What Is The Cold War About and Why Is It Still With Us?

REG WHITAKER

The Cold War is now almost forty years old. What began in the immediate aftermath of World War II has become the permanent condition of the second half of the twentieth century. There were periods in the 1960s and 1970s when there was talk of détente and even the end of the Cold War. Today, relations between the super-powers are as aggressive as they have ever been: the breakdown of serious discussions is followed by an empty charade in Geneva; the arms race heads past the stratosphere and into space; Soviet troops swarm over Afghanistan while the Americans assault
ical and economic mobilizations of the nations on both sides and determined the disciplinary limits of thought and dissent, the permissable scope of political imagination; it constantly drives a wide constellation of Third World interests and struggles into the subordinating mould of superpower rivalry; and, above all, it offers the ultimate rationale for the insistently projected and intricately-planned collective suicide of the human race. These are among the things we owe to the Cold War.

The ebb and flow of the Cold War, from spine-tingling brinksmanship to détente and back again, ought not to deceive. In 1974, surveying the apparent paradox of détente coexistent with a race to develop yet more deadly armaments, Richard Barnet (who should have known better) wrote that "the arms race, which started as an instrument of the Cold War, is now independent of the Cold War and has a life of its own."2 A decade later we can see that, in Thompson's words, "to check the missiles is something. But the political launch-pad for all these missiles is the adversary posture of the two great rival alliances, grouped around the USA and the USSR: that is, the Cold War."3 Perhaps we can also begin to see that the "Cold War" is neither a passing phase nor a catch-phrase for an era — that it is nothing less than the underlying structure of the postwar world.

In 1962 the world came closer, perhaps than it ever has, to within a hair's breadth of plunging into the nuclear catastrophe. This is known to history as the "Cuban missile crisis". Explanations for the crisis emphasize that the Soviets placed missiles in Cuba which directly threatened the American homeland, thus upsetting the "nuclear balance"; that the Kennedy administration — nuclear strikeforce on red alert — told the Soviets that they had a choice of backing down or facing nuclear war; that the Soviets backed down, thus resolving the crisis. Some would say that the cause of the crisis was simply the Soviets' rash and provocative act of placing the weapons off the American coast. Others might argue that the Soviets were merely attempting to right an imbalance of terror which had always been in the Americans' favour: the USA could threaten Soviet cities with missiles; the Soviets could not, then, so threaten American cities.4 These are, at best, only proximate explanations, in the sense that they lie close to the events of the crisis. But why was the fate of the earth being held to ransom?
Grenada and threaten Nicaragua; the ideological war rages with Soviet citizens watching TV spy dramas glorifying the KGB while Americans flock to watch *Rambo* splatter Asian Communists across the movie screen. When we consider the vast atomic arsenals of death with their precision-guided delivery systems and hair-trigger mechanisms for launching, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Cold War is now far more dangerous for the future of the earth than in the darkest days of its early history.

The emergence of a mass peace movement in the 1980s, at the very moment of the revival of Cold War bellicosity, has inspired some serious debate on the Left, most notably E.P. Thompson's propositions regarding the "logic of exterminism" and the reactions which his thesis provoked. Much of this turned on the question of how the nuclear problem intersected with the problem of the Cold War: were the familiar categories of Marxist analysis still adequate to comprehend what was at stake, or was it necessary, as Thompson argued, to think afresh in new categories? Is warfare the result of capitalism, or are we involved in a problem deeper and more dangerous yet? Is the peace movement a socialist struggle or is its relationship to socialism only tangential? And a very precise, but perplexing, strategic question presented itself to Western peace movements: how do campaigns against the defence policies and the weapons of the West situate themselves in relation to the Soviet Union and the logic of Cold War confrontation?

It is urgent that we address ourselves to the complexity of the relationship between the nuclear arms race and the nature of the Cold War. Surprisingly, while there has been considerable attention lavished on the nuclear question (as much on the Right as on the Left), and while there has been much ink expended on the mechanics of East-West confrontation, there has been extraordinarily little attention paid to the most basic question of all concerning the Cold War: what is it about?

The Cold War has become so much the air we breath that we may forget how *primordial* it has been to our times. These are among the things which the Cold War has done: it has divided the world into warring military, political, economic and cultural blocs; it has been the organizing principle behind the entire international institutional apparatus and diplomatic practice of the postwar world; it has inspired the internal polit-
one, very minor, exception (the Americans who entered the Civil War in 1919 on the side of the White armies), the extraordinary fact is that America and Russia have never been at war with one another, ever. Wars have been fought with intermediaries or surrogates; there have been intelligence "wars" and ideological "wars"; but never direct armed confrontations. Moreover, whenever the vital interests of one superpower are at apparent risk, the other backs off: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Afghanistan are matched by Chile, Grenada, and various US interventions in the Middle East.

Is there more, or possibly less, than meets the eye here? How does a global conflict continue for so long — apparently unchanged in essentials — with both sides respecting, in practice (rhetoric aside), the other's sphere of vital interests while, at the same time, justifying a potential nuclear apocalypse to counter the alleged threat of the other? It is necessary to return with renewed urgency to the primordial, and generally unasked, question: what is it about?

There are, of course, many theories — some relatively subtle and elaborate — of the Cold War. Yet apart from offering conjunctural explanations, none of these theories, in and of themselves, seem to exhaust the fundamental question. In another sense, all the theories of the Cold War seem to run in packs; and the packs are, in the end, two in number. I will summarize these in two succinct and convenient quotations. The first is from Dr. James Endicott, veteran Canadian peace campaigner and once a prime target of McCarthyism in this country. In 1982, Endicott wrote: "Anti-Communism is the essence of Cold War." The second is from another peace campaigner, E.P. Thompson, who, in a 1981 lecture (scheduled for the BBC but banned from the air), asked: "What is the Cold War now about? It is about itself." To tip my own hand in advance, I would on the whole agree more with Thompson than with Endicott, but both are worth examining. Indeed the first explanation, with suitable variations, is the official version of both superpowers.

Anti-Communism is the essence of Cold War — that there is, at the very heart of the Cold War, an ideological struggle between two irreconcilable systems is a proposition presumably as acceptable to both Gorbachev and Reagan as it was to Stalin and Truman four decades ago. In flights of ritual rhetoric, the So-
What great issues were at stake in the first place to justify these two states bringing the world to within a minute of midnight?

Michael Howard, an uncommonly intelligent conservative, has reflected upon a seeming paradox in “strategic studies”.

When I read the flood of scenarios in strategic journals about first-strike capabilities, counterforce or countervailing strategies, flexible responses, escalation dominance and all the rest of the postulates of nuclear theology, I ask myself in bewilderment: this war they are describing, what is it about? The defence of Western Europe? Access to the Gulf? The protection of Japan? If so, why is this goal not mentioned, and why is the strategy not related to the progress of the conflict in these regions? But if it is not related to this kind of specific object, what are we talking about?

But if the launch-pads for the missiles are the two blocs, there remains a deeper mystery. It is the mystery confronted by the American journalist Thomas Powers in his search among hundreds of strategic analysts, on both sides, for an answer to “the question at the heart of the Cold War — what is it about?”:

But none of the people I approached showed anything more than a polite interest in the question. No one offered the sort of ready answer that suggested he had been thinking about it. No one found it easy to propose the name of someone who might have been thinking about it. Their eyes were not exactly glazed, but they were certainly blank.

Powers goes to suggest that “it was questions of hardware which interested them. . . it is process that absorbs the managers and publicists of the Cold War — not words but the Great Game itself, not why we act but what we do.”

Take, for example, the recent controversy over the deployment of Euromissiles — a controversy which has resulted in demonstrations by millions of Europeans — and the proliferation of SS-20s, Pershings and Cruises across the map of Europe, East and West. Why are these missile sites going up all over the continent? Is there a war scare? If so, what is the issue, what is the casus belli? In 1939 there was Danzig and the invasion of Poland. Where is the Danzig of today? Is it West Berlin? No, the Soviets have long since given up on that. Is NATO threatening to destabilize Poland and then move in for the kill? If so, they have apparently done a very bad job of it. Search as one will, it is impossible to find a casus belli, or anything remotely answering to that description in Europe today.

If we step back further yet to survey the entire landscape of East-West confrontation, there appears a very curious fact, almost never remarked upon. The USA and the USSR are mobilized and arrayed against each other on a global scale. Yet with
cates that appeasement of totalitarian aggressors only whets their appetite for more; that collective security and bold brinksmanship in crises are the only answers. The impact on Western policy makers of the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948 was much greater than that of any other takeover in Eastern Europe, and lead directly to the creation of NATO. “1948 must not equal 1938” was the operationalization of the Munich complex.

These ghosts and these complexes from another war remain vivid and compelling to Cold Warriors on both sides. How else to explain the costly and messy military intervention by the USSR in Afghanistan (an intervention with at least latent potential for destabilizing Soviet Islam), if not by a knee-jerk reaction conditioned by the 22 June 1941 complex: “Afghanistan is on our borders, a friendly régime is threatened by elements possibly linked with our enemies, therefore ...” How else to explain the language in which two leading American Cold Warriors explain privately to each other, in 1976, the need for massive American rearmament to bury détente. Frank Barnet, Cold War publicist, wrote to Eugene Rostow, Yale Law Professor and militant anti-Soviet ideologist, that “the US today is about where Britain was in 1938, with the shadow of Hitler’s Germany darkening all of Europe.” In reply, Rostow allowed that “I fully agree, as you know, with your estimate that we are living in a pre-war and not a post-war world, and that our posture today is comparable to that of Britain, France and the United States during the Thirties. Whether we are at the Rhineland or the Munich watershed remains to be seen. I won’t quarrel with your dating!”

Could Marx have had any more poignant subject than these two haunted Cold warriors for his famous remark about “past generations weighing like a nightmare upon the minds of the living”?

The West has tended to look upon the USSR by analogy to Nazi Germany. The (retroactive) argument has been that Hitler’s Germany was totalitarian and expansionist, and that its expansionism was linked organically with its totalitarianism. Nazi ideology was inherently aggressive and could find no outlet but in conquest and war. A direct, even mechanical application of this analogy to Soviet Russia has underlain American images of the USSR, from George Kennan’s influential 1947 “Mr X” article in *Foreign Affairs* on “The sources of Soviet conduct”,

*SPE* 13
viets warn of militaristic American imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism, the Camp of War. Reagan invokes the celluloid menace of the Evil Empire and its outriders of international terrorism and Communist subversion. Official rhetoric in war, even in a Cold War, is directed mainly at the foot soldiers. More subtle and somewhat more complex versions are put forward by policy makers and intellectuals, among themselves, especially when images of the Other are linked to material concepts of the national interest. These ideological images of the Other, filtered through the prism of material national interests, yield one observation, equally true for both sides: it is not just generals who are given to fighting the last war, but politicians, bureaucrats, and state intellectuals as well. Indeed, images of the Other are haunted by borrowed images from the past.

The Soviet image of America is dominated by the ghosts of 22 June 1941, the day of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The 22 June 1941 complex is an overriding determinant of postwar Soviet behaviour. "Never again" is the cry — "Never again" a direct surprise attack on Soviet soil; "never again" twenty million Soviet dead and the agony of the Great Patriotic War; "never again" a false sense of security and military unpreparedness based on a pact with an untrustworthy foreign power. The answer was to consolidate a buffer zone of subservient satellite régimes all around the Soviet borders, to liquidate any political opposition within these régimes which might be linked to the USSR's enemies abroad, and to build a military garrison state capable of continual deterrence of aggression against this Soviet bloc. And thus the war of 1941 was projected into the future age of nuclear war, with awesome (and clearly unintended) consequences for the endless conflict of the postwar world.

On the Western side, there are two complexes which, in combination, dominate Western images of the "Soviet threat". The first, hauntingly similar to the Soviet complex, is based on the ghosts of 7 December 1941 — Pearl Harbour. "Never again" was, and is, the American cry; perpetual global military preparedness is the answer. The other complex, particularly shared by America's allies such as Britain, arises from the ghosts of 30 September 1938 — the Munich agreement, selling out Czechoslovakia to the Nazis. The Munich complex indi-
the youthfully middle-aged face of Gorbachev fronting for the Politburo's row of extinct volcanoes, world revolution is little more than a bad joke.

Among Western policy elites, the analogy to Nazi Germany has been a powerful weapon, especially as a marketing device for the public. For example, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's "open letter" to the Canadian people, rationalizing the testing of cruise missiles in Canada, relied on the emotional force of the explicit linkage: the USSR is expansionary because it is totalitarian; Canadians had to show the same "courage" necessary to stand up to totalitarian aggression as earlier generations had done. The ugly underside of this equation is the constant implication that arguments for mutual accommodation are apologies for totalitarianism, and thus for "appeasement" à la Munich. All too often — especially in the 1950s — Western peace movements have tacitly accepted this conflation of two separate issues, and taken it on themselves to defend and apologize for the internal workings of the Soviet system as a kind of preface to disarmament. In this way they mirrored the official Western Cold War ideology and trapped themselves in a political ghetto without exit. The peace movements of the 1980s seem to have largely — although not entirely — shaken the chilling embrace of this inverted Cold War incubus. The pro-nuclear official ideology, of course, continues to claim that nothing has changed and that peace activists are the "dupes" of Soviet expansionism. How intriguing it is then that the regimes of the Eastern bloc employ exactly the same terminology (just fill in the blanks for proper names) to discredit the genuine, that is the unofficial, peace movements in those countries.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all with regard to this analogy to Nazi Germany is that both sides employ it, albeit in different ways, to reinforce mutual misunderstanding. Soviet defensive expansionism is itself premised on a equation of the "Western threat" with that of Hitler's Germany. In Soviet eyes, this justified the consolidation of an iron grip over Eastern Europe — "never again!" The West reacted with its own "never again": the Truman Doctrine; the domino theory; NATO; SEATO; and ringing the USSR with hostile military alliances (including, ironically, German rearmament) and nuclear bomber (later, missile) bases which threatened the Soviet heartland with de-
through National Security Council (NSC) - 68 which set the tone of American policy in the 1950s, to the present surrealistic ravings of the Reaganites. As recently as September 1984, we find Professor Richard Pipes, former member of Reagan's National Security Council, writing that:

Imperialism is endemic to the Soviet system in part because its ruling elite has no other justification for maintaining its power and privilege than to create the phantom of an ever-present external threat to the country's survival, and in part because it seeks to compensate its citizens for deprivations at home by manifestations of its might abroad... Experience has repeatedly shown that attempts to restrain Soviet aggressiveness by a mixture of punishments and rewards fail in their purpose because they address the symptoms of the problem, namely aggression, rather than the cause, which is a political and economic system that induces aggression.12

One glaring problem with this analogy to Nazi Germany is that nuclear weapons have changed everything. Today a policy which includes, as an integral objective, the destruction of the "enemy" leadership and system is not a rational policy but an invitation to Armageddon. But the analogy itself should be rejected. That the Soviet system is "totalitarian" is a proposition with which, for purposes of argument, we might perhaps not quarrel; certainly it is an authoritarian and brutally illiberal state. As for the proposition that the USSR is expansionary, simple recourse to postwar history readily verifies its exactitude. Yet there is expansionism, and then there is expansionism. Seen through the prism of the USSR's own 22 June 1941 complex, its expansionism is defensive expansionism: the unending maintenance of a cordon sanitaire which requires perpetual reproduction of the domination and repression of those smaller nations unlucky enough to lie upon its borders, up to and including Afghanistan. Nazi external aggression was the logical result of its ideology of racial superiority and German revanchist chauvinism. Soviet official ideology, however sclerotic and petrified, lacks this impelling outward motive. Indeed, to the extent that Russian nationalism is a major element in Soviet ideology, it is precisely as a defensive expansionary force, imposing Soviet influence and Soviet-style institutions on its subordinate "allies" to counter the fears of a Western subversive threat which bedevil Soviet leaders. As for an ideological vision of world revolution under Soviet hegemony and direction, let us face the mundane reality. The USSR is a régime now almost seventy years old, with enormous vested interests in the maintenance of the international status quo. Even with
the Soviet tanks which rolled into Budapest in 1956 — any more than a Soviet finger was raised on behalf of the Guatemalan government overthrown by a CIA coup in 1954, or for the Socialist-Communist government of Chile overthrown by a CIA-backed destabilization and military coup in 1973. Even Ronald Reagan, that most simple-minded of all Cold Warriors, reacted to the crushing of Solidarity by martial law in Poland with nothing more decisive than a TV special.

When we turn to the Soviet image of US behaviour, things are not much better. The Soviet view is that the world since 1945 has been divided into the “camp of peace” and the “camp of war”. Thus the German Democratic Republic parades its military might for hours through the streets of East Berlin, on the occasion of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the GDR, along a route festooned with banners demanding that NATO missiles be withdrawn from Europe as a threat to peace. Behind such displays of the most grotesque hypocrisy lie a set of ideological propositions: that war, hot or cold, is the inevitable result of the exploitive drive of capitalism, which always issues in imperialist expansionism abroad; that the Cold War is a global class struggle between predatory imperialism and the revolutionary world proletariat led by the socialist states; that the elimination of capitalism necessarily entails the elimination of the material conditions for war; and that conflict between the imperialist and socialist blocs is always caused by imperialist aggression. These propositions are here crudely described, but so, it must be said, are these same propositions when expounded officially at length.

The work of American revisionist historians on the origins of the Cold War has given more intellectually-respectable expression to the proposition that the Cold War is largely of American origin, with American business being dominant, behind the scenes, in the US drive for world hegemony. Although there is much in the revisionist case which is persuasive, it does suffer from a somewhat one-dimensional, American-centred bias: the Soviets were not merely passive in the process, but were themselves actors and their behaviour must be seriously taken into account. Yet let us grant that America has perhaps more to answer for before some mythic bar of history. Certainly the pattern of American initiative-Soviet response has created a certain rhythm to the Cold War.
struction. In the Soviet view, this only confirmed their darkest suspicions of another 22 June 1941, which had prompted them to consolidate the Eastern bloc in the first place. And thus the fatal circle closed.

The Soviets, despite their revolutionary rhetoric, were actually pursuing what amounted to old-fashioned Great Power spheres of influence politics. They were quite ready to sell out revolutionaries when indigenous Communist forces were on the wrong side of the Great Power divide; as indeed Stalin did with the left-wing guerillas in Greece. At the same time the USA — in the name of Wilsonian idealism (actually the open door to American capitalism) — rejected all talk of spheres of influence, while setting about the consolidation of a Western bloc, under American economic and political hegemony, from which both the USSR and the left wing forces within Western nations were to be excluded from participating. On both sides, universalist rhetoric masked behaviour which was much more along traditional lines of national self-interest; yet the same rhetoric seemingly precluded either side from recognizing the legitimate concerns for self-interest on the part of the other. "Realism" about the other side proved, in practice, to be the very worst sort of idealism. The double role of ideology, as both expression of interest and mystification of reality, was never demonstrated more fatefuly.

In its earliest origins, then, the Cold War does seem to be bound up with profound misunderstandings based on false analogies from the past. Yet by the 1950s, both sides recognized in practice the other's sphere of influence. This is, after all, the implicit reality of the doctrines of "containment" and "peaceful coexistence". The Korean War was finally settled, after three years of fighting and appalling civilian carnage, by a saw-off which pretty much recreated the status quo ante bellum. Western hegemony over the Middle East was conceded, for all intents and purposes, by the USSR; as was Western pre-eminence in much of the Third World. (Since 1945 the USA has launched fourteen armed interventions outside its own territory; Britain, twenty-nine and France, twenty-three. This compares with only six Soviet interventions outside its borders.) Despite John Foster Dulles' perfervid rhetoric of "rollback" and "liberation" of the "captive nations" behind the "Iron Curtain", not a single American finger was lifted against
international business. Although Canadian banks were not allowed to compete with British banks for British business, it was "regarded as cricket that foreign banks approach British companies that might be setting-up in Canada."^21

Through the post-war period and into the 1920s, the Bank of Nova Scotia became increasingly active in soliciting the entry of foreign firms into Canada. In 1919, for example, the General Manager circularized the branches, asking for information on vacant factory buildings in Canada on behalf of Heaton's Agency of Toronto, in co-operation with whom they were attempting to encourage US manufacturers to begin operations in Canada. [NS, 23 Feb. 1919.] In 1928 — while again advertising the importance of US and British branch plants in Canada, and the role which the bank's foreign branches played — McLeod reminded his branch managers that "it is our constant aim to cultivate this class of business." [NS, 7 March 1928.]

It was not until 1931, when another business depression was beginning to seriously affect the bank's ability to utilize available funds, that it upgraded the service offered to US and British firms contemplating opening in Canada, with the formal establishment of a New Business Department. [NS, 21 May 1931.] As in the Royal Bank, "new business" had become a synonym for foreign, multi-national business. The New Business Department was designed to co-ordinate activities involving foreign firms in Canada: processing information received from branches across the country, and mobilizing bank officers in the foreign branches to solicit business from parent corporations.

Almost daily information reaches this office regarding British and American companies who are contemplating establishing plants or expanding the Canadian end of their business . . . we can be of assistance to such concerns, but in order to obtain . . . the resultant banking business, it is absolutely necessary to get in touch with such concerns at an early stage of their negotiations. [NS, 21 May 1931.]

In part, the formal establishment of the New Business Department by the Bank of Nova Scotia indicates it was feeling the same level of competition for foreign business as was noted by the Royal Bank. With the US stock market unable to absorb Canadian bank loans to the degree it had before the crash of 1929, the competition became even more strenuous. Other Canadian bank were aggressively pursuing foreign firms, but with a very profitable part of its operations at stake, the Bank of
which continues to echo down to the present, reflecting no doubt the greater economic and technological strength of the USA, as well as its vastly superior geopolitical position. Yet in another, deeper, sense the question of origins is now one of interest mainly to historians. It is not at all clear what guidance, if any, it offers to the perilous present. As Thompson has put it, in carefully crafted words, "The Cold War has broken free from the occasions of its origin, and has acquired an independent inertial thrust of its own."\(^{15}\)

In any event, a Marxist interpretation of the Cold War should not be locked dogmatically into mechanical applications of class struggle models, projected from inside capitalist societies onto the international stage; still less should Marxist analysis be identified with booh-yeah reactions to which superpower calls itself "socialist" and which "capitalist". Instead Marxist analysis, a political economy of the Cold War, should seek to penetrate such levels of ideological mystification to reveal the level of the real material forces which sustain the Cold War. And here I agree with Thompson: the origins do not seem to matter that much any more. What matters now is the material structure which underlies the continuation of the Cold War.

Nor does psychology matter that much. In its origins, the Cold War was, as I have tried to demonstrate, intimately (although by no means exclusively, as the revisionist historians have clearly shown) bound up with mistaken perceptions of the Other's intentions and motives. Yet the objective behaviour of each superpower, with regard to the Other's so-called vital interests, reveals what little stock each actually places, any longer, in its own rhetorical image of the Other. The rhetoric, however, continues to intensify. One might thus draw, from the exercise of analysing the images each side holds of the Other, the hypothesis that the whole thing is one great misunderstanding, a cosmic failure of communication.

The problem with this sort of thing has been brilliantly stated by none other than Enoch Powell, who (whatever else one may think of his ideas) is unusually clear-sighted on American misunderstanding of Soviet intentions; a misunderstanding which "challenges, if it does not defeat, comprehension." The point, Powell suggests, is that:

international misunderstanding is almost wholly voluntary: it is that contradiction in terms, intentional misunderstanding — a contradiction, because in
order to misunderstand deliberately, you must at least suspect, if not actually understand what you intend to misunderstand.

When people, individually or collectively, are found behaving in an apparently unnatural or unreasonable manner, it is generally because they like doing so and fear discomfort or disadvantage if they desist . . .

This largest and most ominous of all international misunderstandings is, like the others, impervious to information or argument; but like the others it has explanations for its existence or survival. Suppose that the misunderstanding were by any chance cleared up, it is impossible to compute the dislocation of the American economy, industry and government that would ensue, so great has become the degree of their dependence on it over the years . . . there are great vested interests to insulate and preserve it.16

If we might think of Enoch Powell as a dissident of sorts in the West, let us now turn to the thoughts of a dissident in the East. George Konrad, viewing the world from the vantage point of Budapest, writes that:

The leaders' propaganda declares that they are arming against each other. In reality, however, a different picture seems to present itself: it is as if the two strongest nation-states to emerge from World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States, had made an agreement to keep the rest of the world under their power and influence. Russian-American confrontation and cooperation — the Cold War — is the new Holy Alliance. Bipolar power forces societies to submit to the discipline of one bloc or the other and to varying — significantly varying — degrees of paternalism and force. Two different types of hierarchical system weigh upon society, and their ultimate police sanction is the machinery of war . . . The Soviet bomb guarantees the police discipline of the West; the American bomb guarantees the police discipline of the East.17

Noam Chomsky puts the same point well in another way: "The typical event of the Cold War is an act of aggression or subversion by one of the superpowers against an enemy within its own domains, combined with an appeal to the threat of the Great Satan. This regular pattern goes a long way toward explaining why the Cold War persists. The system has a certain functional utility for the superpowers."18

Given that the world divided, in the late 1940s, into these two blocs, the result of military-diplomatic stalemate has become a system in which enormously influential interests, on both sides, are vested in the perpetuation of the continuing division into blocs. Consider some of the essential elements of this system, outlined in the following nine points:

(1) US/Soviet hegemony over their respective blocs is reproduced under the banner of collective security.

(2) The "threat" of the Other is deployed to maintain controls over domestic political dissent — from McCarthyism to the ubiquitous national security apparatuses.
(3) There is an accretion of complexes of interests — military, industrial, bureaucratic, with security-intelligence networks and state intellectuals — differently constructed and constituted within the two camps; but alike in that their place, prestige and funding is justified and indeed made possible by the Cold War. These may be described, for want of a better term, as the "Cold War elites". There are some studies of these on the American side, but there is unfortunately little for the Soviet side. These elites should not be seen as interests which are purely capitalist, as such, in the West; or, as exclusively state totalitarian, as such, in the East. With regard to the West, it is one of the striking observations of any serious analysis of the Cold War elites that, however many linkages there may be between the state and private interests, these linkages can no longer be termed one-way. In the state sector itself, the military, security and intelligence establishments especially have developed considerable degrees of autonomous influence. In this context, it is no accident that Reaganism and Thatcherism — despite ritual invocations of laissez faire — have in practice (and to a considerable extent, even in rhetoric) been more notable for their incarnation as the strong state, especially in its military and policing manifestations.

On the Soviet side, it must now be recognized that the model of total control from the top down cannot explain the more complicated and diffuse dispersal of power which seems to characterise the actual functioning of the system. It is at least a plausible hypothesis that various institutions and agencies of the Soviet state — the military, the intelligence networks, the security apparatus, and the defence production and weapons systems research and development units, to name a few — have developed bureaucratic and institutional, if not material, interests in the perpetuation of Cold War confrontation. This is not to deny that forces exist within the Soviet state whose interests would be better served by détente; for example, those forces (perhaps presently attached to Gorbachev’s star) which favour real economic reforms in the Soviet system. There may indeed be a contested field, on both sides, but it is a terrain on which the forces favouring the Cold War hold apparently strong positions.

(4) The Cold War elites of both sides are locked into a relationship of mutual dependence: each requires the “threat” of
the other to maintain their own position. This has specific implications for the domestic politics of both sides. The Soviet “threat” has been deployed, on countless occasions, within Western nations to bolster political parties which take a harder line externally and a more reactionary line internally (most recently, the Reagan Republicans). And as Stephen Cohen has recently argued, the same is true on the Soviet side: “At... turning points in Soviet political history, a crisis or serious worsening in East-West relations played a crucial role in the defeat of moderates and reformers inside the Soviet establishment. The lesson is that cold-war relations abet conservative and even neo-Stalinist forces in Soviet officialdom and that Soviet reformers stand a chance only in conditions of East-West détente.” The result is “an inadvertant but perilous axis between their hard-liners and ours, an axis whose first victims are the advocates of Soviet reform.”

(5) The superpowers engage in fierce competition, competition which threatens the life of the planet. But this is a form of *complicit competition*: competition which mutually reinforces the ruling classes of both sides. Take Nicaragua, where US intervention through its chosen agents is helping force the revolution into a repressive Leninist mould, which the Americans then use as transparent justification for their intervention. Yet this vicious process serves the Soviet interests as well, to the extent that US actions drive Third World revolutions into the safe and familiar limits of Soviet-style police régimes. Or again, take Poland: American rhetoric inflated the “threat” Solidarity posed to Soviet security by casting this national syndicalist movement as a Western-sponsored subversion of socialism. The military clampdown then reinforces the American argument that no democracy is possible within the Soviet orbit. But note well that in neither case is there the slightest hint of any direct intervention within the other’s sphere. This kind of complicit competition is obviously not the result of any deliberate conspiracy. It is rather a tacit complicity, arrived at over time through trial and error.

(6) If the Cold War is a system, it is an *asymmetrical* system. The pattern, set at its origins, continues to impart a rhythm to the Cold War. In the Cold War, as in the nuclear dance of death which is its shadow, it is generally the Americans who lead and the Soviets who follow. This may be no more than a
reflection of American superiority in economic, technological and geopolitical terms. It certainly does not justify blaming the US exclusively. After all, it takes two to tango. This peculiar rhythm does, however, place an invidious and unfortunate burden upon Western peace movements which must, perforce, be more critical of their own governments, with all the political vulnerability which that implies.

(7) The Cold War is a constant; but the ebb-and-flow of its intensity can be accounted for by the exigencies of international and domestic factors. Détente in the 1970s was the result of America's Southeast Asian catastrophe, the rise of China, the Kissinger-Nixon plan to reduce the costs of containment by reducing tensions, and Soviet desire for a breathing space to build up to nuclear arms parity with America. Carter, and more vehemently, Reagan, broke with détente partly as a response to Soviet buildup, but also as a response to US economic decline vis-à-vis Japan and Europe — which America cannot match in consumer exports, but can lead in arms sales so long as the market is primed by mobilizing the "Soviet threat". As well the arms boom is a kind of crude military Keynesianism, an ideologically acceptable form of pump-priming during a period of recession.

(8) Arms control negotiations are a means of institutionalizing the management of this complicit competition, to mutual benefit. Arms control talks break down from time to time, when one side detects an immediate advantage to be gained by unilateral moves. This is, however, highly destabilizing. In the long run (presuming there is a long run) the advantages of arms control will, no doubt, appear as attractive to both superpowers as state regulation is attractive to corporations whose representatives staff the regulatory agencies. Such arms control has nothing whatever to do with genuine disarmament; it is simply an arms race controlled to the mutual benefit of the racers.

(9) The Cold War is not merely an asymmetrical but an inherently unstable equilibrium. This — the most terrifying aspect of the Cold War — is tightly bound up with the nuclear question. As Robert Malcolmson has recently pointed out, the very existence of the nuclear arsenals in and of itself reinforces East-West fissures: "nuclear weaponry not only threatens to blow us all up, it also threatens, by its massive and looming
presence and because of the vested interests that cling to it, to nip in the bud and stifle any gestures of reconciliation, or signs of restraint, or any disposition to substitute diplomacy for military clout." The other side is a threat — it has tens of thousands of weapons of mass destruction targeted on our cities; it is the sword that hangs over each of our heads, every day, every hour, every minute.

Each side fights to achieve an illusory security in the face of this threat, to make itself strong enough to "deter" the other. And each can count on a bedrock of support from its own terrified citizenry for "peace through strength". Nuclear disarmers are wrong to assume that all supporters of arms buildup are warmongers — many see massive arsenals precisely as the guarantee of peace, however tragic such a misunderstanding may be.

There are at least two specific reasons why the struggle for security through deterrence is inherently unstable. First, the asymmetrical nature of the Cold War yields two quite different understandings of what a nuclear "balance" actually means. The Soviets understand balance to mean equality with the US; the latter has always understood balance to mean US superiority. Hence, the deadly dialectic of the 1970s, when Soviet buildup to achieve parity (far beyond the point of overkill, it should be noted) was (mis)interpreted by the American Cold Warriors as cause for a renewed binge of arms spending to restore "balance", i.e., US superiority.

The second, and more important, reason for inherent instability is the very nature of technology itself. The arms race is always undermining the "balance", however defined, which may exist for precarious moments but is always being swept away by innovations in the technology of death and its delivery. Cruise missiles evade detection; Pershing can strike the Soviet heartland in a matter of minutes, rather than half an hour it takes US-based ICBMs. Faced with this, the Soviets may go to "launch-on-warning", and the possibility of Armageddon by accident, rather than design, increases manifold. Star Wars may give the US a dangerous sense of invulnerability. The record of arms control offers a chilling perspective on the instability of technological competition: arms control agreements in one area of weaponry have always led to intensified research and development in areas not covered by agreements (indeed, this
has often been a payoff to the vested interests in the manufacture of death, interests which would otherwise be adversely affected by arms control agreements). In this sense at least, arms control may actually have intensified the instability of the arms race.  

Herein, of course, lies the most profound danger of the Cold War: that an inherently unstable competition may end by consuming itself, and all the earth along with it. I would, however, like to distinguish the position which I am developing from that of Thompson, with whom I am in substantial but not entire agreement. Thompson appears to assume a kind of grim technological determinism ("the logic of exterminism"). There is a tendency to conclude that *because* the weapons exist, we are fated to use them. I would insist that behind the arms race and the hideous technologies there lies the ground of material self-interest, and that material self-interest can limit the technological logic of exterminism.

The relationship between the Cold War and nuclear war is of the most intimate nature. Perhaps there could never have been a Cold War at all, were it not for the very existence of nuclear weapons and the barrier which they erect to waging war as "politics by other means". It may be that the deterrent really has worked; that without the looming mushroom cloud on the horizon, the US and the USSR would long since have dragged the world into a "conventional" third world war, the human cost of which might well have been almost as horrendous as a nuclear war. (Of course the so-called limited wars which have raged, and continue to rage, around the globe — many inspired or exacerbated by superpower rivalry — have exacted a terrible toll in themselves.) The Cold War is a result of the nuclear stalemate, as well as its cause. The relative prudence which nuclear weapons enforce on direct conflict between the superpowers, is one side of this coin. The other side is the double hierarchy of domination and repression, maintained by two superpowers armed with the potential to destroy the world; and, the mutuality of interest in maintaining this unstable equilibrium that is found on both sides in the clusters of interests which benefit from it.

***

The Cold War is still with us, then, because it has powerful and influential supporters in both blocs, and a material base
for mutually reinforcing complicit competition. It has become a world "duopoly" of power and repression. This duopoly is the terrifying form in which the superstate has established its hegemony over human society in the late twentieth century.

Is there a way out of the iron grip of the Cold War? No answer which ignores the material interests vested in the Cold War can begin to come to terms with the magnitude of the problem. This, at least, is the beginning of wisdom.

One very limited answer — limited, really, to the problem of the nuclear threat — lies in a Hobbesian approach: working for an accommodation between the superpowers which does not challenge the interests of the Cold War elites, so much as it appeals to their enlightened self-interest. Succinctly: nuclear holocaust is bad for business. This is not an appeal against the Cold War as such, nor against superpower intervention within their blocs or in the Third World. And even as an appeal against the nuclear madness, it runs into the problem of the disjuncture between microrationality and macrorationality. It is not at all clear that the combatants, in the Hobbesian war of all against all, can recognize the meta-irrationality produced by their rationally self-interested individual actions; especially when their own immediate security appears to depend on intensifying the general insecurity, and in the absence of the crucial element in Hobbes: a common power which stands above all the combatants. Perhaps the most we might hope for from such an approach is renewed arms control (managed conflict) and a Soviet-American condominium or cartel to control, or prevent, the acquisition of nuclear arms by smaller states. This latter would be no small matter, inasmuch as it would decrease the chance of nuclear war being precipitated by some third party; but whatever increased security it might bring would only be purchased at the price of the intensified grip of the superpowers on the rest of the world.

The insistent refusal of Third World struggles to conform to Cold War moulds might be a factor in loosening its grip. At the same time, non-conformist Third World revolutionary movements may also be dangerous to the extent that they frighten the superpowers and bring in intervention, especially where there is a potential clash (Iran, which is contiguous to Soviet territory and a declared American "interest", presents the most volatile example today). In any event, it is precisely
the tragic economic weakness of the Third World which allows the superpowers to deploy their vastly superior resources to buy and coerce their way into dressing indigenous struggles in Cold War colours.

There is a more hopeful route out of this maze. Within the blocs themselves there are basic divergences of interest between the superpowers and their "allies" — divergences rooted in material contradictions as well as in national-cultural dimensions. These differences manifest themselves within the elites of the allied nations; although one must also note the existence, within allied nations, of secondary Cold War elites whose interests are tied to the maintenance of Cold War hegemony. Still, contradictions between the USA/USSR and their allies or subordinates abound, and seem to be increasing, in both East and West. Here lies a potentially pivotal role for the peace movements in finding ways and means to encourage the disengagement of their national states from the thick web of entangling subordination to American/Soviet hegemony. In this regard, the sad trajectory of the French intellectuals in the 1980s is an object lesson: from a position of principled critical distance during the early Cold War, the intellectual Left in France (with a very few honourable exceptions) has capitulated to the crudest and most squalid anti-communism; with the result being a negligible peace movement and a government of the "Left" as obdurately hawkish as that of Ronald Reagan.

Any tendencies to political disintegration within NATO are positive, not because they will represent a "victory" for the Warsaw Pact, but precisely because they will encourage similar centrifugal forces within the Soviet bloc. This is especially important with regard to that dangerous nuclear tripwire, the two Germanies. There are strong tendencies unleashed in West Germany — the peace movement, the Greens, and neo-nationalism — which are pushing toward neutralism. There are similar tendencies (badly stifled, to be sure) in the GDR. A loose federation of two unaligned Germanies — an extension of the Austrian solution of 1955 — would do much to loosen the superpowers' mutual grip around the throat of Europe. Interestingly, leading American Cold Warrior Zbigniew Brzezinski, in a revisionist article in Foreign Affairs, has recently suggested something along these very lines.
Such tendencies in Europe will have a long and tortuous career before issuing in the happy result of disalignment, but all such tendencies should be applauded — even when they arise from national-chauvinist roots. Anything that works against superpower hegemony is positive. Gaullism, in this sense, was marginally preferable to the pro-American sycophancy of French Socialism in office. In any event, there are great ideological struggles to be waged, by the peace movements and progressive intellectuals, in contesting and delegitimating the hold of the symbols of Cold War discourse over Western publics.

Having said this, I must hasten to add that the machinery of hegemony will not vanish in the face of disalignment, and may even be redeployed. Disalignment itself must come to terms with the power of the duopolistic system. The USA and the USSR are, after all, Great Powers with profound interests in maintaining their spheres of influence. To ignore this unpleasant fact would only court disaster. Disalignment will be a positive attack on the Cold War system to the extent that international relations are decharged of the Soviet/American polarization. Sadly — especially for smaller countries like Canada which have chosen their geography unwisely — some recognition of the preeminence of the superpowers within their own spheres is the necessary price to pay, to avoid an angry spasm of repression in reaction to disalignment. In this regard, the model of “Finlandization” (a term used by Western Cold Warriors as one of abuse) appears as a not-unattractive alternative. Certainly Finland — once attacked and occupied by the USSR — manages a degree of autonomy, within limits, which is not unattractive in relation to the actually-existing model of domination suffered by other Eastern European countries. Canadianization, anyone?

These are not bright or uplifting images on which to conclude. Seen as a system, as a totalizing dynamic, the Cold War is indeed a terrifying machine — but not a completely closed one. No machine, no system is ever definitively closed. In his first and most powerfully cynical spy novel, John Le Carré ends with his protagonist, disillusioned by both sides, being gunned down along side the Berlin Wall. His last image, as he dies, is that of a “small car smashed between great lorries, and the children waving cheerfully through the window.”29 That was two and a half decades ago. The most hopeful thing to be said today is that the children are no longer waving cheerfully.
Notes


3. E.P. Thompson, Beyond the Cold War (NY, 1982) p. 154

4. For recent revelations see Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis,;" and "Documentation: White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis", International Security 10:1 (Summer 1985) 137-203


8. In an important recent book, The making of the Second Cold War (London, 1983) pp. 24-30, Fred Halliday usefully lists eight major schools of thought, from orthodox Soviet threat and US imperialist theories to more nuanced north-south, interstate and class conflict theories. Halliday himself — although placing special emphasis on class conflict and the importance of revolutionary advances in the Third World as key elements in the intensification of the so-called Second Cold War — concludes that “it is not one or other of these constituent elements but rather their unpredictable and unprecedented combination which has made the postwar period so unique, and so perilous.” On Halliday, see Morten Ougaard’s critique, “The origins of the second Cold War,” and Halliday’s reply, in New Left Review 147 (September/October 1984) 61-83


10. E.P. Thompson, Beyond the Cold War, 169 (See n. 3 above.)


13. Based on information in Michael Kidron and Dan Smith, The War Atlas (London, 1983) but updated to include two more interventions in 1984 — Chad and Grenada.

14. Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, The Limits of Power (NY, 1972) along with Gabriel Kolko’s earlier Politics of War (NY, 1968) and The Roots of American Foreign Policy (Boston, 1969) are among the most distinguished contributions to the revisionist literature, but they do display a fairly relentless American focus. Noam Chomsky’s Towards a New Cold War (NY, 1982) displays a similar American-centered bias, but this is less true of his “The drift towards global war,” Studies in Political Economy 17 (Summer 1985) 5-32. Another example is James Petras and Morris Morley, “The New Cold War: Reagan’s Policy Toward Europe and the Third World,” Studies in Political Economy 9 (Fall 1982) 5-44. For an interesting work attempting to set the origins of the Cold War
Whitaker/The Cold War

within a perspective which allows scope for Soviet initiatives as well, see Vojtech Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare and the Politics of Communism, 1941-1945* (NY, 1979)

15. E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War*, p. 168-69


18. Chomsky, "The Drift," 21 (See n. 14 above.)

19. George Kennan, a crucial figure in the genesis of American Cold War policy in the late 1940s, recently writes that "millions of people in this country now have a personal stake in the maintenance and cultivation of this vast armed establishment, and of the Cold War psychology by which it is sustained. These include military people, industrialists, workers in defence industries, politicians, journalists, publicists, and many others who for one reason or another have locked themselves into characteristic Cold War attitudes. The Cold War and the responses which it engenders may in fact be said to have become an addiction for large parts of our society": *The Nuclear Delusion* (NY, 1983) pp. 237-8. On the Cold War elites in America, see J.C. Donovan, *The Cold Warriors: a Policy-making Elite* (Lexington, 1974); and Wolfe, *Rise and Fall* (See n. 11 above.). A recent biography of Eisenhower shows, in harrowing detail, how the President, who coined the phrase "military-industrial complex", fought doggedly against the pressures of the Cold War elites not only to vastly increase nuclear weaponry but, on numerous occasions, to use it as well: Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower, Vol. 2: The President* (NY, 1984). For the Soviets see: David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* (London, 1983) for a careful analysis of the forces at work within the USSR; as well as Andrew Cockburn, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine* (NY, 1983) especially 80-152


21. Chomsky, "The Drift," 11-4 makes the point well that military Keynesianism has a particular ideological cachet in capitalist societies.


25. I am speaking here of the Thompson of *Exterminism and Cold War*. More recently, he seems to have moved away from this determinism toward an interest in what functions war, or preparedness for war, perform for contemporary superstates: this was the main thrust of a lecture Thompson delivered at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, 8 November 1985.

26. See: Kees van der Pijl, *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class* (London, 1984); and Richard Barnet, *The Alliance* (NY, 1983). Contradictions abound: just as the brave new Labour government of little New Zealand dares to take on Reagan's America over the banning of American warships from New Zealand ports, the tenuous margin of Canadian national independence in international affairs, established by Pierre Trudeau, is brusquely swept

27. Some good sense in this regard can be found in Langille, “Strategies” (See n. 1 above.)
