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# NUCLEAR DISCOURSE AND ITS DISCONTENTS, OR, APOCALYPSE NOW OR NEVER

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Human beings think most often in images; a terrible or delightful picture comes into our minds and then we seek to find words to express it, to capture it, to make it somehow manageable. Thus it is with the possibility of nuclear war. Our images are fixed. The scenes of utter destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; two cities laid waste; people disappeared, remaining as shadows on cement or persisting in a terrible and painful twilight zone of lingering death from radiation. Or, even years later, moving through the world carrying within them a perceived taint, a threat to themselves and others: "I am one who has been touched in the most frightening way by the most horrible sort of weapon."

I taught a class at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst for five years called "Issues of War and Peace in a Nuclear Age." Inevitably, we would arrive at the section of the course that required a discussion of the dropping of the atomic bombs in World War 2. By that point the students realized that hundreds of thousands of people already had been incinerated in the fire-bombings of Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo. So they knew that body counts could mount up to almost unimaginable figures with so-called conventional weapons. But the notion of nuclear war and nuclear weaponry and its use is somehow different. The damage persists, carried literally in the bodies of survivors, encoded, if you will, in human tissue itself. Using Michael Walzer's book *Just and Unjust Wars*,<sup>1</sup> we discussed the distinction he makes between the *justice* of strategic bombing of German cities in World War 2 and the *injustice* of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I am not interested in pursuing how or why he makes that distinction so much as I am interested in alerting the reader to the discussion that took shape as this question was taken up by students.

One particular semester, there was a group of students who saw in the use of nuclear weaponry an extension of conventional war-making. They recognized, of course, the long-term threat to individuals and the environment that nuclear devastation carries, but they argued that it was but another weapon, a horribly destructive weapon, to be used, as it was in this instance, to end a horribly destructive war. They spoke in what Freeman Dyson would call the *rhetoric* of the warriors or would-be warriors. This is a world that gives rise to its own discursive style. The world of the warriors, Dyson notes in his book *Weapons and Hope*, promotes a style that is "deliberately cool, attempting to exclude overt emotion and rhetoric...emphasizing technical accuracy and objectivity."<sup>2</sup> This world of the warrior domain is male dominated and, interestingly, all of the students who spoke out in favor of the use of

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atomic weapons in World War 2 were young men. A number of them had fathers who fought in the Pacific theater in World War 2. It is likely that there were young women who shared this perspective but who felt inhibited in speaking out or endorsing nuclear weaponry.

A second voice emerged in the course of the discussion, the one that Dyson calls the voice of the victims or would-be victims. This rhetoric of the victims is “women and children dominated.” Even as the warriors’ world describes the outcome of war “in the language of exchange ratios and cost effectiveness, the victims’ world describes it in the language of tragedy,”<sup>3</sup> frequently laced with eschatological fears. More and more victims, or those who see themselves as potential victims, peer over the edge of the abyss and come back convinced that an apocalypse looms soon. The students who expressed this anticipation or fear were those who were harsh in their condemnation of the United States for having introduced the nuclear threat into the world of war and states.

One young woman, a Japanese exchange student, having listened patiently for several days to the young Americans, to the discourse of the warriors and the victims, raised her hand slowly but deliberately. The class quieted down. She spoke hesitantly, she had difficulty with the language, and then she said, “What happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not war, it was something else.” Class ended at that moment, although we had fifteen minutes left in the period, because all of us were too stunned to speak. What was that ‘something else’ she referred to? My hunch is that we all have a sense that a nuclear weapon is not war but is something else. Even the warriors realized that some extra step was taken with the use of this weaponry.

Here we are, forty years plus after the dropping of the atomic bombs; they have not been used since save in testing situations, and we are still struggling with ways to deal with our apprehensions, to deal with the proliferation of nuclear technology, to deal with the recognition that at least one of our would-be enemies has a nuclear potential equal to our own. We live in a postwar world that has been defined by the term deterrence and the advocates of deterrence would say that it has obviously worked: the proof is in the pudding, there has been no nuclear war. I’m not interested in debating deterrence in this essay. But I am interested in taking a good look at the different discourses that have emerged around nuclear realities, or, perhaps better put, the discourses we have available to us to deal with the reality of nuclear weapons. I’m interested in rhetorical practices. How do we come to grips with the dangers and possibilities of the present historic moment as these revolve around war and rumors of war of a potentially nuclear sort?

I suggested in my recent book, *Women and War*, that there are currently three primary clashing discourses: the *strategic*, the *psychological*, and the *apocalyptic*.<sup>4</sup> These are dominant voices that vie for our attention where nuclear war, nuclear weapons, and nuclear dangers are concerned.

The strategic voice is preeminently that of Dyson's warrior: cool, objective, scientific, and overwhelmingly male. But more women aim to get in on this strategic enterprise, to certify female voices as authoritative spokespersons for and of this world of knowledge and power. The cool, in command strategic voice talks in the language of cost benefit, control, and crisis management. Since 1982 women's leadership conferences on national security have been held with the aim of devising ways for women to become equal partners in the discussion and formulation of national security policy. Women too would speak in the voice of the knowing insider. There is a problem here—for this strategic discourse is often strangely disassociated.

To understand the contemporary discourse of the warriors, of those who have what it takes to deal with notions of megadeaths and nuclear exchange, we must go back to the discourse of realism in international relations and in the study of international relations. Those who locate themselves within contemporary realist discourse trace their roots to Thucydides' *Peloponnesian Wars* and the so-called Melian dialogue in which the Athenians proclaimed to the hapless citizens of Melos that might is the right that reigns, to Machiavelli and his *Prince*, to Hobbes and his nasty, brutish, short state of nature, and to other sources leading into the present and culminating in the emergence of the discursive hegemony of realism, *realpolitik*. Realism, in turn, became professionalized. It got located in the academy, and the way in which students of international relations have been taught the discourse is often by pitting realism against something that the realist calls *idealism*; that is, alternatives to realism are evaluated *from the standpoint of realism*. Hence the bin labeled idealism which for the realist is more or less synonymous with dangerous, if well-intentioned, innocence concerning the world's ways.

Realism is based on two primary and quite simple principles: we live in a dangerous world that no one can fully control; and, we must assume that others, if they have the power, will be prepared to use it against those who have less power if their interests are at stake. The realist also emphasizes that the causes of war are inherent, that they are a constitutive feature of an international system in which the nation state remains the arbiter of its own interest and the judge of the means by which its security is best assured.

Historic realism, molded into a discursive tradition, involves a way of thinking, a set of assumptions about the human condition, and a potent rhetoric. The great strength of thinkers located in the canon as realist forefathers is their historical perspicuity, their willingness to deal with the problem of "dirty hands;" their boldness in offering an orientation to the question of collective violence; and their insistence that the limits, as well as the uses, of force be treated explicitly, preferably in a mood shorn of crusading enthusiasms, universalist aspirations, and triumphalist trumpeting. But something happened when realism got pinioned within the academy; it became palpably less realistic, less



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attuned to the political and historic landscape than in its classical formulations. Encumbered with technical jargon, specialists in this discourse all too often began to speak to or at one another or to their counterparts in government. Unabashedly male dominated, oriented to state sovereignty, presuming unitary notions of power and national interest, practitioners of the discourse of realism got caught up in a wider quest for a scientific language that came out in such forms as game theory and other abstract models that would, so the story went, work if one could just get the parameters right.

Characteristic of the modern, professionalized discourse of international relations in its most recent incarnations then, is a proclamation of scientific knowledge—that cool, objective warrior language that Dyson talks about, a presumption that politics can be reduced to questions of security, conflict management and damage control; a patina of ahistorical and anodyne terminology (window of vulnerability, collateral damage, crisis management, escalation dominance), and a pronounced insouciance concerning the will to power embedded in the concepts and metaphors that comprise the discourse in the first place.

Although particular forms of this quest for scientific certainty come and go, the dangers inherent in professionalized warrior rhetoric remain. I have no better word for what I have in mind here than disassociation. For although the specialist as a constructor of abstract scenarios, cloaked in the mantle of scientific study, presents himself as one who describes the world as it is, he is in fact presuming that we have control over events when in fact we often do not. This prompted Hannah Arendt to argue in 1969 that scientifically-minded brain trusters bustling about in think tanks, universities, and government bureaucracies should be criticized harshly not because they were thinking the unthinkable, as some of them liked to boast, but rather because they did not think at all.<sup>5</sup> The cool language of strategy, having become disassociated, more and more removed from its subject matter and from events that it conjures with, prompts a modern *classical* realist, Michael Howard to state:

When I read the flood of scenarios in strategic journals about first strike capabilities, counter force or countervailing strategies, flexible response, escalation dominance, and the rest of the postulate of nuclear theology, I ask myself in bewilderment, this war they are describing, what is it about: The defense 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 they talking about? Has not the bulk of American thinking become exactly what Clausewitz described, something that, because it is divorced from any political context, is pointless and devoid of sense?<sup>6</sup>

That women have been pretty much excluded from this enterprise is not its most obvious flaw and it is one that can be remedied. Women can engage in the activity even if representations of women and the sphere with which they have been historically linked remains an absence that helps to make possible the much cherished parsimony of the preferred model or simulation or analysis in the first place. So professionalized strategic discourse, located either in the academies or government bureaucracies, including the Pentagon, whether as abstract strategic doctrine advertising itself as realism brought up to date, or as alternatives that would somehow take us beyond realism into ever more scientific realms of discussion, seems to me one of the most dubious of the many dubious sciences presenting truth claims that mask the power plays embedded in the discourse and the practices it legitimates.

But I can't simply leave it at that. The warrior's voice cannot be wholly discredited. We have too many examples historically of instances in which failure to prepare for the onslaught of devastation from a determined foe in fact lead to greater loss of life and to a more prolonged struggle than would have been the case had those under attack thought in more strategic terms, thought in the language and through the presumptions of the warriors in order to prepare themselves. Is there anyway to reclaim the assumptions of the realist and the warrior, to strip them of their claims to dominance, and to see within these inherited discourses something we can draw upon to help situate us in a world of nuclear threat? These are questions that a few of those speaking on and through strategic discourse have themselves attempted to confront in recent years (Kennan and McNamara, for example). By softening the presumptions of the strategic voice and by insisting that in fact ethical and moral dimensions *must* be brought to bear in strategic thinking, the purveyors of strategic discourse and its attendant rhetoric give a tacit, if not explicit, bow in the direction of the discourse of the *victims*.

For example: Joseph Nye, author of *Nuclear Ethics*, insists that moral reasoning about nuclear weapons is inescapable in democracies. He acknowledges that many practitioners of strategic discourse have ignored ethics even as many moral absolutists opposed to nuclear weapons refuse to tolerate nuclear weapons at all and that, too, he finds unrealistic in a world in which nuclear weapons are here to stay. He acknowledges that "strategists tend to live in an esoteric world of abstract calculations and a belief in a mystical religion called deterrence which is invoked to justify whatever is convenient. Strategists would do well to realize that there are no experts, only specialists on the subject of nuclear war and to listen more carefully to the moralists' criticisms."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, however, even those who would inject ethics into strategic discourse wind up endorsing and calling for the maintenance or managing of a situation which those who embrace either a *psychological* or an *apocalyptic* voice find unacceptable, even reprehensible; that is, they continue to insist that the United States must maintain a credible nuclear deterrent, that, in the words of Allison, Carnsdale, and Nye, authors of *Hawks, Doves, and Owls*:

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to avoid war it is necessary, though not sufficient, to maintain the capability of our military forces and the credibility of our military intentions and resolve. Our nuclear arsenal continues to play an important role in deterring aggression against the territory of the United States, our allies, and other areas of vital interest to us....There seems little doubt that deterrence of deliberate nuclear or conventional attack on the American homeland is effective, robust, and stable....Our suggestions for actions to be taken and actions to be avoided are designed to ensure that Soviet leaders see no advantage in the balance of nuclear forces and to maximize the credibility of our nuclear deterrent.<sup>8</sup>

How is it then that this more modest deployment of strategic discourse and rhetoric is found *wholly* objectionable by the other two primary voices in the contemporary debate, the psychological and the apocalyptic? I will turn first to the voice of psychological discourse on nuclear weaponry or, as the practitioners of this discourse call it, nuclearism.

This alternative language is more readily available to ordinary citizens than the cooler, technical language of strategic discourse. Living as we do in an era in which every issue quickly becomes one for therapy and gets turned into a psychological problem, it is perhaps not surprising that nuclear weapons and war have been psychologized and that psychological discourse should proliferate on war and peace questions. The practitioners of psychological discourse claim that we must all feel dread in our current situation and that if we are not suffering nuclear nightmares, this is additional proof that we are infected with nuclearism, that is, a massive denial of the reality and threat that nuclear weapons present to our own survival and that of our children and their children.

It is interesting that many fewer specialists in national security are pessimistic about our future prospects than the general public. The general public, more caught up in either the psychologistic or the apocalyptic mode or some combination of the two, is far more pessimistic about the prospects of a major nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union before the end of the century. So the discourses that most proliferate in our public debate as non-specialist voices are those most convinced that we are in a terrible danger zone, if not doomed. In surveys on the question: how likely is a major nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union before the end of the century, one finds that nearly half the general public say nuclear war is likely, but specialists' answers cluster between about one in one hundred to one in one thousand who find it likely. Not too much is proven by this sort of finding, but it does indicate that those who specialize in the study of nuclear deterrence and the study of the risks of nuclear war, and have a language that they can bring to bear that makes that threat seem more manageable, are more hopeful about our



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prospects than those who not only do not share that language but who eschew its use as either amoral or immoral.

Psychological discourse about nuclear weaponry is one variant of the discourse of victims. The reigning assumption is that we have all been made ill by nuclear weapons, that there is the bomb out there, but there is also a bomb in us, that we are corrupted by the disease of nuclearism. Those most corrupted are those who preach and practice nuclear deterrence and speak in the language of strategy. Psychologicistic nuclear discourse often condemns the motivations of those who traffic in nuclear issues even as it challenges the rest of us to bring our suppressed fears to the surface.

Psychologicistic discourse does more than simply warn us. It chastises and judges, dividing the world up into three categories: those who are knowingly corrupted, namely, the traffickers in strategic nuclear discourse; those who are unknowingly corrupted, namely, those who claim that they are not frightened to death by the prospect of nuclear war because they do not believe it is the central danger that we, "the benumbed," face; and a third and preferred category, those who have stripped off the numbness, who have rid themselves of symptoms of the pathology of nuclearism and who, facing the dangers straight on, are part of what these rhetoricians hope will be a growing movement to obliterate the nuclear disease. The metaphors deployed are those of disease, of pathology, of malignance.

There is much to be said for the warnings that these rhetoricians utter. It is the case that, confronted with horror or the prospect of something horrible, we tend to stick our heads in the sand and avoid facing that which should be faced. They are right to express moral anguish. My concern is that the metaphors with which they work and the rhetoric that encapsulates those metaphors do not take sufficient account of the constraints of the world in which we all exist. For example: Even as the practitioners of this discourse argue for the elaboration of a *transnational* self, a *species* identity, the world in which we actually live is one in which *the self* is more and more defined by national and religious identifications. What we see happening is not so much a new internationalism as a resurgence of militant nationalisms. It doesn't seem very helpful, given this potent development, to argue that this is further symptomology, a spreading disease, and that only physicians who have understood the nature of the disease can cure us.

Vaclav Havel, the great Czech playwright and political essayist, tells stories of earnest and sincere western peace activists journeying to central eastern Europe, making contact with dissidents, refusniks, political rebels in these societies, including Czechoslovakia, and he indicates that he finds it very difficult to explain to them why he does not sign petitions for immediate nuclear disarmament. For we citizens of central eastern Europe, he argues, that is not the central danger, not the most immediate threat to our lives, to our culture, and to our existence. And he indicates that what, to him, seems a rather remote prospect,



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whereas imprisonment for conscience is an immediate one, doesn't seem to carry much weight with Westerners. They, he insists, can concentrate on the nuclear question precisely because they do not face certain immediate threats. He is sad that they do so in a way that gives them a moralistic language that labels those who disagree with them as corrupt or evil.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing categories from individual psychology and putting them to work to cover complex structural realities and determinants sanctions an overpersonalizing of important political realities. Take, for example, the rhetoric of Helen Caldicott, a medical doctor and leader in raising alarms about a nuclear disaster she finds imminent. She writes of missile envy as a *psychopathology of men* or a particular group of men. She describes the planet as an organic entity that is "terminally ill, infected with lethal macrobes that are metastasizing rapidly the way cancer spreads in the body."<sup>9</sup> The problem with the cancer metaphor is that one cuts a cancer out or irradiates it into oblivion, if it is found in the human body. The equivalent, presumably, would be nuclear disarmament and the destruction of stockpiled weapons. But when the analogy gets pressed between the structural realities of international politics and individual psychopathology, the inadequacies of this discourse become clear. In Caldicott's argument women get dubbed with the rescue mission because they *innately* understand conflict resolution, being "nurturers born with strong feelings for nurturing given their *anatomies* and *hormonal* constitutions. Males having an excess of the hormonal output of androgen are bound to deploy these deadly toys."<sup>11</sup> One variant, then, on this discourse is the presumption that if many of us are ill, men are, by definition, hopelessly infected by nature. This formulation does not seem terribly helpful. Males are always going to have an excess of androgen, and it's an excess, of course, only if one sets up the female as the single human norm. So the upshot is that males need to be remade. No scheme that calls for the remaking of human nature as a precondition for a better world has ever panned out. Indeed, it seems politically naive, and the organic and psychological metaphors potentially dangerous, in terms of the sorts of interventions that they may invite.

But it would be inappropriate to end on this note. Just as the practitioners of strategic discourse point to important realities in our situation, the practitioners of psychologistic discourse alert us to certain discomfiting facts. It is the case that most of the time we refuse to confront that which we do not understand, or that which seems unbearably grim. And this fatalistic outlook may, in the words of Robert Lifton, bind our eyes and minds tightly closed with a message of helplessness.<sup>12</sup> Although I am strongly convinced that there is a more specifically civic discourse better able to rouse us to appropriate and critical action than psychologistic analogizing, there is a truth here that cannot be entirely gainsaid: the world inside and the world out there are in fact related, and human beings are constituted, in part, in and

through the ways in which they introject or internalize the outer and the ways in which the inner is projected into the outer.

With that, let me move on to the third of the three discourses that dominate our thinking about war and peace—the apocalyptic. The apocalypticist assures that we are doomed. There are several examples of the genre, from Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*, to the practitioners of so-called end time fundamentalism. Each issues dire warnings that we are lost. In Schell's case, we are lost unless we move to put an immediate end to that which plagues us and guarantees utter destruction. He posits his argument in absolutist either/ors. At the end of his book he insists that: "two paths and two paths only lie before us, one leads to death, the other to life." If we choose the first path, if we

numbly refuse to acknowledge the nearness of extinction, all the while increasing our preparations to bring it about, then we, in effect, become the allies of death and in everything we do our attachment to life will weaken, our vision, blinded to the abyss that is open to our feet, will dim and grow confused, our will, discouraged by the thought of trying to build on such a precarious foundation anything that is meant to last will slacken and we will sink into stupefaction as though we were gradually weaning ourselves from life in preparation for the end.<sup>13</sup>

There is a powerful hortatory flavor to apocalyptic rhetoric, whether in its secular form, as in Schell's sustained and dire prophesy, or in its explicitly religious manifestations.

Paradoxically, central to this posture is a mode of reasoning that is also favored by many contemporary "disassociated" realists, proliferation of so-called worst-case scenarios. The rhetorical ante gets upped and stays at fever pitch in apocalyptic argumentation. What one finds in the feminist practitioners—just one among a vast array of feminist voices—is the claim that war is threatening disorder; peace is healing order; war is human bestiality (male and male only); peace is human benevolence (female and female alone). The present world of war and preparation for war flows directly from a male ontology of absolute discordance which will be supplanted at some happy point by a world of peace and nurturing which flows, or will, from an ontology of concordance that is specifically or exclusively female.

For the apocalypticists, peace is a utopian dream, a fullness of being, that evokes images of celebration and understanding where all the barriers between peoples have been melted away. This notion of peace traffics in binary opposites. As I indicated the choices are presented in stark either/ors. So we find the contrast between masculinism, patriarchy, violence, disorder and matriarchy, non-violence, harmonious order. Here are just a couple of recent examples, and one can proliferate them almost endlessly. I draw these from a book called *Reweaving the Web of Life*.<sup>14</sup> One writer says wars are nothing short of tools for organized killing presided over by men deemed the best, and in fact they are.

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Missiles and nuclear weapons are extensions of the male self which is capable of little but violence. If a passion for life is to flourish, women are the bearers of this life loving energy, writes another. Feminism and non-violence see power only in its healthy form, leading naturally to cooperative and nurturing behavior necessary for a harmonious existence.<sup>15</sup> This apocalyptic, cosmic feminism is animated by a quest for attunement with some higher unity, often a benevolent view of nature which then gets contrasted to the despoilations of modern nuclear culture.

One of the practitioners of this apocalyptic mode insists that the only route to transformation would be for women who “bear a different relationship to children than men do and are more connected and empathic with the environment than men are,”<sup>16</sup> to gain absolute power over the process of reproduction and, in a situation utterly free of any male influence, go on to reduce the number of men in the human population to an ideal of ten percent. This alone guarantees continuing and everlasting peace on earth. The writer claims that this ratio could be achieved in one generation if half the population reproduced in the normal manner, and one half by ‘ovular merging’—that is, the combination of two ovum to create a female person. We have here a very extreme version of the insistence that we must literally transform human beings—in this case create females and eliminate males—in order to ensure peace or the possibility of peace and destroy nuclear weapons.

But the dominant apocalyptic voice in the population at large, though heard less by those of us in the academy, is that which flows from fundamentalist and religious end timers who *anticipate* a nuclear holocaust. This is for them a source of joy, a sign that the ‘rapture’—the divine rescue of true believers from the holocaust—is drawing nigh. Just before the earth gets devoured in an orgy of destruction, true believers will be lifted up and drawn to God as promised in the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic warnings are balm to the spirit of many, rather than a way to strike terror. Writes A.C. Mojtabai, author of *Blessed Assurance, At Home With the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas*, in a recent essay:

...people coming to the Bible belt to speak out against the nuclear arms race ought to be forewarned. The Physicians for Social Responsibility worst case blast conflagration scenario for nuclear war is so familiar it's almost cozy. It is part of the script for the tribulation that is coming soon to winnow the earth in preparation for the triumphal second coming of Christ. And the message is not prevention but exemption. The message is you've been warned. Declare for Jesus while there is yet time.<sup>17</sup>

Mojtabai notes that the Doomsday clock of the Union of Concerned Scientists, telling us how few minutes are left until nuclear midnight has been reached, “has been used by revivalists for centuries in the harvesting of souls. The message is *beating* the clock, not turning it back....The message is, ‘Are you ready? It's going to happen any moment.’” All this is normal fare: apocalyptic anticipations, terrors, and yearnings are



nothing new, but there is a new element here and that is our ability to "bring down the show ourselves."<sup>18</sup> Majtabai describes the fundamentalist habit, which is to reduce alternatives to exclusive disjunctions, all or nothing, absolute good or absolute evil, black or white. And that, I have already indicated, is a characteristic of apocalyptic thinking in general, whether in its secular versions or, here, in the end time version.

The religious apocalyptic version taps more Americans than either the strategic or psychologistic voices, for the fundamentalist mode extends well beyond the American Bible Belt. A Nielson survey released a couple of years ago indicated that over 60 million Americans, about forty percent of all television viewers, regularly listened to preachers who tell them that we can do nothing to prevent nuclear war in our lifetime. A 1984 Yankelovitch poll revealed that four out of ten Americans believe that when the Bible predicts that the earth will be destroyed, it's telling us about nuclear war. And, according to Mojtabai's study, the Citizen's Network report documented that of four thousand evangelical fundamentalists who attended the annual national religious broadcasters convention, an estimated three thousand are dispensationalists. Dispensationalism is a doctrine that goes back to the 19th Century; it reduces the Bible to a single basic plot: God puts man to the test and man fails. And within the dispensationalist mode, which has different stages, we come to the age of the Kingdom which is on the horizon, which will bring the sorry history of humankind on earth to a close. The view, again, is that those who have been saved will be raptured, will be drawn up as the tribulation spreads and the vial of wrath is poured into the air and the earth itself destroyed. This message of doom *and* hope, of promised eternal redemption, goes out over fourteen hundred religious stations in the United States.

Is there any way out of or through these rhetorical practices, if each has the weaknesses that I have cited along with some very specific strengths? A language in and through which to express the sentiments of civic life and the dangers and possibilities of the present moment: that is the challenge. But what might that language be and how might we come to it, recognizing, of course, that transformations in the way in which we think about things and the rhetoric we deploy will not in itself suffice to bring about the ends we seek. At the conclusion of *Women and War*, I talked about breaking the deadlock of war's mobilized language. Perhaps I should have said the mobilized language of war and peace, for a good bit of the rhetoric that I have elaborated is a language that looks to peace, but only through the most terrible and extreme imagery of war. Ryszard Kapuscinski, in an essay called "1945," wrote the following:

What does it mean to think in wartime images? It means seeing everything as existing in a state of extreme tension, as breathing cruelty and dread. For wartime reality is a world of extreme Manichean reduction which erases all intermediate hues, gentle, warm, and limits everything to a sharp aggressive counterpoint, to black and white, to the primordial struggle of two forces, good

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and evil. Only the good, in other words us, and the bad, meaning everything that stands in our way, which appears to us and which we lump into the sinister category of evil. And it is curious and disheartening that much of the language of peace is cast in the language of war, that peace people think in wartime images, that is, in a struggle of good versus evil.<sup>19</sup>

This mobilized language is infused within the metaphors and tropes of everyday discourse. We are weaned on such opposites as good versus evil, peace versus war, just versus unjust. To deflect this way of thinking is impossible so long as we remain enthralled by grand teleologies of historic winners or losers, or of bad war people versus good peace people; so long as our identities are laced through with absolute moralisms; and so long as we seek or require on this earth a unifying experience of the sort that total war or perpetual peace alone seems to promise.

To appreciate the relativity of all antagonisms and friendships, to see in others neither angels nor demons, puts one on a track different from that laid down by those who would organize and systematize reality in some of the relentlessly total ways I have here been describing. The discourse I am calling for as an alternative to the nuclear discourses that have thus far prevailed eschews all-or-nothing pronouncements of utopian and apocalyptic prophets, seeking instead to articulate the limits of the world in which we live, yet to sustain space for meaningful action, for what Hannah Arendt called new beginnings. Unlike the practitioners of strategic discourse at its most unrelenting, the voice I call for infuses an *ethical* dimension devoid of sanctimony. Unlike psychologistic discourse at its most extreme, the voice I call for rejects handy labels that some of us can use to tag the others of us pathological or ill. Unlike the apocalyptic voice, the voice I call for is attuned to the provisional nature of enmities and friendships in politics, aware of the fact that those who are foreign will always present us with a situation of estrangement but this need not become the occasion for enmity.

I would call this the voice of the hopeful, anti-utopian citizen who acknowledges a world of bewildering diversity in which we are nonetheless invited to search for commonalities as cherished achievements. After all, we are all mortal, we all fear for our children's future, we all breathe the same air, and we must all confront, at this point, the possibility of a similar and terrible fate. Although we may never know the new heaven and the new earth promised in the Book of Revelation, and we shall not achieve a world in which there shall be neither mourning nor crying nor pain, there is the possibility that we can begin to take action and to think and act in ways that Abraham Lincoln once called "disenthralled." We require a discourse that draws upon the strengths, but rejects the excesses of the strategic, the psychological, and the apocalyptic voices that I have here elaborated.

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books) 1977.
- <sup>2</sup> Freeman Dyson, *Weapons and Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984): 4-5.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books) 1987.
- <sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harvest) 1969.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University) 1984: 139-140.
- <sup>7</sup> Joseph Nye, *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press) 1986: 11.
- <sup>8</sup> Graham T. Allison, Albert Carnsdale and Joseph Nye. *Hawks, Doves and Owls* (New York: WW Norton) 1985: 224.
- <sup>9</sup> Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy* (New York: Bantam) 1985: 1, 316-317.
- <sup>10</sup> Vaclav Havel, "Peace: The View from Prague," *New York Review of Books* (21 November 1985): 28-30.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 316-317.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Future of Immortality* (New York: Basic) 1987.
- <sup>13</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf) 1982: 231.
- <sup>14</sup> Pam McAllister, ed. *Reweaving the Web of Life* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers) 1982.
- <sup>15</sup> Donna Warnock, "Patriarchy is a Killer: What People Concerned About Peace and Justice Should Know," in *Reweaving the Web of Life*: 20-29.
- <sup>16</sup> Barbara Zanotti, "Patriarchy: A State of War" in *Reweaving the Web of Life*: 16-19.
- <sup>17</sup> AG Mojtabai, "Fundamentalism and Nuclear Threat," in *Proceedings of the Center on Violence and Human Survival*, May 1987. (New York: John Jay College) 1988: 38.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: 39.
- <sup>19</sup> Ryszard Kapuscinski, cited in Elshtain, *Women and War*: 256.