

1949

What Goes on Here

Payson S. Wild Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Wild, Payson S. Jr. (1949) "What Goes on Here," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 9 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol2/iss9/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

RESTRICTED

WHAT GOES ON HERE

An article by
Payson S. Wild, Jr.

Americans, like most human beings, recoil at the thought of war, and the idea of another war, a World War III, seems repulsive beyond description. However, here and there in our country, there are voices which are saying that we should engage in a so-called "preventive war" against Russia. Some of these voices are scarcely raised above a whisper, but the mere fact that a conflict against the Soviets is being urged at all is of considerable significance. Because this subject is so highly explosive, it might be argued that it should be kept under cover, but in a democracy such as ours, experience indicates that it is healthier to bring a discussion out into the open where it can be appraised on its merits rather than to treat it as something "hush-hush." Therefore, let's face up to the issues involved, however unpalatable they may be, and let's bring the problem out into the daylight where a more careful examination is possible.

Why Some People Favor a "Preventive War"

The premise of those who favor our making war against the Soviet Union in the near future is a very simple one, namely, that war between the United States and Russia is inevitable anyway, so why shouldn't we fight when the odds seem favorable to us? Proponents of a "preventive war" on our part maintain that the Communists, and this includes the Soviet leaders, believe that a war to the finish between communism and capitalism must come sometime and that according to the philosophy of communism, the in-

Professor Wild is Professor of Government and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University. This article is a reprint of Prof. Wild's article as it appeared in the June 1949 issue of *Woman's Day*. Prof. Wild served for many years as Associate for International Law at the Naval War College.

RESTRICTED

terests of a Communist state and those of a non-Communist power are irreconcilable. Therefore, since peaceful coexistence between Russia and the United States is impossible from the point of view of the Kremlin itself, it behooves us, says the “preventive war” school, to prepare now for the showdown and to attack when it suits us and not the Communists.

Those who would have us launch the war first thus cite the Communist texts on the inevitability of war between the rival ideologies and also the statements of Russian officials to the effect that capitalism is an enemy which must be vanquished by force. The violent anti-American tone of the Russian press and radio, the war-like speeches of the high Soviet command and the constant stream of denunciations of the West pouring from behind the Iron Curtain all indicate, it is alleged, that the Soviet Union is convinced that the “cold war” must get really “hot” in the future. Analyzing Soviet psychology and reasoning, “preventive war” supporters declare that the basic strategy of communism never changes and that this strategy is based on the assumption that capitalist nations and the capitalist class must in time be liquidated by violence and war. That, it is maintained, is the ultimate goal of Russian Communist thinking.

Furthermore, say such supporters, we should not be deceived by day-to-day changes or modifications in Communist tactics. When it seems advisable or convenient, the Russian government may talk peace or make concessions and Stalin may utter soothing words or agree to treaties which contain appealing phrases but all this, it is asserted, is just a matter of expediency and temporary adjustment which does not alter the hard core of Communist strategy built on the doctrine of an ultimate war to the finish.

The Russians, therefore, will not hesitate to attack us, say the “preventive war” people, when they feel that they are ready. And when will they be ready? Here’s where the atomic bomb comes

RESTRICTED

into the argument. Back in 1945, just after Hiroshima, the scientists estimated that it would take the Russians from three to five years to produce an atomic bomb of their own. Nearly four years have passed since then and time is growing short, if the estimates are correct. Nowadays, some atomic experts say it may be 1952 or 1953 before the Russians can produce the bomb with any degree of success, but what will happen when the American monopoly comes to an end? At that point, say those favoring a "preventive war," our present advantage stemming from our sole possession of the bomb will be gone and we shall be at the mercy of the ruthless disciples of Marx and his class-war school who will not hesitate to obliterate our cities when they deem themselves ready.

Therefore, it is argued, why should we not attack fairly soon before the Russians get the bomb and prevent them from waging war on us at a later time? That's why there is talk of a "*preventive war*," a war to forestall a later Soviet onslaught which, it is declared, is bound to come at some point. This argument is buttressed by references to the Russian stand on the international control of atomic energy in the United Nations. If, it is asked, the Soviet Union genuinely desired peace, why didn't she subscribe to the plan for placing all fissionable material under the direction of an international agency, as proposed by the United States and all the non-Communist members of the United Nations, thus removing atomic energy from the authority of any national government? Soviet opposition to international control and Soviet insistence on freedom to manage atomic energy plants on her own, proves, it is claimed, that Russia wants to stock-pile bombs for her own purposes, which include a war against us when she thinks the time is ripe.

Believers in a "preventive war" go on to describe what they think the situation will be like once the Russians acquire the bomb. They predict that it will be a time of almost unbearable tension. We shall be living in a war atmosphere, they say, with the threat of

RESTRICTED

terrible destruction hanging over us. Because there seems to be no adequate defense against an atomic bomb attack, the advantage lies with the attacker who will endeavor to destroy or paralyze his foe before the latter has a chance to retaliate or rally for a comeback. Unlike 1917 or 1941, we shall not have time, it is said, to mobilize in a relatively leisurely fashion. To forestall the dreadful consequences of being attacked in an atomic war, each side will be under an almost overwhelming temptation to make a surprise attack first, it is declared, and with the Russians in possession of the bomb, we shall be at the mercy of the Russian Communists unless we destroy them first.

The logic of the "preventive war" school is thus clear: the Communists will make war on us sometime, believing as they do that such a war is inevitable, and are holding off until they acquire the atomic bomb and find the moment auspicious for their purposes. If that is the case, then why shouldn't we move up the time for the war while we alone have the bomb and in the name of our own self-defense strike while we have superiority instead of remaining passive while they prepare to hit us at their convenience?

It is argued, however, that the United States, as a democracy with a Constitution which requires a vote in Congress before we can legally make war, is not the kind of nation which can wage a "preventive war," that is, a war in which we suddenly attack on our own initiative. To this the "preventive war" people reply that (1) the President and the military establishment should go ahead anyway and take quick military action without a delayed build-up in public opinion and in Congress, explaining the reasons later, and (2) the Russians are taking advantage of our good nature and our democratic ways. They know, it is claimed, that despite their belief in an inevitable armed clash, we are not the sort of country which will unleash an unprovoked attack. Our very virtues are our undoing, it is asserted; therefore, in dealing with a dictator-

RESTRICTED

ship which can operate with speed and which can go to war without consulting the people of Russia, we should, it is urged, be prepared to move swiftly ourselves and thus surprise the Soviet rulers who are counting on our hatred of war and our reluctance to attack first as a means for allowing them to "blitz" us at a time of their choosing.

What Opponents of a "Preventive War" Say

The arguments against the "preventive war" philosophy fall into at least three main categories. One stresses the difficulties of a "preventive war" purely from the military point of view, a second challenges the assumption that war is inevitable and a third maintains that military force by itself cannot eradicate the menace of communism. Involved in the second and third arguments is really a fourth, namely, the point of view of morality which questions the right to bring on deliberately the horrors, death and destruction of war on the grounds of a hypothesis, the hypothesis or assumption that war is inevitable when that hypothesis cannot really be proved.

Taking up the military problem first, critics of the "preventive war" idea assert that its advocates seem to assume that defeating Soviet Russia would involve merely tossing some atomic bombs on Russian cities and that after that, the Soviet Union would cry quits and sue for peace. The attitude that victory over Russia could be gained in this fairly easy and relatively effortless fashion is seriously questioned, however, by many experts, both military and civilian, who have studied the problem. In the first place, these experts say that Russia is so vast and the dispersion of industry and resources is on such an enormous scale that atomic bombing of certain cities would be insufficient for a knockout blow. Furthermore, it is claimed, at the first sign of attack the Russian army would sweep over Western Europe and ensconce itself in virtually every corner of that continent. Would we then drop atomic bombs on Paris,

RESTRICTED

Brussels, Rome and other cities inhabited by peoples friendly to us in order to disrupt Russian military establishments? That would be a tough question to decide.

Above all, say the experts, the war could not be won by bombs alone. In the last analysis, it is troops which would have to support air attack and carry the day by actually defeating the armed forces of the enemy. Therefore, so goes the argument, we should have to be prepared to transport armies overseas, land them in Europe, and smash the Soviet military machine in direct combat. In other words, if the Soviets occupied Europe, we would have to have another "D-Day" all over again and would have to challenge a powerful foe well entrenched behind the Atlantic sea wall. Even if resistance in the West prevented the Russians from smashing immediately to the ocean, huge American reinforcements would have to be ready for fighting in Europe. The experiences of both Napoleon and Hitler in trying to conquer Russia are cited as evidence of the extreme difficulty which might be encountered if an attempt were made to invade Russia itself, a land which stretches thousands of miles from Poland across Siberia to the Pacific.

Then, say the "preventive war" opponents, suppose Russia is vanquished, suppose that even air attacks brought about Soviet peace overtures, we would still have to send a huge army of occupation to insure Russian compliance with our peace terms. Equipping and maintaining the large armies needed both for war and for occupation would, it is claimed, strain the American economy to the utmost. Our way of life would be transformed; we would have to become, state some experts, a military nation, with our manpower and industry geared to the needs of a titanic military establishment. Our relaxed, democratic ways, our production of civilian goods, our peacetime pursuits would all disappear under the harsh necessity

of supporting naval, ground and air forces capable of subduing a powerful enemy and of holding him down afterward.

A "preventive war," therefore, is not something to be entered upon lightly. Those who have misgivings about such an enterprise emphasize the tremendous problems involved and stress what such a war would do to our democracy. They declare that a war against Russia could not possibly be worth the carnage, devastation and ruinous economic burdens entailed and suggest that it would be such a disaster in so many ways that it should be thought of only as a last resort when absolutely no other alternative giving us a chance for survival seemed at hand.

Is War Inevitable?

Next, fault is found with the assumption that war with the Soviet Union is inevitable. Those not in sympathy with the "preventive war" point of view sometimes concede that war is possible and that Communist ideology stresses the inevitability of a showdown fight between communism and rival ideologies. They may admit also that Russian behavior since 1945 has appeared to be belligerent and non-cooperative. However, the opposition believes that there is a chance, and not a slender one at that, that the Soviet system can be halted without a war. It is pointed out that the Kremlin leaders have pushed ahead whenever the going looked easy, as in Eastern Europe, but that they have hesitated and acted cautiously when confronted by formidable power. This line of reasoning maintains that the Communist bosses are realists and, unlike Hitler, are rational; that is, they will not go adventuring if the odds look so great against them that they might lose. Therefore, it is contended that if the United States and like-minded nations build up a power coalition which out-balances the U. S. S. R., the Russians will be deterred from attacking, should they be so minded, and will refrain from pressing matters to the breaking

RESTRICTED

point. Furthermore, there are some who believe that the U. S. S. R. has no aggressive designs whatsoever and that Russian moves since 1945 have been primarily defensive anyway.

The concept of a power alignment offsetting Russian power as a means of inducing the Soviets to refrain from warlike actions, if they have any such intentions, underlies the whole American policy of "containment" as expressed in the Truman doctrine, aid to Greece and Turkey and the Atlantic Pact. The hope is that the prospect of being confronted by superior force will remove any temptation on the part of the Communists to engage in an all-out war. Reinforcing this view is the claim that the Communists themselves are in no hurry, believing as they do that time is on their side and that no exact timetable of conquest on Hitler's model is necessary, and that if we can hold firm indefinitely, they can be contained indefinitely. Thus, in time, they will come to accept the fact, it is said, that they must adjust to a situation in which a larger measure of cooperation is the only alternative to a hopeless war. Isn't it better, ask the "preventive war" critics, to proceed on these lines and to take the chance of averting war in this fashion, than to provoke hostilities deliberately and bathe the world in blood on the basis of an unproved assumption that such a holocaust must come anyway?

What happens when the Russians get the bomb? Here again the opponents of a "preventive war" admit that there will be severe tension and considerable danger. But, it is said, we have such a head start and will have so many more bombs available than they at any given point, that they will not be assured of any easy success should they decide to unleash a surprise attack. Provided we disperse our atomic resources so that we could survive an initial blow with considerable stores of bombs left for a counterattack, the Russians would have to reckon with a retaliatory onslaught, the

RESTRICTED

thought of which, it is asserted, ought to operate as a fairly effective deterrent. Thus, if we build up power on our side, and prepare sensibly for a possible surprise blow against us, we should, it is argued, be able to convince the Russians that war would be too dangerous for them. In time, then, they would have to settle down and recognize that the goal of world communism was impossible of achievement without risks which would appear overwhelming. Above all, say those opposed to a "preventive war," by avoiding hysteria and provocative measures which could goad Russia into belligerent countermoves and by keeping the diplomatic situation fluid, with room for negotiation, we can, with careful leadership, arrive at a stable relationship.

A "Preventive War" and Communism

A third major argument against a "preventive war" is that even if it were successful in destroying Russian military power, it would not eliminate communism. In fact, some declare, such an attack by us would stimulate its growth. The contention is that communism is an idea which appeals to people who are in distress and who are dissatisfied with existing conditions, and which thrives on disorder and chaos. Therefore, the claim is, unless we help to improve the lot of millions throughout the globe who see in communism a chance to alter a state of affairs which they consider unsatisfactory, we shall not win them as converts to our cause.

Difficult as it is for us to realize, communism as an idea, it is pointed out, has an appeal for the impoverished and the dispossessed who long to improve their status. The reality of communism in Russia and in the satellite states is one thing but to people in Asia, Africa and the Near East who hear only the Communist promises of education, of more material goods, of medical care and of "freedom" for the masses, the dream of communism has a drawing power which, it is maintained, can be counteracted

RESTRICTED

best by our showing that our way offers at least as much and a lot more. Those who do not countenance the thought of a “preventive war” insist, therefore, that a military conquest of Russia would not eradicate the roots of communism which flourish in discontent and misery. We would still, after victory, have to take care of the populations who have proved susceptible to communist propaganda. And a war, it is stated, would increase the unrest and reduce the standards of living making more friends for communism than ever.

We and the Communists are struggling to capture men’s minds. Military means alone, say the foes of a “preventive war,” do not win out in this psychological struggle: you can’t spread democracy by bayonets and machine guns. If we attacked Russia first, wouldn’t we, it is asked, play right into the hands of the Communists who would say, “See, we told you those capitalists were warmongers who don’t care about human welfare and who don’t shrink at wholesale slaughter”? How would we look to the rest of the world?

Alternatives to War

Ideas and ideals have tremendous power in themselves, and military force by itself is sterile, as Hitler’s efforts to win conquered populations by repression alone has shown. Hence, say those condemning a “preventive war,” it is up to us to prove that democracy is better and has more to offer materially and morally than communism, and we can’t do that solely by a display of armed might. Creating a defensive military alignment to hem in Soviet expansionism may be a necessary step but, it is alleged, this is largely a negative measure which must be coupled with a positive policy of outbidding the Communists in terms of benefits and ideological appeal. Communist ideology will be beaten, therefore, not by force but by a better ideological and material offensive on our part, it is claimed.

RESTRICTED

At this point, "preventive war" opponents call attention to the fact that we Americans are really revolutionaries in the modern world. Peoples everywhere have been stirred by our accomplishments. They want what we have to offer and can produce. American movies and the gadgets such as cigarette lighters, wrist watches, fountain pens and knives carried by our GI's to all corners of the earth have, for example, created a demand for such items by populations everywhere. These peoples are not content with their present material standards and are demanding and pressing for a share of the wonders which the United States has on display. The United States has created a global ferment and the Communists in many instances have capitalized on this unrest by promising to fill such wants. But Soviet production is now unequal to the task. An imaginative America, it is declared, can take the initiative from communism by sharing our "know how" and turning our technical skill in the direction of assisting others to participate more fully in the benefits to be derived from our type of enterprise under democratic auspices.

Instead of waging war to beat communism, it is argued that we can come out on top, through skillful diplomacy and by adding a program of economic and social welfare to our defensive military arrangements. In this fashion, say the exponents of this position, we may avoid the horrors of war, and assume an unassailable type of leadership in world affairs which will win us firm friends and pull the props out from Communist arguments. To attack Russia first would mean, according to this thesis, that we would sacrifice our moral hold on men's minds and would enable the Communists to call us selfish imperialists bent on global supremacy for the sake of profits and power. In line with this argument, Mr. David E. Lilienthal, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, said recently, "There are those among us who have been bewitched by the atomic bomb.....But it is important for us to recognize that

RESTRICTED

neither the atomic bomb nor any form of power.....constitutes the true source of American strength.....That source is our ethical and moral standards of precepts and our democratic faith in man. This faith is the chief armament of our democracy. It is the most potent weapon ever devised.”