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Arms Control and Intricacy

This meditation is prompted by the recent passing of Herbert Scoville. His career, in and out of government, in pursuit of balanced national security tempered by arms control went a very long way in defining and exemplifying the idea of scientific responsibility. The best years of his life, and all of his dwindling time, went into building the case for the arms control process and elucidating the differential impacts of weapons systems on the fragile texture of what we term stability.

Much that assails the eye and the ear, relative to reining in the risk of nuclear conflict, is at the level of rhetorical jousting. Our adversary calls for a mutual moratorium on tests. We invite the adversary to observe a weapons test. Deadlock follows. But below the surface rhetoric is an intricacy that grows more complex with time and with weapons innovations, and it is here that the specialists have so critical a role.

The likelihood that nuclear weapons will disappear is small. We read in Shevchenko's confessional autobiography* that Soviet policy-makers dismiss true nuclear disarmament because, in that event, the Soviet Union would cease to be a superpower. If that is to be taken on its face, the puzzle of Soviet intransigence is given a new twist, since it seems to say that in their case nuclear overkill has evolved into a nonnegotiable geopolitical asset. The burden on arms control efforts thus becomes staggering, and the focus has to be on measures for conflict avoidance and negotiations to put a cap on weapons systems competition. But with trust on both sides near the zero point, the course is all uphill.

The quality of public opinion in matters of arms control and the requirements of national security are very important to a society based upon the principles of representative government. Nowhere is this problem more troublesome than where controversy arises regarding new starts on weapons systems and confidence levels in the verifiability of arms agreements. The parade of disputes over weapons systems in the past decade alone says much about the confusion that afflicts public opinion. Each new weapons initiative has generated arguments as to need, efficacy, cost, reliability, survivability, and consistency with ratified or unratified arms control treaties. Not everyone can follow these trails without a guide, and Scoville's legacy to his fellow citizens will long survive in the educational work of the Arms Control Association.

Because intricacy besets this whole area, great oversimplifications are of no help. Thus, the AAAS thought it timely to publish this year a glossary of terms and concepts that bear on problems of verification in nuclear arms control matters. It runs to 38 pages, without counting even more pages listing key official documents, treaties in force, and "suspended arms control negotiations." It is a mouthful. "SLAR" stands for Side-Looking Airborne Radar. "Pave Paws Radar" is a phased array radar to warn of submarine-launched missiles. "Molniya" are Soviet satellites for military communication. "Exoatmospheric" refers to antiballistic missiles that operate outside the atmosphere. Thus we begin to glimpse a patch of the intricacy that suffuses the nuclear weapons culture and hampers public opinion in staying in step with the arms control debate.

Now a summit meeting is in prospect. It ought to be more than a spectacle of personalities on a world stage. It ought to bring into focus the full dimensions of the terror that holds us hostage. Whatever may be its outcomes, the genuine work of pursuing arms control will be done, as always, offstage. It will be done in the quiet zone of the cold war, and those who work honestly at it are unlikely to be singled out for peace prizes. The unfinished work of Scoville challenges us profoundly.—WILLIAM D. CAREY

*A. N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (Knopf, New York, 1985), p. 163.