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The Eagle and the Bear

Barely a month into the new decade, the fragile texture of Soviet-American forbearance has come apart and the outlook for mutual restraint is dim. SALT II is no longer a starter, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty looks little better, and the lid is ready to come off the military budget. Even the course of the American national elections is being reshaped by the actions of those hereditary foes, the Soviet Union and Iran. As winter turns to spring, the world will be maintaining an anxious storm watch. We are back to where we were two decades ago, when a somber President said, "Each day the crises multiply. Each day we draw nearer the hour of maximum danger."

A few years ago social scientists flailed at what they saw as signs of the failures of knowledge. The evidence in that direction is now much more telling. We have a feast of knowledge, but it has not done much to improve political technology. As a case in point, cultural and scientific exchanges with the Soviets, less than a decade old, were meant to reduce tensions and foster mutual understanding. To some degree they did, but it is apparent that the armies of knowledge did not make enough difference. Still, if the hour of maximum danger is drawing closer, there is all the more reason to balance political censure and economic pressure with civil discourse. When governments are not on speaking terms, the burden of such discourse falls by default on others.

More by coincidence than intent, the recently concluded Annual Meeting of the AAAS in San Francisco concerned itself with these matters. The Council voted a strong resolution for control of the nuclear weapons race and for plans to convert nuclear weapons facilities to peaceful uses in phase with arms control agreements. That done, the Council voted its endorsement of a National Academy for Peace and Conflict Resolution. Moreover, the Council mandated a AAAS task force on nuclear arms control and directed that this topic be a major theme of the 1981 Annual Meeting in Toronto. The thrust is not toward a new dance of détente, but rather toward limiting technological terror and extending the search for a stable peace. If Soviet censorship permits these words to be read by scholars within the U.S.S.R., a degree of response in kind is not unthinkable.

The real price that has been exacted by the Soviet strike into Afghanistan is, to be sure, an extinction of that minimum of trust that is necessary to legitimize conflict management between nations. Absent that element, governments and publics have scant choice but to resort to stronger military capability in order to influence an opponent's calculus of risks and consequences. Both science and technology inevitably will be harnessed to that task. And the derivative cost is in the diversion of attention and effort from a host of problems that, left unattended, can lead to as much grief as almost any quarrel between superpowers: swarming population, crushing indebtedness of developing nations, forest and cropland depletion, failure of emerging nations to achieve their expectations with stability, and virulent poverty. The 1980's might have been the decade for inspired uses of science and technology to manage peaceful change and the abatement of incendiary dangers. It could yet be, if our priorities are not unreasonably skewed.

A major discontinuity has been introduced into our working assumptions, with global ramifications. In many ways the ramifications are likely to count for more, in the end, than the discontinuity itself. How they are perceived and understood, and whether they lead to reactive or proactive responses, to sterile reflexes or to a surer grasp of the meanings of the turning century, is the urgent question. The contest between the eagle and the bear is no small part of all this, but it is not the whole of it. That is something to remember.—WILLIAM D. CAREY