Shrines to destruction

Martin Woollacott

WHEN a religion is in decline there may be a long period when, even though its temples empty and its priests turn apostate, the tenets of belief are still haltingly and hollowly observed.

So it is with the religion of nuclear deterrence. Thousands of missile silos, shrines to destruction, are still powered and manned, nuclear-armed submarines still quarter the oceans, the scriptures are still studied in war ministries and staff colleges, and there are still converts, in the shape of an India, a Pakistan, or an Iraq, who wish to join the elect. Yet nuclear deterrence, as a belief system, is close to collapse in the countries where it was invented.

Many of the generals who commanded nuclear forces, the politicians who were involved in nuclear decision-making, and the intellectuals who tried to create doctrines for the use of nuclear weapons have now repudiated deterrence, wholly or in part.

Those who now devise or advocate nuclear weapons programmes are usually mediocrities, time servers, or careerists, like the third rate scientists responsible for the Indian and Pakistani tests. Or they are politicians — like some in Russia, who see in nuclear weapons a currency that can buy continued great power status after economic and conventional military strength has dwindled away.

The terrible truth about this decayed religion is that it retains the capacity to exact unimaginable sacrifices from the human race.

True, the nightmare of a huge exchange of weapons between Russia and the United States may now be very distant. It has been replaced in Western countries, but at a much lower level of awareness, by anxieties over proliferation, and over the acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorists or by "rogue states" like Iraq.

But, on the whole, the public in developed countries acts either as if nuclear weapons had already been abolished or as if the maintenance of these arsenals was a safe procedure. The political and military establishments, meanwhile, act as if these weapons were as necessary as they ever were. They may not really believe it, but the habit of belief remains intact, largely because assessing deterrence in the degenerate form in which it now exists requires a revolution in understanding the history of the last 50 years, an effort which is only just beginning to be made.

What is left is the muddled idea that since nuclear deterrence supposedly "worked" in the past, it still "works" today.

When this notion is challenged, even in a small way, Washington, the Vatican of deterrence, reacts with anger. The German defence minister, Rudolf Scharping, has consequently had to equivocate on his coalition's argument that Nato should adopt a No First Use policy.

Germany would do nothing unilaterally, he said after meetings in Washington this week. Yet a proper American response would have been to say that such a move was eminently worth exploring during the discussions about a new strategic concept for the alliance, which are going on in preparation for the 50th anniversary summit of Nato in April next year.

The refusal to embrace No First Use of nuclear weapons in the past was based on Nato's need to be able to respond to Soviet conventional superiority. That conventional advantage has not only disappeared, but been replaced by a Western *conventional* superiority — to such an extent that Russia abandoned its own No First Use pledge in 1993.

It is hard to say which country is being more irrational. Neither faces any threat to which the appropriate response would be the first use of nuclear weapons. Certainly not from each other, and, as to other possibilities, would even the use by Saddam Hussein, say, of a biological or chemical weapon, justify firing nuclear missiles at Iraq?

WASHINGTON'S resistance to German ideas is no doubt less to do with the No First Use debate than with the fact that No First Use leads on naturally to other measures of disarmament, like the withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons still deployed in Europe.

Not that the nuclear powers are against arms reductions. The Pentagon, it was revealed this week, may well go ahead with unilateral reductions of its nuclear forces in the event that the Russians fail to ratify the Start-II treaty in the near future. The weapons, it seems, cost too much.

The problem here, as Jonathan Schell points out in his new book, The Gift of Time, is that arms reductions have been part of the game of deterrence for many years. They were and are aimed at preserving the deterrent in a "safer" form rather than abolishing it.

This is a critical and intricate question, as Schell demonstrates in his book. While advocates of arms reductions and advocates of abolition can work together, there is a sharp distinction between real disarmers and those who propose only a certain "tidying up" of the deterrent, to make accidents less likely and to appease non-nuclear powers.

Even between those who want the deepest of cuts and those who want abolition there is ultimately a very important difference. Extreme reductionists may call for the standing down, the disassembly, or the destruction of all weapons, with only a residual capacity to reconstitute nuclear forces remaining. Abolition, on the other hand, involves complete renunciation, with no road back to weapons envisaged.

Would that we were at the stage where such arguments could be joined in practice rather than only in theory. But we are stuck in Cold War mud. The men and women interviewed by Schell in his book, most of whom held important positions in the nuclear establishment, offer different solutions to the problem of nuclear weapons. But all are agreed that present doctrine is a palsied holdover from the past.

The only difference is that the names of previous enemies have been rubbed out and such formulations as "a rogue state", "terrorists", or "Russia... should circumstances change for the worse" as the British defence review put it, are filled in instead.

The former US ambassador, Thomas Graham, led the succesful American campaign to persuade non-nuclear states to indefinitely extend the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

He recently wrote to Nato leaders — including Tony Blair — that the non-proliferation regime will be in "grave danger" if Nato continues "to assign a high value to nuclear weapons, for instance as an essential bulwark of Alliance cohesion".

Instead Nato ought to be moving toward No First Use, the de-alerting of tactical nuclear weapons preparatory to their abolition, and an end to nuclear sharing.

As Schell's title implies, we have been given time to deal with the nuclear menace, and have already wasted much of it. Clinton, the president who could have championed disarmament, did not do so, partly because of his difficult relations with the military.

But the essence of the situation is that the days when the nuclear deterrent, apart from being justified by what seemed to be a manifest threat, was sincerely defended by able generals, formidable intellectuals, and powerful politicians are over.

It is with us still because of institutional inertia and a lingering refusal to understand that something so powerful can be without use or value. The deterrent for which we should be aiming, as Schell writes, is "the fear of returning to a nuclear-armed world" that "would always stand guard over the treaty by which the world had eliminated nuclear weapons".

The Gift of Time, Jonathan Schell (Granta).

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