

The Power of Nuclear Arms

by Bernard Zylstra

No one today can present an adequate way out of the impasse world powers have reached with respect to the problem of nuclear armament. It is thus with great hesitation that I offer the following comments for reflection.

The need for power

Power is an intrinsic element of created reality. In the human world it is the ability to act or produce an effect. Nearly every act of persons involves power of one kind or another. In everyday experience we speak of the power of muscles, of money, of thought, of prayer. The development of agriculture, the building of culture, the establishment of society and the growth of civilization are all based on the employment of the different kinds of power which the Creator entrusted to his creation.

It is disconcerting that the current debate about nuclear arms in Christian circles often takes place on the basis of the hidden assumption that power is inherently evil. The prevalence and intensity of this assumption should not surprise us. After all, the times in which we live are evil times, most glaringly expressed in Hitler's death factories and Stalin's Gulag Archipelago. The suffering inflicted by man upon man in our century is unprecedented in its magnitude precisely because of the quantity of power we have been able to harness for the purpose of violently destroying the life of man himself and the earth, man's home. Confronted with death, suffering and destruction it is understandable that power, because it is indispensable to violence, is considered inherently evil.

Nevertheless, such a view of power is wrong and thus misleading in assessing the issue at stake. Not power itself but mankind's sinful misdirection of it leads to suffering, destruction and death. Mankind is in need of redemption, not from power but from sin. Viewing power as sin paralyzes us in overcoming the evil misdirection of power. A rejection of power does not alleviate suffering. It is an escape from reality.

The need for political power

Political power is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a just society by the state. From a normative point of view — the only view relevant to these matters — a just society is one in which persons and their associations live together in peace. Justice presupposes peace. Peace presupposes power. More pointedly, peace throughout an entire society presupposes political power, that is, the capability of the state to protect the rights of persons and associations domiciled within its territory. The state expresses this capability by the establishment of a society-wide public legal

order in which the basic rights of persons and associations (marriages, families, churches, business enterprises, schools, clubs, etc.) are spelled out and expanded in the light of a deeper understanding of justice, new cultural potentials and new economic possibilities.

The state is duty-bound by divine decree to guard this society-wide public legal order against internal violation and external attack. Any diminution of the power of the state that undermines the execution of this duty is irresponsible. It should be clearly kept in mind here that by “state” I do not only mean the government with its executive, legislative, judicial and administrative powers. I also have in mind the citizenry which, even today, exercises an enormous power in the affairs of state by such means as national consensus, public opinion, representation and patriotism. Without the support from one or more of these powerful sources, the government even in a totalitarian state cannot exist for long. This was made clear to us in the recent events in Iran, where widespread lack of support on the part of the citizenry finally forced the Shah to leave, even though he had at his disposal the most powerful military equipment in the Near East.

The power of the sword is only one part of the state’s power. Nevertheless, it is an indispensable part. The “power of the sword” is not the power of just any sword or any gun. It refers to the unique prerogative of the state — as the servant of public justice — to use the means of violence as a last resort against a violation of the public legal order. This unique prerogative must be seen in a positive, normative manner. No public legal order, no society-wide system of human rights and freedoms can long endure without the monopoly of the power of the sword on the part of the state.

Giving the power of the sword to more than one agency within a society inevitably leads to the elimination of the public legal order and subsequent societal chaos. The present situation in Iran illustrates this, where the supporters of Khomeini and leftist revolutionaries are competing for control of police and military power. If this competition is not resolved quickly by at least *de facto* maintenance of public order, Iran can easily become the victim of imperialist aggression.

The state requires the power of the sword because of sin and evil. Yet this power must play a redemptive role in the history of mankind. It is instituted to protect the life of men, women and children, created in the image of God (cf. Genesis 9:6). It is a power subject to the authority of Christ and entrusted to the government, *God’s servant for our good* (cf. Romans 13:4).

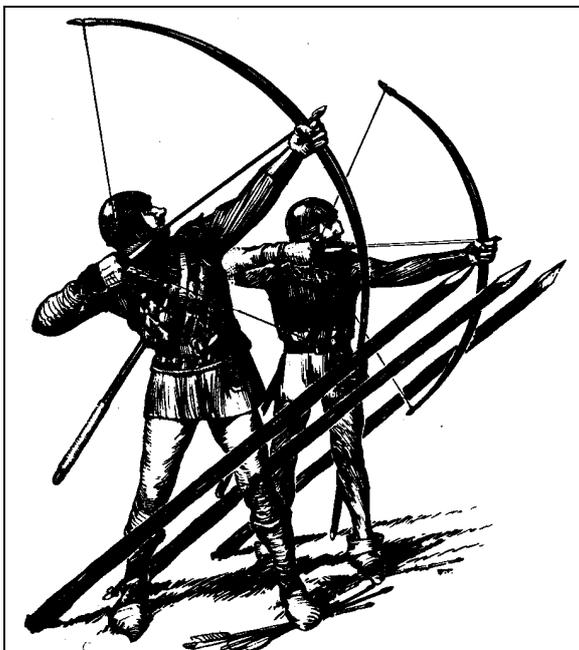
The presence of nuclear power

Today the military power of the United States and Russia is in the first place nuclear power, with unthinkable destructive potential. I believe that it is a mistake to focus on the discovery and development of nuclear power itself as the major source of evil in international relations. Nuclear armament is not the cause but the symptom of international tensions. In order to understand the role of nuclear power, we will have to come to grips with the history of international politics in the modern age. Only a few comments are in order here.

The history of warfare among nations since the Renaissance is largely the history of

increasingly intense explosions of the secular spirit of modernity in the political arena. The spirit of modernity is the yearning for the deification of man, for the unlimited freedom of self-expression and self-creation in a future of progress. In the arena of politics, this spirit expressed itself in the absolute sovereignty of the state as the bearer of the secular salvation of mankind. Every major political outburst of the Faustian spirit of modernity led to imperial expansions or revolutionary upheavals, destroying peaceful relations among states. Since Europe gave birth to the spirit of modernity, it witnessed the rapid succession of the Spanish, Dutch, Napoleonic, and British empires. It also was the main source of two world wars.

The second world war led to the disintegration of the colonial empires and catapulted the USA and the USSR into the centre of world politics as antagonistic superpowers armed with a rapidly growing nuclear arsenal. The USSR is the most radical political embodiment of the spirit of modernity. Its attempt at the creation of a “new social order” for the salvation of “the new man” has led to the establishment of a post-humanist totalitarian regime which does not respect the rights and freedoms of persons and associations. The USA, which has not entirely severed its links with its spiritual roots in Christianity and early humanism, is a moderate or centrist expression



The longbow — medieval version of arms escalation and militarism. String pulled back to the ear (instead of to the chest as with the shortbow), it required a hundred pounds of pull and could hit a target at 250 yards, penetrating the best armour. A handful of archers could hold back a whole army at a pass. English yeomen would practise near the church on Sundays, sharpening their arrowheads on the stones of the church porch. The longbow was denounced in a papal encyclical as immoral and an instrument of the devil.

of the spirit of modernity. Though with Russia it belongs to the category of world empires, it has not developed into a fulfilled totalitarian regime and continues to respect certain fundamental rights of persons and associations. These two superpowers are vying for world leadership.

The Christian, if he is to be faithful to the revelation of the Scriptures, must reject the secular spirit of modernity in its radical, moderate or conservative expressions. This means that the Christian living in North America must read the signs of the times *within his own cultural context* very carefully. But in his assessment of the role of nuclear power the Christian may not neglect the distinct difference between the USSR and the USA. That would amount to a neglect of concrete realities, only in the light of which the extremely difficult path towards a new international order can be found.

Present need for deterrents

A war between the two superpowers must be avoided. The absence of war between them since 1945 is largely due to the deterrent effect of their respective nuclear arsenals. This is indeed an exceedingly fragile basis for “peace” between them, but it must be maintained until an alternative basis is found. If that deterrence requires new

nuclear technologies (for example, with respect to counter-force capability — the ability to destroy the enemy's military forces in distinction from population and industrial centers — where the USA apparently is relatively weak), then such technologies should be developed. The argument that monies spent on this should instead be spent on the alleviation of world hunger is not to the point because it confuses two problems which require two different solutions.

The defence of deterrence should not be interpreted as a lack of faith in God. Faith is not a risk, whether that be in marital, military or economic matters. Faith is trust in God who blesses obedience to His rule. I would suggest that faith should lead us to the patient and painstaking support of strengthening the legal bonds between the superpowers such as are proposed in SALT II as a prelude to greater mutual trust. Such trust can only be developed if neither power engages in imperial expansion, if there is mutual restraint in the use of power abroad, and if there is expansion of justice at home.

The powerlessness of nuclear strength

In conclusion, we must not stare ourselves blind at nuclear power. It is indeed the greatest force man's science has unleashed from nature. And as a natural force, subject to technical control, it may well contribute greatly to the unfolding of culture.

But it is an exceedingly fragile instrument in the maintenance of peace and justice. Why? Because it really is unusable to that end, and the possessors of this power are, I think, quite aware of this. The nuclear strength of Russia and America entails a factual powerlessness on their part in dealing with political crises, not only at home but also abroad. In this vacuum of politically relevant and meaningful power, revolutions on the right and on the left have become the order of the day. The nuclear power of the giants has had very little effect on the political direction of China, Korea, Israel, the Suez Crisis, the Hungarian Revolution, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Panama, Angola, Mozambique, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Southern Africa and Iran.

This powerlessness displays, I think, the divinely given structure of the body politic. That structure requires the organization of political power, but only for the ends of justice. Nuclear power is not suited for that end. Our awareness of this should encourage us greatly to search for a basis of the international legal order that does lead to peace and justice.

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