 doomed it to failure. But both nations claim that they have been following its broad outline, and it would not be too difficult to renegotiate SALT II, and then try to go beyond its obvious limitations in SALT III. This path, arms reduction, rather than a weapons freeze, opens up the possibility for traditional diplomacy to regain control over a runaway arms race. For many, it seems the only sensible way out of our current dilemma--using political means to master technological processes.

There is at least one other alternative. For more than three decades, the United States and the Soviet Union have managed to conduct their global rivalry without resorting to armed force against each other. Given the frequency of war between major nations in the past, it can be argued that nuclear weapons actually prevented World War III. Once the ultimate use of force became unthinkable, the contending nations were compelled to oppose each other at lower levels of violence--in conventional wars fought in part by surrogates as in Korea, in brutal onslaughts of rhetoric, in expensive campaigns of foreign aid and propaganda aimed at the uncommitted nations of the Third World. And, above all else, the super powers engaged in the vast build-up of nuclear arms, designed not to be used in anger, but to insure that the opponent was never tempted to take the fatal step toward all-out war. It has been an expensive and tense solution, but it has prevented a major war since 1945 and may be the best way for mankind to survive.

A freeze, new efforts at arms control, or the continuation of the existing nuclear competition are all viable alternatives. What is most heartening about the current concern being expressed over nuclear weapons, whether by freeze advocates or believers in peace through strength, is the willingness to face the fundamental issue of our time openly and candidly. For most of the nuclear era, the American people have ignored the implications of these awesome weapons--they were simply too terrible to contemplate. As Herman Kahn discovered, most Americans did not want to think about the unthinkable. So we pretended nuclear war could never happen, or we dealt with surrogate issues, such as fallout from testing in the fifties or the risks of nuclear power plants in the seventies. Only now in the 1980s have we finally begun to face squarely the question of how best to avert the danger of nuclear catastrophe.

The debate is healthy and historians as individuals should participate in it. We have special gifts to bring to bear. Our knowledge of the past and our realization that no one group ever has a monopoly on truth should enable us to offer perspective and restraint on a topic where fear and emotion too often prevail. By engaging in the calm and thoughtful analysis of the nuclear dilemma confronting America today, historians can contribute to the forging of a national consensus that may help the country and the world survive the 20th century.