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ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION FACING US ON THE CONTROL OF ATOMIC ENERGY *

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BY

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Some of us physicists tend to take a rather gloomy view of the present world situation. We know that Nagasaki-type bombs could be produced in large quantities, and we know that the United States would be in a very dangerous position if stock-piles of such bombs were available to any enemy at the outbreak of war. Moreover, when we think of a war that may come perhaps ten or fifteen years from now, we do not think of it in terms of Nagasaki bombs. Nagasaki bombs destroy the buildings of a city by the blast which they cause. But ten or fifteen years from now giant bombs which disperse radioactive substances in the air may be set off far away from our cities. If such giant bombs were used against us, the buildings of our cities would remain undamaged, but the people inside of the cities would not remain alive.

The traditional aim of foreign policy is to prolong the peace, i.e., to lengthen the interval between two wars. We physicists find it difficult to get enthusiastic about such an objective. The outlines of a war which may be fought with these weapons of the future are now becoming more and more clearly visible, and we accepted the view that the world has to go through another war before it arrives at a state of permanent peace, we would probably pray for an early rather than a late war. Clearly, foreign policies which may prolong the peace cannot furnish the solution to our problem.

Collective security might very well have solved the problem which faced the world in 1919. Under conditions different from those which prevail today perhaps it would have been made to work -- assuming American participation, but the ills of 1947 cannot be cured with the remedies of 1919. With the United States and Russia far outranking in military power all other nations, there is no combination of nations which could restrain by force either of these two giants.

No balance of power in the original meaning of the term is possible in such a situation, and there has arisen between the Russian government and the government of the United States, a rather peculiar relationship. Because of the possibility that they might be at war with each other at some future time, these two governments consider it their duty to put their nations into the position of winning that war if war should come. Stated in these terms, the problem is not capable of a solution which is satisfactory to both parties and Russia and the United States are thus caught in a vicious circle of never-ending difficulties.

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This peculiar relationship became apparent sometime between Yalta and Potsdam. Just what caused the change in their relationship is difficult to say. Perhaps there was no particular cause other than the fact that these two countries lost their common enemy before they had reached an agreement on the post-war settlement.

Russia's desire to push her frontiers in northern Europe as far West as possible can be understood on the basis of strategic considerations. We observe further that she wishes to dominate politically Rumania and Albania both of which are strategically important to her. The United States wants to have friendly governments in Greece and Turkey. Obviously, friendly governments in these countries would secure an access to the Black Sea for the American and British fleets and would, in case of war, enable us to carry the war to the Russian ports and the shores of the Black Sea.

Any economic aid that Russia may get would in some measure increase her ability to fight a war, and we note that when Russia was on the point of obtaining a loan from the Swedish government, the United States ambassador protested against the granting of such a loan. The only economic aid which Russia was able to secure with our approval was a total of 250 million dollars of relief granted by UNRRA. This aid went to the Ukraine and Byelorussia and it is less than the amount of relief which Italy was able to obtain.

All this does not mean, of course, that either the United States or Russia want war. It merely means that they want to win the war if there is one. But as long as Russia and the United States will allow their policies to be guided mainly by such considerations, their course will be rigidly determined, and they will retain little freedom of action for working toward the establishment of peace.

NEGOTIATIONS ON CONTROL OF ATOMIC ENERGY

How does atomic energy and the bomb fit into this picture? Atomic bombs may be the only weapon by means of which Russia could carry the war to the territory of the United States if there should be war. Clearly, this is good and sufficient reason for the United States to try to eliminate atomic bombs from all national armaments. But can we see equally clearly for what specific reasons Russia should be expected to concur, particularly if the methods of control involve measures which are difficult for her to accept?

In order to have effective control of atomic energy all over the world, the United States proposes to set up an Atomic Development Authority and to put it in charge of the mining, refining and manufacturing of uranium and other dangerous materials. It is a good proposal and it is difficult to see how control could be made effective on lesser terms. But, keeping in mind the possibility of war, it is easy enough to understand why Russia hesitates to agree to such a proposal. Large scale operations of such an agency on Russian territory would give the United States and other nations access to information of strategic importance to which they have no access at present, such as the details of the road and the railroad systems and the location of various industries inside of Russia.

What are the reasons which might, nevertheless, move Russia to agree to some effective method of control on the basis of the present negotiations? For one

thing, such an agreement would greatly reduce the mounting tension in the world and improve our chances of avoiding war. In this sense at least it would serve the interests of Russia as well as the interests of the United States. Moreover, as long as the United States has a stockpile of atomic bombs and Russia has none, Russia cannot be certain that she will not be attacked and that the United States will not wage a preventive war, perhaps on the very issue of atomic energy. Today it is difficult for us to imagine that this country should ever take such action. Having ratified the United Nations charter, we cannot legally go to war except in the case of an armed attack or on the basis of a unanimous vote in the Security Council of which Russia is a member. The mere refusal of Russia to enter into any agreement on the control of atomic energy could hardly be construed as an armed attack. From the legal point-of-view, Russia would be within her right if she built up a stockpile of atomic bombs and planes and rockets suitable for their delivery. She would only be doing what we are doing ourselves.

As matters stand at the moment, Russia has no atomic bombs. Feeling in this respect secure, we find it easy to see all this very clearly and, therefore, we recognize that such a preventive war against Russia could not be justified from a moral point-of-view. But can we predict how we shall react as the day approaches on which Russia will have a stockpile of bombs and airplanes and rockets suitable for their delivery at a moment's notice? Can we visualize what kind of a life we shall be leading when we shall have to fear for our lives and the lives of our children, when the city in which we live, as well as all the other cities in the United States, will appear to be in danger of being burned and smashed without warning? I do not venture to predict how we would react in such a situation but I would not vouch for anyone, not for any of my friends nor even myself--in such a situation; I would not vouch for anyone to give moral considerations the weight which we give them at present and which they deserve. The most ardent advocates of international cooperation might then turn into the most ardent advocates of a preventive war.

As long as we have bombs and Russia has none, she cannot be certain that we are not going to attack her. At present we propose to eliminate atomic bombs from all national armaments by setting up an international control agency, and we offer to the Russians, as the main inducement, to discard our own bombs at an early date and thus to free Russia from the danger of being attacked.

Perhaps we will succeed in reaching an agreement on this basis and perhaps we won't, but it is a very narrow basis on which to negotiate. Russia and the United States are caught in a vicious circle at present, and it is not likely that this circle can be broken by negotiating on the issue of atomic energy as if it were an isolated issue.