

worldview

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ON FACING ALTERNATIVES

There was a flurry of patriotism in the United States last month. It centered around reaction to an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* which reported that studies were being made of a possible American surrender in an all-out nuclear attack, where our casualties might range from fifteen million to ninety million. President Eisenhower himself initiated the reaction. Senators, Congressmen and other patriots quickly joined in.

The President is normally a man of great patience but, we are told, when he first heard of the *Dispatch* story he "exploded" with indignation. And the Senators are usually divided in their views, but on August 15 they voted an amendment, eighty-eight to two, which forbids the use of government funds to any person or institution who ever proposes or actually conducts any study regarding the "surrender of the government of the United States."

Some might now think the Republic is safer. The executive and legislative branches of the government have made it clear: We will *never* surrender. The Senate's action was hailed in many quarters as a forthright warning to our enemies that, whatever horrors they might inflict on us, they could expect nothing but equal horrors in return. In the thermonuclear age Americans still say: Give me liberty or give me death.

Last month's "surrender" drama thus followed the traditional American script, and to many it may have seemed as comfortable and inevitable as a Western movie, in which no compromise between the good guys and the bad guys is ever possible—and in which the good guys always win. Because, as William Pfaff observes elsewhere in this issue: "We Americans have an old belief that eventually the sheriff must take his pistols and begin that long walk down the sunny center of the street to have it out with the badmen." Do any of us imagine that, at the end of that walk, the sheriff will give in?

One might therefore dismiss the "no surrender" flurry as merely ridiculous, in an ingratiatingly American kind of way. But in an age of weapons

of mass destruction—in issues which involve the fate of the whole human race—it is dangerous to dismiss such an episode so lightly. In itself, last month's argument was probably harmless enough: a matter of rhetoric rather than of substance. But in a wider context it indicates something terribly wrong about a good deal of our thinking and planning in 1958. In the world of the H-bomb we still act as though we had only to decide the issues of simple courage and justice of our frontier days.

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But frontier concepts of courage and justice carried into the world struggle today can prove morally and strategically disastrous. Modern war is different in kind from other wars. In the face of its reality, our traditional notions of "courage," of "surrender," of "liberty or death" have lost much of their validity. Ideas of "massive retaliation," of "absolute victory," of "unconditional surrender" have become, in themselves, suicidal.

As Hannah Arendt has written: "With the appearance of atomic weapons, both the Hebrew-Christian limitation on violence and the ancient appeal to courage have for all practical purposes become meaningless, and with them the whole political and moral vocabulary in which we are accustomed to discuss these matters . . . This situation has placed in jeopardy the very value of courage itself. Man can be courageous only so long as he knows he is survived by those who are like him, that he fulfills a role in something more permanent than himself . . . Or, to put it another way, while there certainly are conditions under which individual life is not worth having, the same cannot be true for mankind. The moment a war can even conceivably threaten the continued existence of man on earth, the alternative between liberty and death has lost its old plausibility."

Any war fought with modern weapons of mass destruction does, of course, "threaten the continued existence of man on earth"—and that much

more than "conceivably." Consequently, to think about the strategy of modern war without at least considering the contingencies of surrender is to fall into the sentimentality of a boy-scout manual. Because in such a war the "good guys" will not necessarily win.

Any responsible government must recognize that, if a thermonuclear war should ever begin, there will be contingencies under which to continue the war would be madness. And not to plan for such contingencies would be folly. The spectacle of eighty-eight Senators forbidding funds to anyone even suggesting such a study is not a reassuring one. One had hoped, after all, that we were a nation of adults, not of adolescents too untried even to contemplate the grim possibilities of life. Because to contemplate these possibilities is not defeatism; it is responsibility. To ignore them is not courage; it is childish escape.

But while many in the United States seem determined to treat a future modern war as though it would be a battle of cowboys and Indians, our friends abroad seem increasingly determined to look at it more soberly. The result is that, in Great Britain especially, a reappraisal of nuclear policy is widespread today.

Last month a significant manifestation of the reappraisal was published. In *The Fearful Choice: A Debate on Nuclear Policy*, twenty-

three distinguished Englishmen—churchmen, philosophers, journalists, members of Parliament, historians, scientists—examine the very question which, in the United States, seems to have been made officially unmentionable: in a nuclear war which is the better policy—surrender or death? Because most of the contributors agree that this, rather than *liberty* or death, is the real alternative which a new war would present to us.

Some might think that *The Fearful Choice* indicates a dangerous failure of nerve before the Russian threat. Certainly much that is said in it is open to serious challenge. But it seems healthy that the problems this book raises should be honestly dealt with rather than evaded, as they still are to a large extent in the United States. The nuclear problem will not go away just because we pretend it isn't really so bad.

Certainly the American people have yet to realize, even dimly, what a war fought with nuclear weapons will mean for themselves as well as for their enemies, for the future as well as for the present. Until they do, they can make no responsible evaluation of the choices facing them in their struggle with the forces of Communism. For their elected officials to deceive them by continuing to talk the brave, but now simple-minded language of a pre-atomic age is to make the functioning of democracy itself impossible. In the cause of justice and freedom, a nation must take risks. But it must also know what terrible risks they are.

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