

# “I’d Rather Be . . .”

*Marden J. Clark*

ONE OF THE POPULAR BUMPER STICKERS of the fifties and sixties told us, “I’d rather be dead than red.” An even more succinct version declared, “Better dead than red.” I remember these slogans because they set up in such bleak terms the choices we seem to face. The first version suggests only a personal choice, the second a national or even universal choice.

Given what has happened in the world since the fifties, we may already have made that choice. By building and deploying and stockpiling all those bombs, we may already have decided that we would not only rather be dead ourselves, we would rather have the whole world dead than red. And the reds apparently have made the same decision regarding us. We may have passed the point of decision, the point where even bumper-sticker logic can have any meaning.

But we *are* still alive. And if life really does mean hope, then surely it’s time that our energies go into translating that hope into reality. One way to aid that translation might be to wonder how we could possibly have created a situation in which the only thing keeping us and the reds from totally destroying each other is the mutual fear of total destruction from the other.

I remember the disillusion and disbelief I felt as our world polarized after World War II. Here was the Soviet Union, who had fought so valiantly alongside us in defeating the Hitler horror, reemerging as the ultimate threat to democracy, with the final destiny of enslaving and communizing the whole world. Only America and other free nations stood in her way.

That threat became reality as the Soviets sealed off half of Germany and all of Eastern Europe, established a foothold in Cuba through Castro, and supported the communist takeover in China. Hitler’s rise to power and the war itself had shown only too vividly how far one nation, one ideology, even one

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man could go toward enslaving the world. Our memories of Stalinist and Leninist internal suppression did nothing to reassure us. The Soviets and communism seemed to be succeeding everywhere in their adventures in global expansion. No wonder we responded with a fear approaching panic. No wonder the bumper stickers blossomed.

But the bumper sticker logic did us and the world a terrible disservice. I am going to risk serious over-simplification and say that bumper-sticker logic *caused* our present situation. The damage may not have come so much from the either/or logic as from the assumption behind the slogan: the assumption that we can expect nothing but aggression from the reds.

Given that assumption, our choice to be rather dead than red meant, of course, that we would go to any limits to avoid being red, just as it meant from their standpoint that they would go to any limits to make sure we would be forced to make the choice, that is, to fulfill that assumption of aggression. And both of us did — went to limits beyond which any of us could have imagined back then.

Along the way lay the humiliation to America of the Bay of Pigs and the humiliation of the Soviet Union at the Cuban missile crisis, the standoff of the Korean War, and for us, the frustration then humiliation of defeat in Vietnam, for them, the heartbreakingly futile resistance of Hungary and Afghanistan.

Far more ominous than any of these was the fact of The Bomb — terrifying enough in its primitive versions that destroyed Nagasaki and Hiroshima, infinitely more terrifying in its later and more sophisticated versions that could be delivered with pin-point accuracy anywhere in the world and multiplied exponentially to almost infinite power. Infinitely more terrifying, that is, if our senses had not been numbed by the sheer numbers, by the overpowering destructive capacities, even by the strange unreality of media depictions of the destruction.

But numbed or not, terrified or not, we live with the reality of all those warheads, all those missiles, all those silos and planes and submarines carrying them, and the inflammatory rhetoric of the past forty years. That rhetoric may have softened during times of mutual pacts or high-level conferences, but I doubt that the logic behind it really has. We would obviously risk having many Grenadans dead than red. We would obviously rather see some of us and many of them dead in El Salvador and Guatemala than red. And the logic figures profoundly in our actions and attitudes in the Near East, at the conference table in Reykjavik — and where else?

Rhetorical figures like “missile gap” and “window of vulnerability” are terribly effective in recommitting us to an intensification of our nuclear buildup. Both metaphors suggest an opening — I can’t resist the image of the black-hatted enemy surging through the gap to destroy us, to make us all either dead or red.

The terrifying irony is that the sky above us is now the window—a genuine window of vulnerability for both sides because both sides are helpless to defend it: neither can keep the other from “delivering” their bombs, even if before delivery one side is essentially wiped out by the other. Hence the seductive

attraction of Star Wars — to close that window by a system set up in space. And then what?

Assuming we survive to see such a system, another system set up farther out in space to control that system? Then another and another, until the world is ringed by such systems as the sun is ringed by the planets. And then we face the irony that it is the sun which keeps us all alive, as continual controlled nuclear explosion.

Seeing where we have arrived, I look back in genuine wonder. Suppose in 1945, just after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world had said: "Here we have this terrifying new weapon. How can we handle it to bring the maximum amount of insecurity and terror to the world?" I don't see how, short of promiscuously exploding bombs, we could have done better. I can imagine C. S. Lewis's Screwtape (who was, you will remember, lieutenant and spokesman for Satan) saying, "No! No! Don't try to get them actually fighting each other. War sometimes brings out good in people. Just work on their fears and ambitions and hatreds. You don't even have to be subtle. Don't let either side forget that the other is out to dominate the world. And don't let the leaders forget the ecstasy of power. Keep each side worried about what the other is developing. Don't let them look at what they're really doing to the world. Just keep them concerned about who has the most and the biggest bombs and missiles."

Screwtape would be pleased with what he sees here now: The two mightiest empires of history glaring at each other across oceans and walls of weapons, each claiming the other has "the lead" in the atomic race, each devoting unbelievable portions of its energies to that race, and each living in mortal terror of the other.

What now seems irrefutably clear is that we as a people — both a nation and a Church, including myself — have grossly misread and grossly underestimated the horror of what has been happening, of what we have almost been encouraging to happen. We are slowly awakening from the long, benumbed stupor that had a paradoxically two-fold expression: apathy or numbness to the real danger, to implications other than for the "defense" of *our* country, and an almost mindless enthusiasm for promoting that "defense," for being Number One in the world.

The arms race seems to have taken on a life of its own, "raging out of control," as we say about forest fires. The image evokes powerful myths, like that of the sorcerer's apprentice, who can't stop the brooms from carrying water once he has pronounced the magic words, or of Frankenstein's monster, or of any one of a hundred science-fiction fantasies. The destructive capacity and the danger are growing not just arithmetically but exponentially, like the energy of the bomb itself.

A stock figure of comic strips is the computer that comes to life, outstrips its creator, and takes over. But that myth pales beside the reality. It is as if the computer in every missile had discovered the power to replicate both itself and its "payload" bombs, not just by cloning but by some miraculously speeded-up process of gestation in which the offspring is always bigger and

better than the parent. We even speak the language of gestation: "this generation," "the next generation," of missiles and bombs. It is as if we humans had lost the power to not will these ever more "sophisticated" weapons into being.

We cry, "Peace! Peace!" and we cry, "Security." But of course, there is no peace and there is no security. Every step one major power takes in the name of peace, the other duplicates. We beat them to the hydrogen bomb and to the submarine-launched missile. But they beat us to the ICBM and the multiple warhead, to which we responded with MIRV (Multiple Independently Targetable Warhead). We now have the cruise missile and the neutron bomb. But surely they will have both soon. We have the edge in delivery systems but can hardly hope to keep it indefinitely.

One of my deepest frustrations in all this is trying to understand either the need or the cry for "more" and "better." One Poseidon can wipe out all the major and medium-sized cities in the USSR. So we have thirty-one Poseidons. Each Trident carries nearly three times as much destruction as the Poseidon, enough for each Russian city over 100,000. So we have at least seven and plans for twenty or more. If one can do the job, seven might do it a bit more thoroughly. But twenty?

If we really believed in peace, had really been horrified by nuclear threat, then America should have been as outraged as Russia itself by President Reagan's hate and threat rhetoric cast in the bizarre imagery of "international outlaws" and "evil empire." Instead, most of us were apathetic or positively supportive. (For a report on the disturbing results of that rhetoric, see Seweryn Bjaler, "Danger in Moscow," *The New York Review of Books*, 16 Feb. 1984, pp. 6-10.) I don't know the extent to which President Reagan believes in the inevitability of a nuclear Armageddon, but we have certainly set up the conditions for it and perhaps made it inevitable. We may *have* to be Number One in the world, though I hardly know by what right. We may even have unconsciously extended "better dead than red" to "better dead than not Number One." I suppose such an extension is supported by the fear that if we are not Number One we will be dead. But I wonder if we are really ready for the now-inevitable extension "Better the whole world dead."

I have been in Russia. My family and I spent ten cold winter days in Moscow and five cool spring days in Leningrad. On both trips, we were with Finnish students on tour so we saw what Soviet leaders wanted us to see. Such tours hardly make me an expert on Russia. In spite of the rather primitive (by our standards) tourist accommodations and a real sense of suppression, we found them both enjoyable and enlightening.

Two images stand out for me — not the images of the Kremlin or the Czar's castles or the magnificent churches or even the images of the Bolshoi or the treasures of the Hermitage. What I see most insistently are the images of two quite ordinary human faces.

One is patriarchally bearded and rather craggy, set atop a tall, finely built but slightly stooped body, maybe thirty-five years old. It belonged to our guide on the Moscow trip. He took a rather fatherly interest in our two younger children, which made us appreciate him very much. Once one of us asked

him what it was like being a Russian. He immediately stiffened to his full six foot four, looked down at us sternly, and said, "I'm not a Russian. I'm an Estonian." He spoke not quite angrily but very firmly, with obvious pride in his nationality.

Later, my wife, Bess, impulsively and warmly gave the standard American invitation: "If you're ever in America, come and see us. We'd love to have you." This time he seemed to shrink a little, big hands at his side, but half-lifting in a despairing gesture. He said, in a voice that still haunts me, "No hope. No hope."

That other face, set off by the inevitable black cloth coat and black hat, was smiling up at me from a seat on a Moscow bus. We had been to a Bolshoi production of *Swan Lake* and were feeling very warm and happy, even in the Moscow cold. When we got to the bus stop a large crowd was already lined up waiting. The bus stopped, and the crowd just surged onto it. We were carried up and in by the surge. People moved immediately to seats and I walked up to the little glass box to deposit our fare. (There are no conductors on Moscow buses. Payment of fares is on the honor system, perhaps bolstered by an occasional plain-clothes checker.) The fare was only six kopeks, a little over six cents, so the five of us needed thirty. I had only a fifty-kopek piece; since there was no one to make change, I dropped it in, cranked out my five tickets, and started for our seat. I felt a hand on my arm holding me firmly and looked down to see a woman's face smiling up at me. The smile told me she meant no harm, but the hold was firm. Then I noticed people passing their fares in relay fashion to the front of the bus, where someone dropped them in, cranked out the tickets, and relayed them back. As the fares passed by, the woman took out five kopeks here and five there until she had my twenty kopeks change. Then she handed them to me, smiled more broadly, and let me go.

It has been over sixteen years since those tours. I can still feel the concern those people had for the stranger in their midst and the sense of profound vitality even in the face of "No hope. No hope." I remember a kind of double take with the smiling woman: a rejoicing that her essential humanness could survive and even prosper in such forbidding climate, but a horror at the very same thing—the human spirit ought to shrivel and die when deprived of nourishment from the freedom we Americans so honor. The horror is now pretty well gone and only the glorying in the survival of the humanness remains.

Our Estonian guide chafed profoundly under Soviet rule. Given the choice, he might have rather been dead than red, but I don't really believe so. His sense of vitality was too profound, his love for and pleasure in his family too immediate and obvious, as they were reunited in Leningrad on our return trip. I doubt that even the thought of such a choice could have occurred to my smiling woman. Except for the smile she seemed to share the resigned stolidity typical of most of the Russian women we were able to observe, especially in those endless lines in the markets and stores. But even if either could have made that choice, I can only be grateful that they did not. My life would have been the poorer if they had.

I went to the Soviet Union conditioned by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. I expected to find a very hard life but also a deep sense of vitality. I found both. I saw almost no evidence of the luxurious life of Tolstoy's aristocracy but also almost no evidence of the terrible poverty of some of Dostoevsky's suffering people. That deep vitality even in a harsh world, the basic humanness, that capacity for love — these have survived all the repression the communists have been able to impose. My smiling woman seemed about my age. She would have weathered the worst of Lenin and of Stalin, in over a half century of communism. I thank her for doing so.

I trust that no one is hearing me say I'd rather be red; but if these were the only two choices, I would choose life. Even under the worst of circumstances, I would choose life — and see what I could make of it. I would hope that at the very least I could retain — or create — as much of that profound vitality as our guide and my lady. I'd hope that as a nation, forced to the stark alternatives, we would make the same choice. I find it impossible to believe that our nation, with all our vitality and love of freedom, would fail not only to survive a communist capture, but to reemerge free.

I rejoice in the Geneva talks and the SALT roundtables. I even rejoice in Reykjavic, in spite of the profound frustration of having come so seemingly close and yet missing. I welcome anything that moves us toward lessening the crisis. But I hope I'll be forgiven my misgivings about the attitude I sense, both official and popular, toward those talks. That attitude says, in effect, "See! There's the proof of the success of our get-tough policy. We've finally got 'em back to the bargaining table. They know they can't bluff us any longer. They know we've caught up to them in weapons, and they can't push us around any more."

This attitude strikes me as dangerously self-serving and exulting, with little concern for the issues involved except as we can resolve them our way. Yes, we'll bargain; we may give up things, maybe even Star Wars — but only if we can win at the bargaining table, can remain Number One. I sense no awareness or admission that we may be partly at fault for the nuclear horror, that our rhetoric may have made the buildup even more dangerous, that we have an obligation to ourselves, to the Soviet Union, to the world: to bring an end to the horror even at some cost to our pride, yes, even to our own "security."

Uncomfortable as I am with such an attitude toward the talks, I would rather have talks, even in that atmosphere, than the kind of logic we heard from Utah's Senator Jake Garn in response to Senator Goldwater's reversal from support of the MX to opposition. We need the MX, Senator Garn said in effect, because so much of it will be produced in Utah, and Utah's economy and people need the jobs. That's like calling a suicide a self-employed person.

Ted Wilson, in the senatorial campaign of 1982, said that America and the Soviet Union are like two men up to their waists in a lake of kerosene arguing who has more and bigger matches. Surely wisdom in such a predicament would dictate that they stop arguing about the matches and start helping each other out of the lake, then begin doing something to get rid of the lake.

The solution might sound simple, but putting it into effect is terrifyingly complex. It will require changes of both attitude and action, not only in the

Soviet Union and in America but in all nuclear powers. Those changes *must* take place. We can start with attitudes — facing our predicament squarely and refusing to tolerate it. National and international attitudes can also change, sometimes slowly, as with America's attitudes toward Vietnam, sometimes very rapidly, as with Iran's attitude toward America.

America's attitude of equating security with nuclear superiority is the worst of delusions. Given MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction), how can any increased ability to destroy them completely give us any security when we know that they can destroy us many times over at the same time, or even after we have destroyed them? Surely the answer is not in more of a nuclear arsenal already so elaborate that it is virtually useless simply because, given our moral revulsion, we can never use it. And the Soviets know it.

The answer is rather in some kind of delayed but automatic retaliation, a system like the network of small robotic submarines proposed by BYU's Paul Palmer and Bart Czirr (see especially "The Strategic Front: Delayed Retaliation and Robotics," *The National Review*, 28 Oct. 1983). The small atomic subs would be virtually undetectable, would carry missiles trained on "the enemy," and would fire them only if the stream of signals ceased. The system would be highly publicized so that the Soviet Union could not avoid knowing about it.

Harvey Fletcher, of BYU, proposes a system of missiles that could be fired into orbit at the beginning of hostilities and could be kept there in harmless orbit until it became clear that we were really being destroyed. Then these missiles could be fired to destroy "the enemy." Again, with full advance publicity, so that *they* would know exactly what would happen.

Either of these proposals is moral madness. But hardly as mad as what we are doing now. And far less expensive. If MAD really is the answer, then either of these at least shifts the moral burden of first strike to them. Maybe the best thing about such proposals is that their moral madness might jolt us out of our apathy. We can wake from our numbed stupor to the real danger we have created for our world.

We can also change our attitude toward the Soviet Union's fear of us. We know we fear them. And we have reason to. They have built up to essential parity with us. But we can't really believe in their fear of us. We have to believe that they are the enemy, power-mad, determined to enslave the whole world, evil. Yet we are constantly reminded of that fear by people who have experienced it, who have studied it, who know the Soviets and Soviet psychology. After all, we invented the bomb. We are the only nation to have used it on people. We have invented or developed most refinements of it and of the delivery systems. In spite of all our protests of peaceful intent, protests we ourselves believe implicitly, they have reasons to fear. Simply remembering my Russian lady and my Estonian guide is enough to remind me how marvelously human are these "enemies." I have little trouble taking their protestations seriously.

Another attitude we can change is one that I shared for a long time: the attitude that all this is just too complex for us ordinary people to comprehend,

let alone to make intelligent decisions about. I thank Kent Robson for reminding us in "The Magnitude of the Nuclear Arms Race" (DIALOGUE 17 [Winter 1984]: 55–60) how easy it is to get authoritative information. (I've taken most of mine from *The Defense Monitor* and releases by the Union of Concerned Scientists; but official materials from both U.S. and Soviet governments verify that the information is basically accurate.) It simply is not true that only the experts can know. The information may be voluminous and technically complex, but the over-all picture is not. We need to inform ourselves and make informed responses.

As for action, my emotions tell me to campaign for disarmament in any form, even unilaterally if that is the only kind we can get. But my common sense tells me that this very possibly could be unilateral suicide. However, there is something we can do with almost no fear of increasing our own or anyone else's danger and with great hope of decreasing it. We can support campaigns to end *all* testing of nuclear weapons. Banning nuclear tests would slow down the race for better weapons and would eventually reduce any nation's confidence in first-strike offensive. It could prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to nations not now possessing them. I can see almost no risk in such a treaty except possibly the risk to our being Number One in a world where being Number One no longer has positive meaning.

Also we can recognize not the Soviet Union nor any other country as the Enemy, but the Bomb itself. Ira Chernus argues that we have mythologized the struggle between us and Russia, making them the totally bad guys and us the totally good guys locked in righteous struggle for the world ("Mythology and Nuclear Strategy," DIALOGUE 17 (Winter 1984): 31–36). We can do something positive simply by recognizing the myth. We won't even have to give it up. What we will have to do, Chernus argues, is subordinate it to a higher myth — that of the Bomb as enemy — a myth in which we could join the Soviet Union as we did during World War II, in a heroic struggle to wipe out the bomb.

Finally, someplace, sometime we are going to have to translate into action all those protestations about our being a religious nation, a Christian people, for whom Chinese and Ethiopians and Russians are our brothers and sisters. I can only read Christ's gospel as a gospel of peace. Evidence from the Marshall Plan in Europe and our treatment of Japan gives me hope that we can achieve positive practical results by loving our enemy.

I don't want to be red. I don't want to be dead. And I don't want America to be either red or dead. I'd rather see the Soviet Union not red. I certainly don't want to see her dead — not even if that could be arranged without our being dead, too. I just want to *be*. To exist, to be alive, to be full of vitality. I want that for our nation, for the Soviet Union and for every other nation. I could wish them and us more alive to human values, more deeply committed to what makes us human: our capacity to think, to plan, to engage in communal activity (I can only reflect in sadness that such capacities have brought us to our present sorry state), to give and to receive love. But to



develop further any of these values or any commitment to them we have to continue to exist. That must now be the first priority of the human race.

For a long time after Hiroshima we held Russia hostage with the bomb. Then they held us hostage through the missile gap and the window of vulnerability. Now, in a most literal sense, we both hold not only each other but ourselves and the whole world hostage.

In a remarkable joint U.S.-Soviet medical inquiry into the medical implications of nuclear war, broadcast in America only over PBS, and late at night in Utah, but heard by over 40 million Russians, the doctors concluded almost immediately that there would be no medical implications, simply because there would be no meaningful medical resources available against the massive human suffering.

One of the doctors commented that when we find ourselves marching toward a treacherous precipice, progress consists of stopping, then pulling back. It is time to stop, to end this madness. No one of us can end it. But together we can set up a climate of urgency and of public outrage that will push our leaders through a process that can end it. In the name of peace, in the name of love, in the name of humanity, in the name of the brotherhood and sisterhood of human beings, in the name of our Savior and our God, we can and must end it.

