Is It Immoral to Strike? First If Attack Is Imminent?

By Edmund A. Walsh, S. J.

A Strong Case Is Made That the United States Is Not Morally Bound to Wait For a Blow That Might Cripple It Beyond Repraisal and Mean Practical Annihilation

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The President's proclamation of December 16, declaring a state of national emergency, marked the end of what is probably the most amazing and confused policy. The official description and recognition of the objectives of world communism by the presidential decree put the issue, at long last, exactly where it belongs. The final confrontation has been reached between the two great centers of world power whose basic and irreconcilable character was frankly described by Soviet authorities many years ago. They never had a moment's doubt as to the inevitable clash that must ensue.

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In the Soviet Republic (i.e., non-Communist states) for once added to the list of states, the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with the imperialist states (i.e., non-Communist states) no longer a battle front in the conventional sense; there is no longer a defined and limited zone of combat occupied by military forces, by men who are expected to run the risks of soldiers, leaving a rear territory which is inhabited by civilians not subject to the same hazards under the old concept of warfare.

Today the total population is involved; the need for technological developments raises one type of question to the world which is no longer a battle front with the battle front has moved into every city, town, and village. There is no rear; there is no escape; and there is no shield of legal status. What is immediate concern, then, is definition and clarification of the laws raised by President Truman's reference to necessity and the welfare of the United States, followed by his authorizations to proceed with production of the hydrogen bomb.

Direct assault launched against us by an enemy who is known to have the atomic bomb—and no power would now attack the United States without it—which type of question not too difficult to answer. We should have no alternative but to retaliate in kind. A second question is more compelling and it is with this that we are here concerned: Would we have to wait for an attack? Primitive man was justified in exercising his right to strike a preventive blow when he saw a bare fist drawn, then a sword thrust at him, then a spear leveled, then an arrow fitted to a bowstring. The danger, though moving back in space, was still immediate and certain in time. With the invention of gunpowder, the assailants moved farther and farther away, but no basic change was introduced in the elements of certainty and immediacy of attack. Then, long-range artillery, though discharging explosives from emplacements even out of sight and miles away, could menace life and limb with equal certainty and immediacy.

Distance Means Little

Now comes the age of air power, with military aviation carrying flaming death from bases located 3,000, 5,000 miles away. Aircraft carriers far out at sea, flying bombs, guided missiles, jet bombs and atomic explosives can now be a certain immediate menace even where growing distances in this era of global-minded warfare. Who shall maintain that the substantive and inherent right of self-defense is canceled out by an accidental circumstance or by the insensitivity of an aggressor in a chemical laboratory?

The Japanese air force which bombed