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Theodore L. Gatchel

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The Ultimate Trust: National Self-Restraint as a Factor in War

by

Colonel Theodore L. Gatchel, US Marine Corps

I

An anti-nuclear movement appears to be taking America by storm. In a short time, the movement progressed from resolutions at New England town meetings and demonstrations at the launchings of nuclear submarines to the point where it is influencing national policy makers, if not national policy. Over a year ago seventeen US senators and more than one hundred members of the House of Representatives called upon the Reagan administration to negotiate a nuclear freeze with the Soviet Union, for example, and about the same time four nationally known policy makers from previous administrations published an article recommending that the United States declare a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons in Europe.¹ Even Admiral Rickover, father of the nuclear submarine, and Dr. Samuel Cohen, Rickover's counterpart with respect to the neutron bomb, have recently expressed second thoughts regarding the wisdom of employing the weapons they worked so hard to create.²

The nature of this anti-nuclear movement is so diverse that it defies accurate definition. The individuals involved include pacifists and others who oppose nuclear weapons on moral grounds; radicals searching for a chance to discomfit the United States; and serious strategic thinkers who believe that reliance on nuclear deterrence, the effectiveness of which is uncertain at best, is a shaky foundation on which to rest our nation's security. In spite of the great diversity of motivation, several common themes seem to unite these individuals, at least loosely. One is the belief that nuclear war is both imminent and unsurvivable. The hands of the ominous Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, for example, are closer to the hour of doom than they have been since the Cuban missile crisis. The issue of survivability has also been discussed in a wide variety of recent articles and books, many of which depict any employment of nuclear weapons as leading inexorably to the complete destruction of the human race. Another characteristic found among many anti-nuclear activists is the reluctance to

accept the idea that someone could be against nuclear war and yet not support the current proposals for disarmament or a nuclear freeze. In the view of these activists, those who do not agree with them are misguided at best, and, at worst, deliberate contributors to the impending destruction of mankind.

An even more disturbing aspect of the anti-nuclear movement is the tendency of many writers and speakers on the subject to treat the issue of nuclear war as if it were a one-sided problem. Many articles, for example, fail even to mention the Soviet Union. Those that do often treat this "other half of the equation" in one of two ways. The first might be described as an even-handed approach. In this view the US and Soviet leaders are equally to blame for the current situation, and the US and Soviet people are equally ready to put an end to the threat of nuclear war forever. Dr. Helen Caldicott, President of the Physicians for Social Responsibility, used this approach during an appearance on the "Phil Donahue Show." She described the efforts of Soviet doctors to warn the Soviet people of the dangers of nuclear war as being similar to those of her organization in the United States. She did not explain, however, what means the Soviet people would use to influence their leaders in the Kremlin.

A second approach is to acknowledge the Soviets as a threat, but ignore them in attacking the problem. Proponents of this view believe that the United States must take the lead in reducing nuclear armaments regardless of whether the Soviets respond in a similar manner. Randall Kehler, national coordinator of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, uses a mild form of this approach when he states that "While there is no guarantee that the Soviets would automatically agree to a comprehensive freeze, our first objective, as American citizens, must be to persuade our own government to initiate such a proposal, taking full advantage of the democratic processes which we in this country are fortunate to have."³ Francis X. Winters, S.J., associate professor of moral theology at Georgetown University, takes a harder line when discussing the obligation of Roman Catholics with respect to threatening the use of nuclear war in order to deter aggression: "We must deny ourselves the resort to such a threat, or use, of force whether or not our adversary reciprocates this act of self-denial. Even against an adversary claiming this right, we must not lay claim to it."⁴ Many supporters of this view seem to enjoy a certain moral satisfaction of doing the "right" thing regardless of what the consequences might be. In a recent poll of 500 randomly selected Connecticut residents, for example, three out of four stated that they supported a nuclear freeze even though they overwhelmingly believed that the Soviets could not be trusted to carry out their end of any agreement, even with a system of inspection.⁵

In the final analysis, any such one-sided approach to disarmament must rely very heavily on trust in our potential enemies. On one level, we would be trusting the Soviets to carry out a reduction of nuclear arms similar to one we

would initiate voluntarily. Given the improbability of the Soviets ever permitting the type of inspections needed to verify such reductions, this initial trust translates to a more basic one in which we would rely on the Soviet Union not to use any advantage they would eventually gain over us either to initiate an actual attack or to employ some form of "nuclear blackmail." Those who would be willing to rely on such Soviet self-restraint claim that the Soviets would not press such an advantage because of the sheer horror of nuclear war, or in Gerald Ford's words, because they are human beings.⁶ Jonathan Schell sums up this view in his highly publicized book, *The Fate of the Earth*. "I believe that without indulging in wishful thinking we can grant that the present leaders of both the Soviet Union and the United States are considerably deterred from launching a nuclear holocaust by sheer aversion to the unspeakable act itself."⁷

Such a view of the effectiveness of self-restraint in preventing nuclear war is directly opposed to the philosophical basis of the US policy of deterrence. Deterrence, of course, is based on the belief that only certain knowledge of retaliation in kind can be counted upon to prevent a possible aggressor from launching a nuclear attack if he otherwise sees some advantage to doing so. In the absence of inside information about Soviet intentions over the past thirty years, who can say with assurance what has prevented the outbreak of nuclear war? Are there any precedents that might tip the scales in either direction, fear of retaliation on one hand or self-restraint on the other?

II

One indication of the relative effectiveness of these two aspects of deterrence can be found by looking at the "strategic" bombing campaigns of World War II. The bombing of cities conducted by both sides would certainly meet the criterion of being horrible beyond description when viewed in light of the civilian casualties caused. In terms of death and destruction, the results of conventional bombing far surpassed that caused by the only two nuclear weapons that have been employed in war. The potential destructiveness of modern nuclear weapons, however, is considered by many to have rendered any lessons from the past irrelevant. This view may be correct in the sense that, for the first time in history, man may be able to destroy all life on earth. At the same time, such a view disregards the importance of perceptions in human affairs. The awesome potential of nuclear warfare has tended to make us forget the fear that was once associated with the threat of conventional aerial bombing. Considered from the perspective of their own times, however, the two fears are remarkably similar. As Harold Macmillan stated in his memoirs, ". . . expert advice had indicated that bombing of London and the great cities would lead to casualties on the order of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, within a few weeks. We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of

nuclear warfare today."⁸ Considered from such a perspective, a look at certain aspects of the bombing campaigns of World War II can still be profitable today.

The origins of the "strategic" bombing of World War II can be traced directly back to the theories of three men: Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and William "Billy" Mitchell. The theories of these men can be traced, in turn, to their experiences in World War I. During that war, an appalling number of casualties were suffered by all the warring nations in attempting to break the stalemate that had resulted from the increased defensive power of modern weapons. Douhet, Mitchell, and Trenchard all viewed the airplane as a weapon that could end wars quickly and decisively without the protracted slaughter that had characterized the Western Front during World War I. All three men envisioned a new form of warfare with two basic cornerstones: an independent air force and "strategic" bombing. An air force independent from control by the other armed forces would devote its primary effort to carrying the war directly to the enemy's heartland where massive bombing would destroy both his ability and his will to continue the fight.

The idea of bombing an enemy's cities instead of his armies inevitably brought up the unpleasant idea of civilian casualties. The prophets of air power did not shy away from this problem. In their writings, Douhet and Mitchell both discussed the attack on population centers using a variety of weapons including explosive bombs, incendiaries, and poisonous gas. In some cases the language seems deliberately chosen to shock the reader. In discussing the idea that future wars will pit population against population rather than army against army, for example, Douhet said that: "this fact sharpens that peculiar traditional notion which makes people weep to hear of a few women and children killed in an air raid, and leaves them unmoved to hear of thousands of soldiers killed in action."⁹

What Douhet dismissed as a "peculiar traditional notion" was nothing less than one of the mainstays of the rules of war: the distinction between an enemy's combatant forces and his population in general. Based on the axiom that belligerents should not inflict harm on their enemies out of proportion to their legitimate aims of war, civilians were considered to be protected from attack by military forces. The theorists of air warfare considered this idea of proportionality to be inapplicable to modern war. Douhet and Mitchell both wrote that it was unreasonable to expect a nation fighting for its survival to withhold voluntarily the use of any weapon that might provide an advantage. When dealing with the ethical questions surrounding the deliberate killing of civilians, the theorists reverted to a perverted form of utilitarianism. A short, violent attack on the enemy's population centers would end the war quickly and ultimately cause the least harm to both sides. In Douhet's words; "Mercifully, the decision will be quick in this kind of war, since the decisive

blows will be directed at civilians, that element of the countries at war least able to sustain them. These future wars may yet prove to be more humane than wars in the past in spite of all, because they may in the long run shed less blood."¹⁰ This reasoning was to appear again in World War II.

Although most proponents of air warfare agreed on the necessity for an independent air force, there was much less agreement about the need for bombing civilians. The reservations ranged from ethical ones to practical ones involving the vulnerability of virtually all of the major cities of Europe during the period between the World Wars. Great Britain felt particularly threatened, and her leaders took the initiative in attempting to restrict the use of bombing in war. Their efforts ranged from disarmament proposals to attempts to amend the rules of war. Without exception, these attempts were unsuccessful. Conflicting national interests proved impossible to resolve. Proposals that satisfied one nation appeared to threaten another. Ultimately, however, the various attempts came to grief over the lack of agreement as to exactly what constituted a legitimate target for aerial bombing. Some targets beyond the battle area were clearly of a military nature. An ammunition factory, for example, would clearly be such a target. Even before the start of World War II, however, the distinction between most civilian and military targets had become too blurred to be incorporated adequately into international law.

Lack of agreement over the legitimacy of aerial bombing notwithstanding, most of Europe's major powers repudiated the idea of bombing civilians. In 1938, for example, Neville Chamberlain declared in the House of Commons that Britain would bomb only military targets.¹¹ On several occasions, Adolf Hitler stated that Germany also would limit bombing to military targets.¹² Based on the Condor Legion's performance in Spain, Hitler's sincerity can be challenged. In any case he felt compelled to declare himself for what might be called the conventional morality on the subject. President Roosevelt's appeal to all the belligerents on the day Germany invaded Poland represents perhaps the epitome of this traditional view. In his message, Roosevelt mentioned the air raids of the previous few years that had "profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity" and then appealed ". . . to each government, which may be engaged in hostilities, publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event and under no circumstances undertake bombing from the air of civilian populations or unfortified cities, upon the understanding that the same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all their opponents."¹³ Each of the warring nations responded affirmatively.

Between the invasion of Poland and the Battle of Britain, both sides generally honored President Roosevelt's appeal. There were, of course, exceptions. Even Warsaw and Rotterdam, the two most obvious exceptions, can be seen as something less than the all-out, indiscriminate bombing of

civilian targets. As the Germans correctly point out, both cities were defended and being fought over at the time of their bombing. Additionally, both cities were warned of the bombings and given the chance to capitulate. During these early days of the war, the British limited their efforts to dropping leaflets and attacking well-defined military targets where the danger of causing civilian casualties was almost nil. This restraint was not so much the product of ethical concerns, however, as it was of fear of retaliation in kind. Once the *Luftwaffe* gained possession of airfields in France, the British began to fear for the safety of their cities. They did not have to wait long for their fears to prove justified.

The bombing of British cities during the Battle of Britain in 1940 marked a major step upward on the ladder of bombing escalation that ended only with the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. As so often happens in war, however, this step was not planned, but resulted from what Clausewitz would have called friction. The battle began as an effort to destroy the RAF, a prerequisite for any cross-channel invasion of the British Isles. Lack of careful planning by the Germans resulted in their attacks being shifted from one type of target to another without attaining any decisive effect. During one such attack on the London docks, a section of bombers inadvertently released their bombs over central London. This accident infuriated Hitler, who had specifically withheld for himself the authority to order what he referred to as terror attacks.¹⁴ Churchill, bowing to public pressure for revenge, ordered the RAF to bomb Berlin in retaliation. The resulting raid was insignificant militarily, but it touched a sensitive nerve nevertheless. It both surprised the Germans, who had underestimated the ability of the RAF to attack Germany, and provoked Hitler into removing his previous restrictions on bombing British cities. The Germans quit short of their goal, but not before thousands of British civilians had experienced the horrors of aerial bombing firsthand.

Although the German aerial blitz against British cities failed to destroy either the will or the ability of the British to continue fighting, the RAF initiated a campaign based on the premise that bombing could accomplish against the Germans what it had failed to achieve against the British. Advocates of this campaign explained away the apparent contradiction in two ways. The first explanation was that the British were simply tougher than the Germans, less likely to break under the stress of bombing. The second was that the Germans had failed to pursue their bombing relentlessly enough to achieve decisive results. This latter conclusion, with its implication of German success had their bombing continued, drove RAF leaders to resist efforts to divert Allied bombing away from "strategic" targets later in the war.

As the RAF geared up for a bomber offensive against Germany, British leaders were forced to face the fact that they had neither the aircraft nor the tactics needed to implement their bombing doctrine. The aircraft problem was quickly being solved. Freed from the immediate need of producing the

fighters that had been so urgently needed during the Battle of Britain, the British aircraft industry could turn its attention to building the four-engined, heavy bombers that the advocates of bombing had been pleading for since before the war. If form follows function in aircraft design as well as in architecture, Britain's heavy bombers left no doubt as to their function. The Avro Lancaster, which eventually became the mainstay of Bomber Command, was the epitome of a bomber. Its normal long-range bomb load of 14,000 pounds, for example, was more than three times that of the B-17G.* This enormous payload was not attained without cost. British bombers suffered in comparison with their US counterparts in terms of range, service ceiling, and, most important, defensive armament. Combat losses resulting from these weaknesses soon convinced the RAF that they could not operate over Germany in the daytime.

In possession of a costly and growing bomber force, the leaders of the RAF desperately searched for a means of effectively employing Bomber Command. This search was spurred on by both the knowledge that bombing was the only way of striking directly at Germany at that point in the war and by the fervent belief of many of the RAF's leaders that it could end the war rapidly without an invasion of the continent. Tactics became the key. If German fighters ruled the skies over the Reich by day, the RAF would bomb by night. Accordingly a night-bombing campaign was launched against German industry, particularly the oil, aluminum, and aircraft sectors. Destruction of the morale of the German worker was viewed as an integral part of this effort, but not the primary goal. Unfortunately for the British, night bombing proved to be a two-edged sword. If darkness protected the bombers, it also hid the targets. In spite of electronic navigational systems and rudimentary airborne radar, the bombers were simply unable to locate their targets with sufficient accuracy to destroy them. A study conducted by a member of the War Cabinet Secretariat in August of 1941, for example, concluded that of all the bombers that reported having attacked a given target, only one-third had come within five miles of that target.¹⁶

Faced with the inability to carry out their concept of bombing, the RAF's leaders began to change the concept. Increasingly the objective became the enemy's will to fight as opposed to his ability to do so. An all-out attack on German morale would justify the use of entire cities as targets. Cities, unlike individual factories, could be located at night with the required degree of accuracy. Having thus solved the accuracy problem, the British turned their attention to the question of destruction. The answer here was found in the incendiary attack in which thousands of incendiary bombs were dropped in a short period followed by high explosives to discourage fire fighters and burst water mains. On the night of 28 March 1942, this method of fire bombing was

*These figures do not represent the maximum possible bomb loads, but rather the loads normally carried on long-range missions.¹⁵

tested on Lubeck. That city had been chosen for several reasons. It was densely populated, highly inflammable, lightly defended, and, because it was on the coast, easily located. The success of the Lubeck raid and other early attempts at fire bombing led to the "thousand plane" raids such as the one conducted on Cologne in May of 1942. British hopes for Allied support of what the RAF preferred to call area bombing were set back, however, by the arrival of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF).

Relying on techniques developed under peacetime conditions, the Americans believed that daylight precision bombing was the most effective way to employ aviation. The British, of course, felt that their initial daylight failures more than adequately demonstrated the fallacy of the American argument. A compromise was eventually reached at Casablanca. USAAF Generals Henry Arnold and Ira Eaker convinced Churchill that both methods should be pursued, Americans conducting precision bombing by day, the British, area bombing by night. The official objective of this "around-the-clock" bombing was to be "the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic system, *and the** undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."¹⁷ The planners went on to list target priorities. Morale was not shown as a separate category, but the RAF was not swayed from its chosen course. In passing the Casablanca directive on to its operational units, the RAF changed the words "and the" to "aimed at" making the undermining of German morale appear to be the overall goal instead of one of several objectives.¹⁸

Following the Casablanca meeting, the RAF wasted no time pursuing the mandate they believed they had received there. A target list of Germany's most important cities was drawn up, and a systematic campaign to destroy them was planned. Hamburg fell victim to Bomber Command on three nights in July and August of 1943. Creating a fire storm that generated temperatures as high as 1,000 degrees Celsius, the attack on Hamburg destroyed a third of the city's houses and killed between 60,000 and 100,000 people.¹⁹ Similar attacks continued throughout the war, culminating with the attack on Dresden on the night of 13 February 1945. Because it had no military value and was crowded with refugees escaping from the Russian armies to the east, Dresden was a controversial target. Its destruction and the resulting loss of life renewed the criticism of area bombing that had existed in some circles throughout the war.

Although the USAAF criticized area bombing largely on the basis of its ineffectiveness, some American leaders clearly felt uneasy about the ethical issues. On several occasions, General Carl Spaatz had protested attempts to have the USAAF join the RAF in the area bombing of specific targets including Berlin.²⁰ The raids in question were cancelled for other reasons,

*Emphasis mine.

however, so the issue was never brought to a head. On another occasion, Admiral William D. Leahy and General Arnold protested the use of area bombing in a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.²¹ Even Winston Churchill came to question the value of the attacks, which he referred to as "mere acts of terror and wanton destruction."²² His concerns were not so much a matter of ethics, however, as a fear that the Allies would soon inherit a Germany that could no longer support itself. When confronted with such reservations, Air Marshal Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, responded with a justification strikingly similar to General Douhet's:

"In spite of all that happened at Hamburg, bombing proved a comparatively humane method. For one thing, it saved the flower of the youth of this country and of our allies from being mown down by the military in the field, as it was in Flanders in the war of 1914-1918."²³

Reasoning of this type was surely what caused one RAF chaplain to state that a lecture that Harris had directed be presented to his senior officers titled "The Ethics of Bombing" would have more aptly been called "The Bombing of Ethics."²⁴ Throughout the European war, the USAAF had steadfastly maintained its position with respect to the moral and practical superiority of precision daylight bombing. The American view was about to change.

Freed by Germany's surrender to concentrate on the war against Japan, USAAF planners soon discovered that the new set of circumstances required the rethinking of some previously accepted ideas. On one hand, Japan represented a bombing planner's dream. Isolated geographically, the islands were a manageable target for attack from the air. If bombing could force Japan out of the war without an invasion, the future of a US Air Force would be assured in the same way that raising the flag on Mount Suribachi soon would ensure "a Marine Corps for the next 500 years."²⁵

Facing planners on the other hand were some severe problems. The new B-29s were encountering engine problems operating at the altitudes for which they were designed. Another problem involved the nature of Japanese industry. Japan's factories, unlike Germany's, were not located in well-defined industrial complexes. Instead they were spread piecemeal throughout large urban areas. At this same time, Japanese resistance was continuing to stiffen, causing American planners to estimate as many as one million casualties if an invasion of Japan proper were to be undertaken.

In response to these varied considerations, General Curtis LeMay, who had been brought in from Europe to lead the bombing effort against Japan, made a bold tactical decision. Removing most of the defensive armament from his B-29s, LeMay sent them against Japan in the same manner that the RAF had attacked the cities of Germany; at night, at low level, with huge loads of incendiary bombs. The wood and paper construction used in many Japanese buildings made fire bombing even more destructive in Japan than it had been in Germany. The raid on Tokyo on 9 March 1945, for example, caused an

estimated 185,000 casualties, making it the most destructive air raid of all time.²⁶ If the tactics used by the Americans turned out to be the same as the RAF's, so did the justification. General LeMay explains his own thinking with his customary bluntness, ". . . No matter how you slice it, you're going to kill an awful lot of civilians. Thousands and thousands. But, if you don't destroy the Japanese industry, we're going to have to invade Japan. And how many Americans will be killed in an invasion of Japan? Five hundred thousand seems to be the lowest estimate. Some say a million."²⁷

Without either condemning or accepting the decisions made by Allied leaders under the harsh conditions of World War II, one can make some observations about the effectiveness of moral restraint in war. The British and Americans both went to war having repudiated the use of bombing against civilian targets. Both countries reached a point, however, at which the policy of self-restraint was discarded. The reasons for this reversal were complex and included both the public pressure for revenge and a genuine belief that such bombing could end the war rapidly with a correspondingly lower loss of life. Of all the justifications commonly used, national survival is perhaps the least honest. From late 1943 on, the period in which the United States and Britain conducted their most devastating bombing, neither nation can be said to have had its back to the wall. Much hard fighting remained, but an eventual Allied victory could be seen by all. With certain exceptions such as US Secretary of War Stimson's removing the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto from US target lists, moral restraint took a back seat to operational requirements during the bombing campaigns of World War II. As so often happens with the study of history, however, honest and reasonable observers can draw different conclusions from the same events. Proponents of disarmament would probably claim that the area bombing of World War II demonstrates not so much the ineffectiveness of moral restraint as it does the fact that simply possessing a particular weapon ultimately ensures its use.

III

With peace as the goal of both parties, the critical difference between disarmament and deterrence lies in who controls the events that might lead to war. As long as the United States can pose a serious threat to its potential enemies, Americans will have at least some control over their national security. A unilaterally disarmed America, on the other hand, must rely on the self-restraint of those same potential enemies.

Unfortunately a look at the Soviets and their ideas about war gives little reason to expect such restraint. Soviet military doctrine treats the application of force in a systematic way relying on "scientific" means to determine how much force is required to achieve a particular goal. They may, in any given case, prefer to use non-military means to gain the desired results. If force becomes necessary, however, the Soviets have shown little reluctance to use

whatever amount their systematic approach tells them is required. Their actions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1981-present) have demonstrated not only the Soviets' willingness to use force, but to use it in ways that violate both international agreements and generally accepted rules of warfare.

Any required self-justification for such use of force is undoubtedly made easier by their official view of ethics that holds that actions that advance the cause of communism are, by definition, right. Reinforcing this view of morality is the experience of the Soviet Union in World War II. Having witnessed the destruction of a large portion of their nation's population during that war, the Soviet leaders since then have continually reaffirmed their determination to take any steps necessary to prevent a recurrence of the events of 1941-1945. Ironically, a Soviet official in the future justifying the decision to employ nuclear weapons against an enemy that had demonstrated either the inability or unwillingness to retaliate in kind would probably couch his argument in terms very similar to those used by Air Marshal Harris or General LeMay to justify the bombing of German and Japanese cities.

Considering all of these factors, is it reasonable to expect that in some future war the Soviet Union would voluntarily restrict its use of some weapon it considered necessary simply because of the destruction that weapon would wreak? The once-ruined cities of Germany and Japan say no.

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Colonel Gatchel, who was graduated from the Naval War College in 1982, is a member of the Strategic Studies Group of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies.



What's Better Than A Computer?

We've been taught, in recent years, to marvel at the computer as a way to store information and then retrieve it. I am here to tell you that the well-written, well-indexed book works better.

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Deep thinkers had to come up with the idea of the alphabet to replace the idea of the pictograph and enable people to record a nearly endless variety of words to express information and thoughts. There was the notion of setting letters into highly legible, compact typefaces. People had to learn to make a flexible, durable surface that would take ink (that wouldn't smudge). Printers had to learn to print many copies of the words at a whack. Binders had to learn to fold, trim, and bind the pages into a handy form for accessibility, portability, and durability.

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Yes, the book is an efficient system for the recording, storage, and retrieval of the wondrous things that go on in a person's mind. The computer is good at computing and sorting, but the book is more marvelous than the computer, I believe, at transferring complex data and ideas from mind to mind—to *your* mind.

— Roger C. Taylor, President, International Marine Publishing Co., Camden, Maine.