DOES MURPHY'S LAW APPLY TO HISTORY?

"Origin obscure" is how *The American Heritage Dictionary* ascribes Murphy's Law. No one who has bought a car, planned a family vacation, or embarked on a corporate takeover has cause to doubt the law: If anything can go wrong, it will. Murphy's Law found adherents first among practicing scientists and engineers. Its influence soon spread. Today, hawks and doves alike invoke Murphy's Law to argue that, as matters now stand, a nuclear World War III is inevitable. Concede to these doomsayers that anything *could* go wrong. Why, asks historian Paul Schroeder, hasn't it? He suggests that the future may have less to fear from general war than mankind's combative past—and the anonymous Mr. Murphy's dour prediction—would lead us to expect.

by Paul Schroeder

Everyone knows Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will. Most of us, most of the time, do not take it seriously. It merely expresses our sense of the perversity of inanimate objects, the ironies and frustrations of everyday life.

Scientists and engineers, however, take Murphy's Law seriously, though not literally, in building a nuclear power station or planning a space flight. The stakes are too great not to. In a similar way, many thoughtful persons take Murphy's Law seriously, even literally, in the debate over nuclear weapons.

This came home to me recently in a conversation with a professor of mathematics at the University of Illinois. He was sure that a nuclear war would eventually occur unless nuclear weapons were soon abolished. The laws of statistical probability, he said, were all in favor of it. I did not produce a suitable reply then; like many nonmathematicians, I tend to be

daunted by professors of mathematics confidently citing laws of statistical probability.

Only later did it occur to me that my friend had implied that Murphy's Law applied to history. If anything can go wrong, it will. The worst thing that could possibly go wrong would be thermonuclear war; and if it continues to be statistically possible, by virtue of the existence of nuclear weapons, eventually it will happen.

My friend is far from alone in this view. Since 1945, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has displayed a clock indicating the time at between two and 12 minutes to midnight—the time left (depending on circumstances) to the human race to eliminate nuclear weapons or be eliminated by them. Jonathan Schell, in his 1982 best seller, *The Fate of the Earth*, plainly argues from Murphy's Law assumptions; so do many other proponents of nuclear disarmament. Even Russians do. Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the Soviet chief of staff until his abrupt dismissal last September, was quoted in the March 17, 1983, *New York Times* as saying:

> We are approaching a dangerous line. There is an old Russian saying: "Even an unloaded rifle can fire once in 10 years. And once in 100 years, even a rake can produce a shot."

Here is real Murphy's Law thinking: Even if nothing *can* go wrong, eventually it will.

Such thinking is not confined to one side in the debate. The advocates of Peace through Strength sometimes use a different set of Murphy's Law assumptions in their argument for increasing and modernizing the free world's nuclear arsenal. If Soviet leaders ever are given a chance at a successful first strike or at nuclear blackmail leading to the West's surrender, they will seize it. Hence, the West must upgrade its nuclear defenses at any cost.

Not every hawk or dove believes in Murphy's Law, of course. Nonetheless, it looms large in the debate. It adds heat and passion, and it prompts calls, from Left and Right, for radical action to stave off impending disaster.

Although I claim no expertise in current world politics or the technical aspects of arms control, as a historian of international politics, I have something to say here. The debate in the West is not only over technical questions about the numbers and "throw-weights" of missiles, or appraisals of Soviet intentions and capabilities, but also over assumptions about the character

of international politics and relations among states as they have evolved over the centuries.

Murphy's Law thinking, among both hawks and doves, ends up with the conclusion, explicit or implicit, that the very *nature* of current international politics makes an intolerable outcome—Red or dead—likely or even inevitable. To the doves, the present system, with its inherently lawless, unrestrained competition between independent states, helps make eventual nuclear war inevitable. The solution, in their view, must be found in a fundamental change in world politics, through arms control, the abolition of nuclear weapons, world government, or whatever. To the hawks, the problem lies in the unwritten rules of the current game, which, they believe, have allowed the Soviet empire and Communist influence to expand rapidly since 1917, while restraining efforts by the United States and its allies to reverse the trend. The rules, hawks argue, must be changed.

Thus, the demoralizing claim is made by both sides that the threats to peace, freedom, and human survival are greater than ever before—and that traditional international politics is wholly inadequate to deal with them.

This is the assumption that I reject.

Murphy's Law does not apply to history. The history of international politics, both in earlier centuries and more recently, points neither to the inevitability of nuclear war nor to the likelihood of Soviet domination.

Both the nuclear threat and Soviet expansion are problems to be faced and managed by the West. They do not constitute steadily worsening crises; in fact, both problems have tended to shrink rather than grow in recent decades. More important still, the character of international politics has not remained static. It has changed decisively, mainly for the better, so that the present system of inhibitions, alliances, and understandings is in most important respects far stronger and better suited to avoiding major wars than any previous one in history. The world, in fact, is now enjoying a period of unprecedented freedom from major wars; and, with wisdom and prudence, that freedom can be indefinitely prolonged.

Obviously, I cannot hope to demonstrate this reality in a

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few pages. I can hope, however, to show why my apparent optimism is not as blind as it may first seem.

Those who argue that the threat to man's survival is both unprecedented (which it is) and growing constantly more unmanageable (which I claim it is not) have an inadequate historical understanding of international politics. They attribute the relative world peace prevailing since 1945 to accident or luck. For example, the eminent astronomer Carl Sagan, in a highly acclaimed 1983 *Parade* magazine article discussing the ecological disasters that even a limited nuclear exchange would cause, comments that more than once since 1945 the world has approached nuclear war. He adds: "I do not think our luck can hold out forever."

Any reasonable person, I think, must accept Sagan's scientific argument. If the historical-political part were equally correct —if since 1945 only *luck* had kept the world from nuclear holocaust—then one would have to join him and many others in cries for some drastic action to turn things around. The crux of the matter, however, is how we assess the *nature* of the historical trend, and what can and should be done about it. My conviction is that for nearly 40 years statesmen of both East and West have not ignored the worsening nuclear threat but have struggled with it, managed it, and to a limited degree even solved it.

That statement needs qualification, of course. There are various aspects of the nuclear danger. The international community's record on dealing with all of them is highly uneven. The record is lamentable on the control and reduction of nuclear weapons; Carl Sagan's concern over the present arms race is entirely justified. On nonproliferation, the record is better but still far from satisfactory. But on the most important aspect, the non-use of nuclear weapons in crises, it is perfect. All of the nuclear powers have repeatedly shown in critical circumstances that they are able to avoid recourse to their most awesome weaponry. At the same time, both by accident and design, nuclear and nonnuclear powers alike have contributed to developing an international system that, from the crucial standpoint of avoiding major and general wars, is far superior to any in the history of international politics.*

*Historically, a *major* war is one between two or more great powers. A *general* war is one involving all or a majority of the great powers. Naturally, the list of the extant great powers at any time varies from era to era. The five "declared" nuclear powers today are the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China.

The period of almost four decades without major war is significant in a way few laymen recognize. Since the second century A.D. under the Pax Romana, the Western world has known no long periods of general peace. The modern record was 38 years, nine months, and five days (June 22, 1815, to March 27, 1854), from the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo to the effective beginning of the Crimean War between the French and British, on one side, and tsarist Russia, on the other. That record was broken last year on May 15, 1984. The news media did not accord it the attention given to records achieved by Atlanta's Hank Aaron for home runs or Cincinnati's Pete Rose for base hits, but the fact is worth noting.

This world record for general peace will mean little if nuclear holocaust ensues sometime in the future. But it nonetheless points to what has really been happening since 1945. Contrary to all previous historical trends, the international system is growing stronger and more stable over time. Carl Sagan is right; the world has at times come close to general and nuclear war since 1945. The question is this: Just when? The most dangerous episodes were clearly the Berlin blockade, 1948–49; the Korean War, 1950–53; the Hungarian revolution and Suez crisis, 1956; the Berlin crises in 1958 and 1961; and the Cuban missile episode of 1962.

Since then, serious conflicts have occurred—in Indochina, the Middle East, Iran, Poland, Afghanistan. In none of these did the nuclear powers, as had happened earlier, confront each other "eyeball to eyeball," despite often ample opportunities to do so.

In other words, so far as one can now see, the most agonizing, dangerous periods of postwar politics are behind us; the threats to world peace, instead of being concentrated in Soviet-American confrontations, as was the case before, have become more diffuse and peripheral; the system of international relations has not merely escaped catastrophe but in fact grown stronger. For a variety of reasons, massive adjustments have been made or accepted by both East and West—Third World decolonization, France's departure from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the defections of Yugoslavia and China as Soviet allies, the decline of communism's appeal in much of Asia and Africa, the rise of new centers of economic and military power, the weakening of direct American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. These changes have not undermined the system or brought it down but in the main improved it.

There are strong reasons to believe that this period since 1962 is not just an interval between storms. For now there are among great powers no perceptible signs of what historians call a "sickening of the peace." In the past, governments and peoples have gradually forgotten the horrors of war, become bored with the strains and uncertainties of peace and frustrated by the limits placed upon their ambitions and dreams. Few leaders have ever admitted to *wanting* war, of course; then as now, men have usually claimed to want peace, but peace with "justice" and "progress"—i.e., to want sunshine, but with rain and snow. Today, as always, factions, movements, even states continually call for peace—*after* the struggle they have been waging is won and their cause has triumphed.

The difference in 1984 is that such calls are now confined to rebel movements, to terrorists, to factions involved in civil wars, and to some smaller states. No major power anywhere, including, in my view, the Soviet Union, shows clear signs of sickening of the peace, of seeing a major war as preferable to continuing the present state of affairs. Seeking short-term advantage, national leaders may still do dangerous, aggressive things; but they genuinely want to keep a major war from developing.

If this sounds like evading the issue, overlooking the numerous possibilities for war by miscalculation or accident, then a look at the historical record is useful. It indicates how decisive the desire of great powers to avoid major war can be.

While history is full of exceptions, it is safe to claim that during the last two centuries, while revolutionary movements, terrorists, warring factions, and small states have frequently fanned the flames of crisis, resorted to bloodshed, and fomented international conflict, they have never been able to spark a major war unless some major power or powers allowed them to do so. French revolutionaries and émigrés promoted European war in 1792; but no war would have broken out had the French, Prussian, and Austrian governments not each decided that a war might serve their various purposes. The Turks did much to provoke war against tsarist Russia in 1853 but succeeded in getting it only because Britain and France allowed themselves to be drawn in—and bogged down in the Crimea—for their own reasons. Bosnian terrorists helped touch off World War I; the sickening of the peace among the European great powers caused it. In contrast, from 1815 to 1848, many rebel groups and smaller states tried to undermine the peace in Europe. Though vital

great-power interests were often at stake, the provocations never succeeded.

Our present-day doomsayers fall prey to a kind of Chicken Little hysteria when they proclaim, each time an embassy is bombed or a small country falls into civil war, that the world is trembling on the brink of nuclear holocaust. The sky will not fall, the world will not run amuck, unless the governments and peoples of the major powers, especially those of one of the two superpowers, *choose* to let it or make it happen.

One main reason that the superpowers since 1945 have not sickened of the peace is clearly the sobering effect of the East-West "balance of terror" (a reality that should be considered carefully by those who call for the abolition of nuclear weapons). But there are other more positive reasons.

Within four decades of each of the major peace settlements of the past (1648, 1714, 1763, 1815, 1871, 1919–20), Europe and the Western world were either deep into new cycles of general conflict or poised for one to begin. The settlements themselves provoked discontent. In 1945, the world faced precisely this same problem, in a virulent form. The settlement of World War II was anything but complete; discontent with it was already intense in Europe and North America; and a determination to overthrow the existing order reigned almost unchallenged in Africa and Asia. Yet, during the almost four decades since 1945—years marked by crisis and conflict involving Afghanistan, most of Africa, Bangladesh, Central America, China, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Korea, Pakistan, Poland, Taiwan, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, and elsewhere—no direct conflict has arisen between the two superpowers.

That no major war has grown out of this long array of crises is not the crucial point. It is, instead, that dangerous problems were solved or managed short of war, that there was a gradual decline in fundamental challenges to the World War II settlement. Of course, challenges continue and bitter disputes endure. But the leaders of no major state today look at the map and say, "These borders will not do; the world's distribution of power and territory must be changed, even if it means war." That would be unprecedented.

Something else is new—the nature and aims of international politics. We are constantly told, correctly, that nuclear weapons have changed the character of warfare, making major

wars obsolete as instruments of national policy. We are also told, incorrectly, that international politics consists of the same stupid pursuit of national power and prestige by the same outmoded, dangerous methods as before. In fact, from the early 17th century to 1945, every major war was fought to gain victory, and fought either to the point of decisive victory or of mutual exhaustion. Diplomacy in these wars was used primarily to promote victory, usually by acquiring allies.

Since 1945, important wars have been fought, with the two superpowers involved, in Korea, the Middle East, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Without exception, great-power diplomacy in these wars has been directed more toward limiting and ending these wars than winning them decisively. Whatever the popular impression may be, American diplomats and military strategists showed far more restraint and prudence in Korea and Vietnam than they did in World War II. So did the Kremlin. Despite all the dangers and intense rivalry in today's superpower relationships, great powers no longer fight wars for decisive victory, as they once did. That is a critically important development.

Nor is it really true, as commentators often assert, that statesmen and military leaders continue to think and operate in the grooves of yesteryear. Eighteenth-century statesmen, even moderate ones such as Count Charles Gravier Vergennes of France, assumed that it was their moral duty to go to war if such ventures promised to enhance the power and glory of their monarchs. Ronald Reagan, a hawk by current standards, does not think that way today.

But, the skeptic will argue, it is the very existence of independent states that is the real danger, not the wishes of particular leaders. The fact that the world is made up of independent states, and that each pursues what its leaders define as a "national interest," gives the international system an inherent bias toward conflict: So contend the "one worlders" and many others. Domestic politics encourage the pursuit of national goals, so the argument goes, while discouraging the sacrifice of these parochial aims to general ends such as world peace. This is an important argument; it correctly recognizes that the causes of wars lie not just in particular policies or actions but also in the structures and purposes of states and of the international system. At the same time, it assumes that the structures of states and the system have not changed. What if, in fact, they have?

We know from much historical research how the struc-

tures of states caused wars in the 17th and 18th centuries. Put simply, European states in that era were largely created by and for war. They were created *by* war in the sense that the existing anarchic situation required them to develop powerful standing armies, and bureaucratic, financial, and taxation systems to support them, in order to survive. They were created *for* war in the sense that the main basis for a state's existence and possession of territory in those centuries was dynastic succession and inheritance of land, creating constant territorial conflicts, chances for gain or loss, and wars of succession. Every monarch thus needed a standing army and a full treasury to seize opportunities for expansion or to ward off attacks and partitions. What some intellectuals and politicians in 20th-century America see as a destabilizing threat to peace—a military-industrial complex—was then a necessity. States possessing such a "complex" survived and grew; those without one declined, were defeated, or disappeared.

Suppose that the purposes and structures of states have now changed; that most modern states, especially the great powers, are now made by and for peace, and are essentially suited not to acquire and defend territory by warfare but to promote industry, commerce, and kindred pursuits. Suppose that industry, trade, and technology are increasingly internationalized, and that many great states are liberal-democratic, so that powerful interests urge their governments not to wreck the world environment in which all must live and work. Suppose that relations among nations have come to include an intricate international network of banking, finance, and commerce, linking both governments and private concerns. Suppose that one could see some states (Italy, Japan, West Germany) transformed from states made for war into states made for peace within a lifetime, and trace a slower evolution in many others. Suppose, in short, that we are only now becoming aware of a transformation being wrought in the structure of states over centuries by the Industrial Revolution, the rise of democracy, and the supranational organization of economic and, to a lesser degree, political life. What then?

Suppose, finally, that this whole case I have presented is accepted (and I am fully aware how partial and superficial it is): What is it supposed to mean? That there is no serious danger of major war? That controlling and reducing nuclear armaments is unimportant? That the Soviet Union, the epitome of the

military-industrial state, presents no serious political and military challenge? Absolutely not.

Mine is not really an argument *for* optimism at all. It is an argument *against* a certain extremely popular kind of crippling fatalism. We should avoid the fashionable dismissal of international politics and the international system of treaties, arrangements, procedures, and institutions. They are vital resources in our struggle to find a way between nuclear holocaust and the West's loss of freedom. In facing our current dangers, whose urgency and magnitude it is insane to deny or to minimize, we must use good judgment.

The history of international politics provides both good news and bad news. The good news is that international politics and the international system have over time unquestionably evolved in character. They have grown in strength and in the capacity to solve problems. Nothing is more demonstrably wrong, more plainly stupid, than the old saw that the only thing to be learned from history is that men do not learn from history. Men have learned, and they do learn—both individually and collectively.

The bad news, of course, is that new challenges and problems always arise, that men and nations have very often failed to adjust to them in time and have learned their lessons only through great disaster. After the next great disaster it will be too late to learn.

I myself oscillate between hope and near despair. One day the contrast between the present international system, stable despite its potential dangers, with that of, say, 1933–39, or 1905–14, or 1783–92, seems to me so striking that a permanent relative peace appears genuinely realizable, and even on its way. Another day, I feel sure that one could say to the world what Prince Bismarck said to the Turkish representatives at the Congress of Berlin in 1878: "This is your last chance; and if I know you, you will not take it."

Of this alone am I reasonably certain: Without patient, careful attention by the major powers to the steady maintenance and development of the international diplomatic system, the threat of nuclear war cannot possibly be managed. And those in America who out of Murphy's Law thinking reject that imperfect system in favor of some illusory cure take us directly onto the path of major war.