

## Three

# APOCALYPTIC THINKING VERSUS NONVIOLENT ACTION

William C. Gay

### 1. Introduction

Throughout the Cold War, we heard public cries that nuclear war would destroy us. Many citizens rejected the governmentally crafted myth of protection. They did not believe in the 1960s that a fallout shelter boom or in the 1980s that a star wars boom would protect them from the big boom. Instead, they thought the Big Boom would bring on global doom. Currently, we are hearing our initial post-Cold War version of the myth of protection. This time the star wars fallacy is being repackaged as a missile defense system. Then, following the events of 11 September 2001, a further shift occurred. Now, we hear that the Office of Homeland Security will protect us from terrorists and from weapons of mass destruction, whether nuclear, chemical, or biological.

Some existentialists stress that since each of us will die, we need to grapple with the meaning of our individual death. Reflection on the prospect that weapons of mass destruction might be used is even more foreboding because their large-scale use raises the scepter of collective death and feeds on a long tradition of apocalyptic thinking. Several religious traditions prophesy that the human world will come to a painful end. Past wars have done much to support Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's view that history is "the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed."<sup>1</sup> Weapons of mass destruction suggest a different meaning than Francis Fukuyama gave to the phrase "the end of history."<sup>2</sup> Instead of global democracy, we may face global annihilation. Even during the Cold War, many people feared that nuclear war could seal the coffin on us all, consuming our world with burning light and eternal night. As we begin the twenty-first century, public fears are even greater that an attack of one sort or another likely will befall us.

In the first part of this essay, I will argue against the utility of fear and apocalyptic thinking. Apocalyptic prognosticators have a zero "accudoom" forecast record. By nature, only once could such a forecast be correct. In religious apocalyptic traditions, the rising of the sun on the proclaimed doomsday typically sends the sheet-enshrouded devotees back from the appointed hilltop

to their everyday tasks. Instead of being taken up into the clouds, they find their feet firmly planted on the ground. The prophet may re-calculate and issue yet another warning of the beginning of the end on a still later date, but the ranks of the faithful tend to thin. In the nuclear doom tradition, the theoretical and experimental data of careful scientific research has often dispelled similar forecasts. A temporarily frightened public returns to business as usual. Will governmental assurances lull us into believing that, despite its great cost, a missile defense system will protect us for ballistic missiles launched at us by diabolical (and hardly comparably powerful) rogue states such as Iran, and North Korea or the “axis of evil,” as they are now termed? Now, will the Office of Homeland Security protect us from the various forms of attack that terrorists may employ? Or, could the Office of Homeland Security be propagating yet another myth of protection? Instead of bringing us security, the Office of Homeland Security may be a threat to democracy by undercutting civil liberties and intensifying militaristic and warist attitudes at home, not just abroad.

## **2. Apocalyptic Thinking and the Limits of Fear in Motivating Public Protest**

What is the reason for presenting nuclear war or the use of other weapons of mass destruction as apocalyptic? Many within mainstream religious institutions, as well as respected scientific communities, have voiced fears of the apocalyptic nature of nuclear war and large-scale use of other weapons of mass destruction. They did not preach conversion to an otherworldly belief as a means to escape the inevitable destruction of the world. Rather, they sought to motivate people to take action to *prevent* annihilation by means of weapons of mass destruction and to *preserve* the fragile ecosystems needed to sustain life on this remarkable planet.

If motivating people to save our planet is the end, what is the means? Throughout the Cold War we were told that we face an imminent threat of total destruction, and understandably, many of us were full of fear. Many existentialists stress how thought of our individual death makes us anxious. Many of us will go to great lengths and make enormous sacrifices to try to prolong our individual lives. Should we feel the same about our planet?

In the 1980s, Jonathan Schell presented the risk of collective death as the most grave moral problem humanity has ever faced: No end can justify risking the destruction of humanity, for the demise of persons will bring about the demise of all value and meaning.<sup>3</sup> So, many of us believed that we had to work hard to prevent global doom. We connected self-love and planetary love with fear: We would do virtually anything if we feared losing that which we most love. I call this belief the myth of the motivating power of fear. During the height of anti-nuclear protest, this myth used fear to motivate the public to

engage in mass action. Many of the citizens swept into the anti-nuclear movement joined because they feared collective nuclear death would be the result of the turn to counterforce strategies (first-strike capabilities) in the pursuit of national security.

Since 11 September 2001, many people, especially in the United States, have come to regard terrorism as if it represents a comparably grave moral problem. In fact, some people are so afraid that they are willing to let government go to virtually any limits to reduce this threat. This time, governments are the ones using fear; they are using fear to motivate the public to accept as necessary and justified the military responses employed to counter terrorism.

Apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears face factual, psychological, political, and moral pitfalls. First, because the claims are so extreme, they are often not credible. For example, when scientists raised solid factual objections, scientists and government officials dismissed the prophets of nuclear apocalypse as misinformed extremists. The scientists and government officials belittled the fear that the nuclear prophets sought to exploit when they exaggerated their portrayals. But some people do not want to let facts get in the way of a good argument. For some, persuasion is a more important goal than truth. If you believe that exaggeration, especially when it generates fear, can bring about a good result, you may throw prudence to the wind. You may justify your lapse into distortion as benevolent deception, but the fact remains that it is like Plato's royal lie and may be exposed. Are we now seeing a similar phenomenon with respect to how government is using public fear of terrorism? Critics of the current policy are doing little to counter governmental exaggerations about the international terrorist threat. Are their exaggerations benevolent deceptions or something much less noble?

Beyond the prospect for factual rebuttal, apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears run a psychological risk. Compare the responses to the nuclear threat and the terrorist threat. Regardless of whether the big boom will bring on global doom, does *belief* in nuclear war as apocalyptic motivate people to eliminate this threat? Much of the public protest against governmental plans relied on the myth of the motivating power of fear to spur otherwise apathetic citizens to rally around the anti-nuclear cause. But as we well know, the anti-nuclear bandwagon is not exactly overflowing these days. Initially after the events of 11 September 2001, many people were motivated to act. Unfortunately, already many people are beginning to suppress their fear. Suppressing negative emotions or entering a state of denial represents the psychological risk that faces apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears. The saying that the main responses to fear are fight or flight is instructive. We have no way to guarantee that people frightened by accounts of the horrors of nuclear war or terrorist attacks will fight back. Many people take flight, especially when they feel disempowered in the political arena and see how limited the success of

past efforts has been. These persons may suffer from psychic numbing. When fear is suppressed, the call to action is avoided.

Even when fear is not suppressed, it can be misdirected. The political risk resulting from apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears is that these concerns can get *co-opted*. How are we to fight off apocalyptic or global terrorism? Nuclear prophets like Jonathan Schell say we must rid the world of nuclear weapons. Current anti-terrorist politicians say we must rid the world of terrorists; we must wage a war against terrorism. Ironically, political leaders argue that the possession of nuclear weapons is the means for preventing the apocalyptic horrors of nuclear war. Just in case deterrence fails, government officials now tell us a missile defense system should be in place. Six months after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the George W. Bush administration announced plans to use modified nuclear weapons to destroy terrorist stronghold stashes of weapons of mass destruction, or to respond to terrorist attacks that make use of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. Officials have told us for quite some time that governmental possession of chemical and biological weapons is one of the means of preventing evil governments or terrorist organizations from using weapons of mass destruction. Now, the claim is also made that the modified nuclear weapons being urged by the Bush administration for possible use in the “war on terrorism” will also function to deter terrorism. In the past, and again currently, governmental leaders, by preying on public fears, achieve acquiescence to an ideology that portrays international adversaries as totally diabolical and completely untrustworthy. Under these conditions, and supposedly in order to “save” their citizens from the “absolute evils,” military and political leaders present military preparedness and military actions as the only, or best, insurance against nuclear apocalypse and terrorist attacks.

The final risk facing apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears is moral. Apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears are too farsighted. Farsightedness or hyperopia is the pathological condition in which vision is better for distant than near objects. For example, nuclear prophets do bring into sharp focus a hopefully distant object—the prospect that somewhere down the road we will reach an omega point where the destructiveness of war will in fact be apocalyptic. The judgment is surely correct that the precipitation of global doom would be a profoundly immoral act. But people who are farsighted fail to bring nearby objects into sharp focus. Even if nuclear apocalypse or further terrorist attacks of the magnitude of 11 September might not be very far down the road, numerous other war-like objects *are* much closer to us. In fact, they surround us. Since World War II, no year has passed in which fewer than four wars were being waged somewhere on this planet. When we devote too much of our attention to imagining the worst that could happen, we risk inflicting moral hyperopia on ourselves. Just as we are being myopic when we focus primarily on crime in the streets when confronting the problem of human violence, even

so we are being hyperopic to focus predominantly on the threats of nuclear apocalypse and global terrorism when confronting the problems of large-scale violence. Apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fears risk leaving us morally shortchanged when they lead us to fail to fight against the horrors of violence that are not distant or possible threats but everyday realities. We need to respond to on-going atrocities in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa that are on a scale quite adequate for moral outrage, and we need to seek feasible protection from devastating harms such as AIDS, hunger, and environmental degradation that actually are currently afflicting us.

### **3. Nonviolent Action and the Value of Hope in Achieving Political Change**

Even without prophecies of nuclear apocalypse and global terrorist networks bent on destroying Western civilization, political systems can and sometimes do give way to public protest. Over the last several decades remarkable political change has occurred and often nonviolently. Many of these changes did not require war or the threat of war.

In their recent and groundbreaking book and PBS series, Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall assess the nonviolent movements of the twentieth century. In their overall consideration, they state the following:

- (1) The use of nonviolent sanctions has been far more frequent and widespread than usually supposed. They were crucial elements of history-making struggles in every part of the world and in every decade of the century.
- (2) Nonviolent action has worked against all types of oppressive opponents—and there is no correlation between the degree of violence used against nonviolent resisters and the likelihood of their eventual success. Some who faced the greatest brutality prevailed decisively.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, Ackerman and Duvall are correct. They also contend:

The greatest misconception about conflict is that violence is always the ultimate form of power, that no other method of advancing a just cause or defeating injustice can surpass it. But Russians, Indians, Poles, Danes, Salvadorans, African Americans, Chileans, South Africans, and many others have proven that one side's choices in a conflict are not foreclosed by the other side's use of violence, that other, nonviolent measures can be a force more powerful. If the great sacrifices of lives and honor ex-

acted by the last century is required in the next one hundred years, it will be because that truth becomes more fully understood.<sup>5</sup>

Like Fukuyama, Ackerman and Duvall appear to connect such dramatic political change with democracy. Nevertheless, as I have discussed in *The Nuclear Arms Race*, we need to be mindful that democratic governments are leaders in the research on nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and in the use of conventional weapons.<sup>6</sup> For example, in the case of new discoveries about the effects of nuclear weapons, democratic governments are concerned with how to lessen these effects in the advent of nuclear war, not with altogether forsaking the possible use of their nuclear arsenals. In their pursuit of national security and other international objectives, the effects of nuclear weapons have so far merely posed “technical constraints” for nuclear states, including democratic ones. In fact, almost all the leading nuclear powers claim to have democratic governments. Andre Gorz coined the term “technical constraints” to describe how political systems respond to the ecological movement.<sup>7</sup> I am applying his concept to the military organization of the most powerful nation-states.

Nations with nuclear weapons are, at best, limited democracies. To the extent that nuclear powers are militarized and have weapons of mass destruction, they are not so much functioning democratically as they are operating as servants of special interests such as oil and weapons industries—to say nothing about their aims of global capitalism or even economic imperial dominance.

How can powerful nations apply the lessons found in the successful non-violent struggles that Ackerman and Duvall so poignantly describe? What would rush in to fill the void in the heads of governmental leaders were the myth of protection in the nuclear age to be dissolved? Can the myth of military national security and the myth of homeland security also be dissolved for political leaders or will they merely be modified by them? Will they continue to look for ways to couple maintenance of national sovereignty with the capacity to wage war?<sup>8</sup>

Ackerman and Duvall considered how nonviolent movements toppled oppressive governments. Yet, are not governments that rely on military force likewise oppressive? They threaten large-scale violence and frequently inflict it as well, even though nonviolent approaches to national security are available.<sup>9</sup> They rely on massive, privately owned media conglomerates that increasingly serve as vehicles for conveying the administration’s views (even governmental propaganda). Under these conditions, the public can be led to believe that they live in a “democracy” and that “homeland security” will protect them. They do not see the prospect that such democratic, nuclear states may be drifting toward a type of totalitarian information system, toward “one voice” that drowns out opposing or dissenting discourse.

One of the messages of the nonviolent movements of the twentieth century that we should appropriate is that hope serves us better than fear. A telling inadequacy of fear, whether proportionate or excessive, is that fear is only negative. Nuclear prophets frightened many people with the negative images that they presented repeatedly. Anti-terrorist politicians do the same. Their negative images give many people nightmares when they are asleep and anxiety when they are awake. This negativity can get out of hand, unless we couple it with a positive vision.

In order to attain hope, we need to know about the feasibility of nonviolent struggle. In this regard, Ackerman and Duvall note:

We also believe that nonviolent resistance deserves more attention than it has generally received. In our time violence generates more news because, for many, history is perceived as a spectacle. But if it were understood more commonly as a process, then the dynamic effect of nonviolent sanctions would be more easily appreciated. This form of power is not arcane; it operates on the same level of reality that most people live their lives, and it is comprehensible for that reason. Contrary to cynical belief, the history of nonviolent action is not a succession of desperate idealists, occasional martyrs, and a few charismatic emancipators. The real story is about common citizens who are drawn into great causes, which are built from the ground up.<sup>10</sup>

Such stories deserve telling. They are stories, true stories, of hope. They often work! Ackerman and Duvall note:

A mass nonviolent movement can force a favorable outcome in one of three ways: by coercing a ruler to surrender power or leave; by inducing a regime to compromise and make concessions; or by converting the regime's view of the conflict, so that it believes it should no longer dictate the result.<sup>11</sup>

Within democratic societies that rely on militarism in general and nuclearism in particular, a nonviolent movement also needs to provide a vision of "true democracy" and "true freedom." A democratic nation can still be a militaristic nation. If a "true democracy" needs to take seriously Immanuel Kant's contention that any military action should require the consent of the people, then what may be required for "true democracy" and as a precondition for "true freedom" (including freedom from the threat of war and annihilation) is a nonviolent model of national security.<sup>12</sup>

For the rational dialogue needed, apocalyptic thinking and exaggerated fear are bankrupt. We need the moral capital of a positive vision. As Joel

Kovel said of the anti-nuclear movement, “Anti-nuclear politics must do more than scare people. It must also offer an affirmative vision.”<sup>13</sup> Some people in these groups did offer such a vision, and the leadership in the movements Ackerman and Duvall document also conveyed a positive vision to their followers. Still, we have a long way to go to convince governments that a more appropriate path is open and that a more appropriate goal and way of living is possible. Leaders of these nonviolent movements want populations to get out of control—out of the control over their thinking that their nation-states exercise. Ackerman and Duvall observe:

Nonviolent resistance becomes a force more powerful than the hand of an oppressor to the extent that it takes away his capacity for control. Embracing nonviolence for its own sake does not produce this force...To shift the momentum of conflict in its favor, the nonviolent movement has to expand the scope and variety of its offensive action, defend its popular base against repression, pierce the legitimacy of its adversary, and exploit his weaknesses and concessions. When all this happens, an oppressor inevitably loses support inside and outside his country, and his means of repression or terror can be unfastened. When the regime realizes that it can no longer dictate the outcome, the premise and means of its power implode. Then the end is only a matter of time.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, within current democratic nations, we still live in what Kovel equivocally, but intentionally terms “nuclear states.” The nuclear state refers to a portion of the military machinery of several nations and to a style of everyday thinking among many people. Kovel stresses the equivocal nature of the term in order to make the point that before the nuclear state *apparatus* can be defeated, the nuclear state *of being* must be defeated.<sup>15</sup> The same is true for the use of all other types of military security. Nuclear states, like terrorist states and terrorist organizations, rely on a violent political apparatus and a violent way of thinking.

The violent state of being is the post-war equivalent of what in *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger termed average everydayness—the They-Self.<sup>16</sup> Our everyday way of being is inauthentic. The early Heidegger thought that by facing our anxiety about our individual mortality, we could slip out of submergence into the they-self and achieve personal authenticity. The leaders of the early anti-nuclear movement wanted us to face our fear that nuclear war could bring on our collective death and hoped that thereby we could move from our nuclear state of being to a new and more authentic way of being. Neither strategy proved sufficient.

The later Heidegger did not turn to ever more grim descriptions of human finitude in order to encourage individuals to break with their inauthenticity.

Instead, he tried to describe a new way of thinking and to develop positive metaphors and images. Likewise, the leaders of a more mature anti-war and anti-violence movement will not turn to ever more grim forecasts in order to encourage us to break with out inauthentic warist, terrorist, and violentist states. The leaders of a more mature anti-nuclear and anti-violent movement will describe in much more detail their new way of thinking and will more frequently employ and more widely circulate its positive vision. In so doing, individuals will have to recognize and abandon the system of “false needs” into which consumer society has socialized us. As Herbert Marcuse noted decades ago, we need to move beyond the one dimensionalism of contemporary consumer society.<sup>17</sup> We need to recognize that cultural diversity is now necessary for the biological diversity on which the continuation of our eco-system depends.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the later Heidegger work serves as model for a more mature anti-nuclear and anti-violent movement. One of his positive alternatives is especially illuminating. He provides the image of the House-Friend: “The House-Friend is a friend to the house which the world is.”<sup>19</sup> The House-Friend watches for threats to our planet and takes action. We can be the careful shepherds of all beings—not prisoners of the warist, terrorist, and violentist state of being. To do so we will still need to be on guard. Not all guards carry big sticks that can wreak human and environmental destruction even while held, let alone after swung.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whether we can develop and circulate adequately detailed and persuasive positive vision to move beyond violence, terrorism, and war remains to be seen. We can see right now, how nonviolent movements inspire us with a hope that takes us further than fear. Ackerman and Duvall note:

In a world in which vital human interests are in constant competition, conflicts will occur, and violence will be used in conflicts as long as people believe it will help win. If another, more effective way to succeed, without the costs of violence, were more widely appreciated, violence would begin to seem less sensible as the way to fight for a cause. Most policymakers have been enamored of either arms reduction or conflict resolution as the primary methods of reducing deadly violence, assuming that all conflicts are prone to be violent. But in each of more than a dozen major conflicts in the twentieth century between two sides vying for control of a nation’s destiny, strategic nonviolent action rather than violence was the decisive mode of engagement.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of raising apocalyptic and exaggerated fears, we need to expand non-violent actions. As Trudy Govier notes in her chapter on hope in her book which is a philosophical response to terrorism, “We can’t assume generalized folly and inevitable catastrophe and make moral sense of our lives at the same time. Living as political beings requires the hope that better things may come.”<sup>21</sup>

Will a hope that relies on nonviolent strategies provide us with the motivating power that fear has not been able to achieve? Ackerman and Duvall contend:

People power in the twentieth century did not grow out of the barrel of a gun. It removed rulers who believed that violence was power, by acting to dissolve their real source of power: the consent or acquiescence of the people they had tried to subordinate. When unjust laws were no longer obeyed, when commerce stopped because people no longer worked, when public services could no longer function, and when armies were no longer feared, the violence that governments could use no longer mattered—their power to make people comply had disappeared.<sup>21</sup>

Maybe someday governments will lose the power to make people comply with violence, terrorism, and war. We can refuse to fight by means of violence, terrorism, and war. Likewise, we can refuse to acquiesce to reliance by individuals, subnational groups, and nation-states on violence, terrorism, and war. In place of the negative effects of fear, we can have the hope and other positive effects associated with nonviolence. We have a force more powerful.

### NOTES

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3. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

4. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), p.2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

6. William Gay and Michael Pearson, *The Nuclear Arms Race* (Chicago: The American Library Association, 1987).

7. Andre Gorz, *Ecology as Politics*, trans. Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud (Boston: South End Press, 1980), p. 3.

8. Cf. William Gay, “Militarism in the Modern State and World Government: The Limits of Peace through Strength in the Nuclear Age,” *From the Eye of the Storm: Philosophy of Peace and Regional Conflicts*, eds. Laurence F. Bove and Laura Duhan Kaplan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 5–16.

9. Cf. William Gay, "The Prospects for a Nonviolent Model of National Security," *On the Eve of the 21st Century: Perspectives of Russian and American Philosophers*, eds. William Gay and T. A. Alekseeva (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), pp. 119–134.
10. Ackerman and Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*, pp. 8–9.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 501.
12. Immanuel Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden, Kant's Werke*, Band 8, Abhandlungen nach 1781 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1923), p. 344. For English translation, see *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1983), p. 112.
13. Joel Kovel, *Against the State of Nuclear Terror* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1983), p. xii.
14. Ackerman and Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*, p. 502.
15. Kovel, *Against the State of Nuclear Terror*, p. xi.
16. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 210–212.
17. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 123–124.
18. Cf. William Gay, "Diversity and Peace: Negative and Positive Forms," *Community, Diversity, and Difference: Implications for Peace*, eds. Alison Bailey and Paula J. Smithka (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 175–185.
19. Martin Heidegger, "Hebel—Friend of the House," trans. Bruce V. Foltz and Michael Heim, *Contemporary German Philosophy*, vol 3, eds. Darrel E. Christensen and Manfred Riedel (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), p. 93.
20. Ackerman and Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*, pp. 7–8.
21. Trudy Govier, *A Delicate Balance: What Philosophy Can Tell Us about Terrorism* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002), p. 169.
22. Ackerman and Duvall, *A Force More Powerful*, p. 505.