

Is It Immoral to Strike First If Attack Is Imminent?

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

By Edmund A. Walsh, S. J.

Vice President, Georgetown University
Regent, School of Foreign Service

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 chapter in the history of American foreign 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.

Lenin knew it and warned his followers:

"We live . . . not only in a state but a system of states, and the existence of the Soviet Republic side by side with the imperialist states (i.e., non-Communist states) for a long time is unthinkable. In the end either one or the other will conquer. And until that end comes, a series of the most terrible collisions between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois states is inevitable."

After citing this fundamental Soviet doctrine, Stalin once added the laconic remark: "Clear, one would think."

Vishinsky's Words Are Hollow

In 1927 he likewise declared to a visiting delegation of American workers:

conclusive, moreover, by the new and inescapable fact of total warfare.

The degeneration in international conduct since 1939 and the evil of total war have produced profound public consequences. There is 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 inhabited by civilians not subject to the same hazards under the old concept of warfare. Today the total population is involved; the needs of technological developments embrace so much organization for armament and for supply that 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 of immediate concern, then, is definition and clarification of the issue raised by President Truman's reference to necessity and the welfare of the United States, followed by his authorization 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—raises one 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

of attack. Primitive man was justified in exercising his right to strike a preventive blow when he saw a bare fist descending on him at arm's length, or a stone lifted against him. In the course of time he saw an ax uplifted, a dagger 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 assailant 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 and immediate menace from ever-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 ingenuity of an aggressor in a chemical laboratory?

The Japanese air force which bombed

Wash Star

24 Dec 50