NUCLEAR ADDICTION:
A RESPONSE

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AT THE OUTSET, I ACKNOWLEDGE A CERTAIN WARINESS ABOUT ENGAGING in moral discourse related to the use of nuclear weapons. Too often the language of morality is used to obfuscate, not elucidate. In the contemporary absence of moral authority, the temptation to manipulate traditional symbols for ulterior ends is rampant. As authority weakens and anxiety spreads, the name of God, the writings of prophets, and even the commentaries of bishops are easily invoked. The correct principles to guide us through the muddle of modern politics and the perils of nuclear deterrence do not come easily. Yet they exist, and we can find them. This is our challenge. For despite the relativism, the propaganda, the fear, I believe that with humility and grace we can discern right from wrong and discover what peace requires.

Secretary Weinberger begins his moral defense of present American nuclear policy with the injunction of Moses: "... I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live." Unfortunately, Mr. Weinberger fails to explain what blessing can be found in the Reagan Administration’s $220 billion plan to add 7,000 new nuclear weapons to an arsenal from which 170,000 times the firepower used on Hiroshima can already be launched.1 Is it the promise of life or a curse that speeds us along a course that risks the extinction of our civilization, our species, and perhaps the biosphere itself. Lofty quotations from the Bible, the popes, and the bishops shed no light on the Reagan nuclear strategy and its compatibility with concepts such as just cause, comparative justice, right intention, last resort, probability of success, or proportionality.

1 See Testimony of Secretary Caspar Weinberger before the United States Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, October 28, 1983; see also “Arms Control and National Security,” 1983, p. 12, published by the Arms Control Association, Washington, D.C.

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Mr. Weinberger states, "Let us not lose confidence that America has a special mission for peace." Yet what does this "special mission" require? How do we "deter aggression and preserve and foster democratic freedom" and at the same time live in the world with Russia in a way that permits ending the nuclear arms race before it ends us?

The first step requires a recognition that evil has not restricted itself to the Soviet Union. The seven deadly sins plague the Western world as well. The unnecessary suffering of people and the ravaging of nature are hardly confined to Russian-controlled territory. Although the nation-state is never founded on humility, it may certainly fall out of pride. Exalting our freedom while launching a massive nuclear-weapons buildup is not the way of peace.

Of course, Secretary Weinberger justifies his program by pointing to the huge Soviet buildup and the perceived need to deter "credibly" any Russian nuclear warfighting scenario our experts can imagine. For nearly forty years we have gone on in this way, engaging in an arms race, modernizing and expanding our nuclear weapons, and so have the Soviets. As a result, we have heightened our insecurity, encouraged nuclear proliferation, and begun to see the weakening of our European alliance. Something is wrong. As the American bishops said in their recent pastoral letter, "What previously had been defined as a safe and stable system of deterrence is today viewed with political and moral skepticism."2

It has taken many years, but now more and more people are asking questions about the precise role nuclear weapons play in our security. Nuclear parity between Russia and the United States so profoundly changed the utility of these weapons that it has required a long time for the meaning of our predicament to come into clear focus. Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense in the Nixon administration, recently said, "These weapons . . . are useless for military purposes."3 In war games at the Army War College, it is difficult to find an officer willing to initiate the use of battlefield nuclear weapons, since no clear gain can be perceived. No one will guarantee that once the "firebreak" between conventional and nuclear war is crossed, general annihilation will not follow. Yet, apparently the meaning of this nuclear cul-de-sac has not penetrated the political thinking that now guides our nuclear buildup. How else can we explain the glutinous demand for more atomic weapons at a time of such profound nuclear overkill?

Secretary Weinberger asserts that the United States must build more "very modern and accurate" nuclear weapons in order to avoid the necessity of targeting civilian population centers and in order to be able to retaliate against the hardened military targets of the Soviets. Such a rationale obscures the fact that the United States already possesses the capability to retaliate against a multitude of military and economic targets such as military bases, troop

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concentrations, marshalling yards, bridges, roads, and factories without specifically targeting cities. It also obscures the fact that so many military targets are within or near cities that striking them entails killing a massive number of noncombatants. Secretary Weinberger’s call for more accurate nuclear weapons also ignores the fact that a first strike by the Soviets would leave empty silos for his proposed new missiles to retaliate against. In any event, with or without new American nuclear weapons, a first nuclear strike by Russia carries the risk of escalation to total nuclear war and the complete destruction of both Russia and America. Therefore, it is not plausible except by mistake or madness.

Simply put, the United States and the Soviet Union are nuclear giants that are paralyzed by their own mutual hostage relationship. Try as they will, by testing, developing and deploying more nuclear weapons systems, neither will break out of the curse of assured mutual destruction.4

Secretary Weinberger quotes Winston Churchill, saying that Neville Chamberlain “lacked imagination in evil.” Yet, what evil can be imagined that equals the deepening fear that drives the nuclear arms race forward and the specter of holocaust that waits at the finish line? The fact that no war has broken out between Russia and the United States proves very little about the future. Short-term perceptions of “security” can be purchased through an addictive and ultimately lethal process. The late Gregory Bateson put it well when he said

As is commonly the case in biological systems, the short-time deterrent effect is achieved at the expense of long-time cumulative change. The actions which today postpone disaster result in an increase in strength on both sides of the competitive system to ensure a greater instability and greater destruction if and when the explosion occurs. It is this fact of cumulative change from one act of threat to the next that gives the system the quality of addiction. The addict may think that each “fix” is like the previous fix, and indeed each is alike in staving off the feelings of deprivation. But, in truth, each fix differs from the previous fix in that the thresholds and magnitudes of all relevant variables have shifted.5

Bateson characterized the nuclear arms race as evil because over time the process itself deepens distrust, increases instability, and inexorably leads to catastrophic war. Each new round complicates the relationship with new weapons that only intensify military insecurity. Such is the record since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In addition to the self-reinforcing quality of the nuclear addiction, Bateson points to the scale—“the sheer quantity of human pain that these machines can generate and the danger of their toxic effects spreading from the killing of a few millions of people to the upsetting of world ecological process.”6 It is these factors of time and scale which give rise to what he calls not merely bad action but deadly sin.

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5 Letter of Gregory Bateson to the Regents of the University of California, January 1979.
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St. Thomas Aquinas classified a sin as “deadly” if it “gives rise to others, especially in the manner of a final cause.” In some periods of history pride was considered the most serious offense, in others, avarice. Can anyone doubt that the most deadly sin today, judged by the evil to which it gives rise, is anything other than unrepentant nuclear competition?

Two other errors in the policy Secretary Weinberger represents are the expressed readiness to use nuclear weapons against a conventional attack (“first use”) and the implied permission for nuclear proliferation that Soviet-American competition creates.

Mr. Weinberger states that the “nuclear deterrence we extend to our allies, then, must protect them, not just against nuclear threats, but working with the allies, protect us all against the awesome conventional power of the Soviet Union. . . .” The bishops are quite clear on this point:

Nonetheless, in light of the probable effects of initiating nuclear war, we urge NATO to move rapidly toward the adoption of a “no first use” policy, but doing so in tandem with development of an adequate alternative defense posture.7

Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara urges the same point and asserts that the only effective deterrent against a Soviet conventional attack in Europe is a nonnuclear defense. Since even the limited use of nuclear weapons runs the risk of total nuclear war, it is not credible that an American President would actually permit their use in the absence of a nuclear attack. If this is so, their deterrent value against conventional warfare is seriously eroded. Mr. McNamara states that there are no circumstances that would justify America initiating the use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, like many others, he finds no economic obstacle to achieving the required conventional defense.8 Under these conditions, there can be no moral justification whatsoever for the continued “first-use” doctrine that guides our present strategy in Western Europe.

The final point is the failure of Secretary Weinberger to acknowledge the growing danger of nuclear proliferation. As long as the two superpowers continue their nuclear arms race, other nations will find justification for their own nuclear development. It is utterly myopic to assume a Russian-American competition in atomic weapons without the proliferation of nuclear capacity to dozens of new countries. Unless both superpowers promptly act to rein themselves in and agree on a strategy of nuclear containment, the specter of nuclear terrorism will haunt us forever. Unless we stop together now, we have no moral authority to stop others. It is not even clear that the superpowers have the power to halt proliferation. But while there is any possibility left, we must seize every initiative to create an environment that puts a limit to the spread of nuclear weaponry. Morality and wisdom dictate no less.

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Unquestionably, the horrors of Stalinism and the repression that exists in the Soviet state inspire condemnation and the need for a strong defense and continuing vigilance. But the cure (deterrence) should not be allowed to become the disease of unremitting escalation. A society of hundreds of millions of people has openings. Let us find them. Exchanges of people, ideas, culture, and trade can break down barriers. Although the story of history is that of one war after another, the tale of the nuclear superpowers is just unfolding. The shared threat to our common existence may yet provide a new foundation, and old paradigms may be transcended in a world that can destroy itself.

Morality, at a minimum, requires truth. The truth in this case is that Russia and America are embedded in a neurotic relationship that progressively grows less stable. Soon, we shall either use our new weapons and die or, rejecting the outworn logic of war, find change in some form of mutual trust.