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Perilous Days—Tempered Solutions

Admiral Raymond A. Spruance Lecture

by

Thomas J. Watson, Jr.

This evening is enabling me to relive memories long past and to think a bit about the US Navy, a service for which I have the most profound admiration. I've had some good Navy friends over the years including those who could save my life on Air Force missions. I well remember my briefing in Guam before flying up to Iwo Jima on a survey mission at the height of the air battle for Japan. The Navy maintained a submarine known as Dumbo in the waters between Iwo Jima and the Empire, and I received an extensive briefing on how to ditch my B-17 and get in touch with Dumbo, who would pick me up and take me back to dry land. The briefing had my full attention. Your submarines picked up dozens of people between the Marianas and Tokyo. It was an atmosphere which tended to build tremendous Air Corps-Navy friendships.

Admiral Spruance I knew only by reputation, but during the war his exploits in the Pacific were well-known to all of us. I have learned much more about the Admiral in the past few weeks in preparing tonight's talk. My main source of knowledge of him is through the naval historian, Samuel Eliot Morison. Admiral Spruance had a number of traits which all of us in America, and particularly you in the Armed Services, need very much in these troublesome days.

Morison describes Spruance as a calm man who was always at peace with himself. He was bold and aggressive when the occasion demanded, but cautious when caution was called for. Or, as it was said nearly 2500 years ago by one of the greatest of the ancient Athenians, he displayed "daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same person."

That quote was from Pericles' funeral oration made to commemorate the dead of the Athenian War. Today we need those traits of Admiral Spruance as never before.

- We need boldness and courage.
- We need deliberation and balance.
- And we need them together.

I don't have to tell this audience anything about the destructiveness of nuclear weapons or the large numbers deployed by both the United States and the Soviet Union. It is clear to nearly everyone that if either side ever

starts using these weapons, there is major risk that the war will not stop until both countries are reduced to rubble.

I try to bring things to a simple bottom line for my own understanding. My bottom line on our strategic arsenal is this: the weapons are useless except for deterrence of nuclear attack or mutual suicide. Even if one side could see a way of eliminating 99 percent of the total strategic weapons of the other, he would not strike because the remaining one percent could eliminate 80 of his cities, effectively destroying his country.

Nobody, military or civilian, would take that risk purposely. But as we pile weapon on weapon, new technology on new technology, and the Soviets do the same, the dangers multiply. The possibility of accident increases, as well as the danger that one side or the other will launch a desperation attack in the belief—real or imagined—that he has no alternative but to press the button and hope for the best. How can we best reduce the risk? One step we cannot take, however seductive it may be, is the abolition of nuclear weapons. Now that man knows how to make them we are stuck with them, because in a world free of nuclear weapons the group that secretly built just a few could blackmail the rest of us.

Something else we can't hope to do is change the Russians. Some people think the Russians are just like us under the skin and can be brought to see things as we do. Other people think that if we push them hard enough they will collapse and no longer be a problem. Both ideas are wrong and dangerous. I have come to the conclusion that the Soviet Union is the most difficult nation in the world to understand and to do business with. And I have tried to both understand and do business with them for many years.

I went to the Soviet Union first in 1937, and rode the Trans-Siberian across Russia to Tokyo to take a job. I went back during the war as a pilot on a B-24 transporting an Air Corps general and his staff to Moscow. We were setting up the delivery route across Siberia for aircraft we were giving the Soviets under Lend-lease. It was even difficult to negotiate that gift, despite tremendous pressure from the Nazis who were at the gates of Moscow. I also dealt with them as a businessman, without much satisfaction. Then I was ambassador there from 1979 until 1981, an unpleasant period marked by their invasion of Afghanistan and by our sanctions in response, sanctions which I strongly recommended.

It is important to understand that most of the things we dislike about the Soviet Union have their roots in several centuries of history and did not start with the Communist revolution of 1917. Russia emerged relatively recently as a nation, and has lived a precarious existence. Their territory was frequently overrun by invasions from East and West. When not being overrun themselves, the Russians invaded and dominated their neighbors. It was survival of the toughest and a cruel existence for the Russian nation and especially for the people.

Even the geography is cold and cruel. Distances are vast; the land mass of Russia encompasses eleven time zones, and much of it is sparsely inhabited and little used. The people are durable, patient, and tough. The realities of Russian history are illustrated by Peter the Great. He created St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, a beautiful city. It is also known as the "City of Bones." Peter, when he needed more men, would simply send a message to a Russian town or village with a requisition for "X" thousand men, and would work those men to death in the building of his beautiful city.

I was recently discussing the difficulty of explaining Russia with a wise British diplomat who served there with me. To illustrate the problem, he told me about emerging from a London bus recently and catching a snatch of a conversation. It went like this. The first Londoner said, "We British are awfully nice, are we not?" His companion replied, "Indeed we are, and it is nice to be nice." A companion story has to do with the British need some years ago to buy grain from South America. A certain group in the British Cabinet were damning the Peron government of the Argentine. Another group were urging the purchase of the grain to feed hungry Britains. The Prime Minister finally settled the argument by saying, "Look, do you want to buy the grain, or do you want to kick them in the face?"

The point of these two stories is simple. There are only a handful of nations in the world which would meet our criteria of "nice," and yet we do business with most all nations. If we want to make verifiable treaties with the Soviets, there is no point in kicking them in the face. After Afghanistan there was every reason to act and we did, and we were able to get their attention. But, just to generally castigate them because they are not "nice" makes no sense at all.

Verifiable treaties are the only constructive answer. Remember that SALT II was approved by the Joint Chiefs and signed by the President. It was never submitted to the Senate because President Carter did not think it could pass. It has been called fatally flawed and adding to a window of vulnerability. But, the flaws have never been stated and the window has been debunked by the Scowcroft Commission. Now we face possible breakout on both sides and a completely uncontrolled nuclear arms race.

Before nuclear weapons became a fact of life, we could take the Russians or leave them. But today we are linked together irrevocably. Like it or not, we have to deal with them. And we have to deal with them as they are, not as we would like them to be. I say this in spite of our knowledge of Poland and Hungary and Czechoslovakia. I think we should get two things straight: In our history and our values, we and the Russians are different and probably always will be. But we and the Russians have identical bottom line interests.

- We both want to survive.
- We both want to avoid annihilation.
- We will either live together or die together.

And if we both would look that reality in the face, I believe—despite our differences—we can come to terms. But many Americans ask how can we make agreements with a country that relies so heavily on military power? Let us look at the reasons for it.

Although force and violence played a large role in Russian history, the Soviet armed forces were not a serious threat to anyone but the Outer Mongolians until World War II. Tiny Finland stood up to them. The Russians were poorly prepared for Hitler's attack and came close to losing all their major cities. Owing in large part to the courage and patriotism of the Soviet people, they eventually drove the Nazis back. But they drew lessons from the war which make the lessons of Pearl Harbor pale by comparison. We lost a large part of our Navy; they almost lost their country. And by that I mean more than their loss of 20 million people: nearly half of their prime industrial and agricultural area was occupied, and the Soviet regime itself was almost driven into Siberia.

When I arrived in Moscow in June of 1942, the capital had been moved to Kuibyshev. The Kremlin files were on trucks in the moat ready for instant departure. So on those grounds alone we can understand why they kept their war industry running after the war was over, even if we cannot condone it. But there is also another reason. They had discovered that military strength made them a great power. Their role in victory gave them legitimacy and a voice in the world, and as long as they kept building up their military power they could command a respect never before obtained by either Tsarist Russia or the Soviet state.

When they followed the United States into atomic and nuclear weapons, they did so because they quickly realized that without these weapons they never could become a superpower. Other measures of superpower status where the Soviet Union fell short, such as economic capacity, standard of living, medical facilities, etc., were overshadowed by nuclear equality. This strategic change was impossible to prevent—short of a preemptive attack before the Soviet nuclear capability was in place.

The reason why the Soviets did not stop with just enough nuclear weapons to deter an American nuclear attack, in my view, stems both from their version of the Pearl Harbor syndrome and from their belief in nuclear weapons as a key to superpower status. Although the Soviet military, like its American counterpart, has the task of doing its best if nuclear war breaks out, Soviet leaders do not believe they can fight and win a nuclear war. Anyone with a basic grasp of nuclear facts knows that winning such a war is impossible. But at the same time I do not have great confidence that they are any wiser than we are about the need for restraint on all action which might lead to nuclear war. They still seem to think they can use conventional, non-nuclear military force or the threat of it to accomplish some of their objectives.

What do we need to steer a sensible course through these dangerous waters? *First*, we need firmness of purpose. We know what we stand for, but by trying in the past to stand for it in the wrong places or with the wrong tools we have undermined our own confidence and credibility. Firmness and consistency must be our watchwords in dealing with the Soviet Union. We cannot deal with them from weakness, but we should not poor-mouth our own considerable strength. To back up our firmness, we need a strong and credible defense.

We already have a powerful nuclear deterrent and we are wisely adding the far-ranging and effective Trident submarines to our Navy. We can, therefore, be confident that the Soviet Union will not risk being first to use nuclear weapons against us unless out of desperation in a belief that they themselves are being attacked.

At the same time, the United States must use all its ingenuity to check Soviet expansionism. Furthermore, we and our allies can do much more to improve our conventional armed forces and we should do so in an orderly process with the emphasis on those forces which are most useful and effective for protecting our vital interests without risking nuclear war. Afghanistan is an example of the kind of place where we were not prepared to fight but nevertheless we felt it important to stand up for the principle that no country—not even a dictatorship like Afghanistan—should be invaded by a foreign army bringing in a new government. We got that point across with the boycott of the Olympics and especially the grain embargo. The Soviets couldn't believe that a President facing an election would antagonize the American farmers, and when Carter did that they realized how strongly he felt about what they had done in Afghanistan. We may have made a mistake beforehand, however, by giving the Soviets the impression that we didn't care what they did in Afghanistan, and that is a lesson we should take to heart.

There are of course other places where our own interests are so much at stake that we would be prepared to fight. All Americans should take part in discussing just what those interests are, and our political leaders should bend over backwards to avoid making threats of military action except where the nation is prepared to carry them out. And when all those conditions have been met we should be sure that our fighting men have the tools to do the job—usable tools, not useless nuclear weapons which if used would only mean mutual suicide for both the United States and the Soviet Union.

My *second* point; we must be better chess players. I understand that here at the Naval War College you learn a lot about games, particularly war games, so you will readily comprehend what I mean. To deal with the complex issues of countering the Soviets in the nuclear era we must look ahead beyond the next move. This means, of course, staying ahead of the Soviets in using our diplomatic and economic advantages in local situations where we are in competition.

But more crucial is the need to look ahead in our handling of nuclear weapons issues. The best example of failure to do so in the past is our handling of the MIRV issue. We saw the short-term advantage in putting multiple warheads on our missiles when only America had the technology. But we failed to look ahead and see what would happen when the Soviets also had MIRVs. The result was that their larger land-based missiles, which they had built in great numbers because they did not have faith or ability in submarines, began to pose a threat to our Minuteman missiles. Now the Scowcroft Commission is recommending in addition to a limited number of MXs, that we return to single warhead missiles. But that horse is out of the barn and long gone. How much better it would have been if we had agreed with the Soviets twelve years ago that neither side would put more than one warhead on land-based missiles.

This leads to my *third* recommendation, that we engage in serious negotiations, extensive and ongoing discussions with the Soviets at many levels. Nuclear weapons must be one topic. Another urgent need is to communicate our assessments of our respective vital interests in hot spots around the globe, places where confrontation and even war could occur between the two superpowers if there is a failure to signal or to read signals correctly. As a small example of useful, quiet, continuing talks I have been impressed by the meetings between the United States and Soviet Navies under the Incidents at Sea agreement. These meetings do not absolutely guarantee that there will be no collisions or incidents at sea, but they reduce the risk.

I would like to see that approach applied on a broader scale and to all the subjects at issue between the United States and the Soviet Union: no nonsense, no false friendliness, but a serious and businesslike approach to the problems which can destroy us both.

My *final* recommendation concerns the personal responsibility of each of us. In the past, our decisions on preparing to fight wars were relatively simple. What were we prepared to pay, in lives and riches, to protect and preserve our civilian population, our territory and our system? Not so now. In every military and strategic decision our political system and our military establishment makes, we have to recognize that nuclear war would destroy the United States and the Soviet Union as civilizations. There would be some survivors in both countries, and over time they would reproduce and organize. But conditions would be worse than in the Dark Ages. In the United States, the concepts of democracy and justice molded into a remarkable system by the Founding Fathers in Philadelphia would at best be replaced by a system of local, feudal warlords ruling by force. The Soviet Union would be fragmented, and the rule of Tsar Ivan the Terrible would seem orderly and civilized by comparison.

So each of us has the responsibility to think through these problems, and I specifically include the men and women in our armed services. No longer,

with the men of Tennyson's Light Brigade, can we affirm that is "ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die."

In our time we *must* reason why, because in a nuclear war it would be our civilization that would die, not just our fighting men. Of course, you must obey orders once issued. So must I. But, here in this college, the best interests of the United States are served by the widest thinking and analysis of the use of nuclear weapons. One must think not only of the first step, but of the second, and the third. Your conclusions will make total US military indoctrination far more effective. Our policies are evolving, and you must have your own thoughtful inputs.

I began with a quotation from Pericles, great leader of fifth-century Athens, on the importance of uniting daring with deliberation. Athens was the supreme example in the ancient world of democracy and reason—an open society, vigorous, bold, afraid of no antagonists and of no idea.

It built its openness on its venturesome mastery of the sea, as Pericles himself declared: "We have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere . . . have left imperishable monuments behind us." And it built its entire society on a noble ideal of the individual citizen displaying daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, both united in the same person.

Athens eventually faded and disappeared, as has every other important civilization in history. But the truly great civilizations, including Athens, passed down their knowledge, values and ideals. These are even more "imperishable monuments" than those built of stone. They live on today because succeeding generations preserved what was good and inspiring.

We who have inherited from earlier civilizations the best fruits of their thought and their creative work have the responsibility to pass them on intact. But we have a more awesome task than any who preceded us, for in the flash of a spasmodic nuclear war we can lose forever, for all mankind, everything good which has been accumulated over the course of several thousand years.

This gives special meaning to our need for "daring and deliberation." We must dare to explore new ways to defend our most vital interests and most cherished values without bringing on nuclear war. And we must be deliberate at each step of the way in order to avoid destroying the inheritance of succeeding generations. The problems—spawned by man's technological genius—which we face today are unprecedented in human history.

In pursuing them with those qualities embodied in Admiral Spruance—fearlessness, boldness and deliberation—we can prove ourselves worthy of those who went before us, and earn the respect and gratitude of those who are yet to come.

Thomas J. Watson, graduate of Brown University, served as a bomber pilot in World War II, as Chairman of the Board, International Business Machines Corporation and, recently, as Ambassador to the Soviet Union.