

[1985?]

It is commonplace today to say that U.S.-Soviet relations have never been at a lower ebb. As a matter of fact, during the almost forty years since the end of World War II, the relationship has been one long series of peaks and valleys, depending largely on the various leaders of each country, the many crises -- especially military -- in world affairs, the food, energy, and economic situation, and a whole series of public and private initiatives that have sweetened or soured the relations between the two great super powers. It serves no purpose to assign praise or blame to either country. We have both been, on occasion, wise or foolish, and generally uneasy as we vacillated between hot and cold, detente and mutual provocation.

Again, this situation between two great powers is not unusual in world political and military history. What makes the situation uniquely dangerous and potentially catastrophic today is that both of the two contending and contentious powers have the potential to utterly destroy each other and the world with them, if the situation deteriorates further and a crisis ignites the short fuse leading to nuclear holocaust.

Forty years ago, there were thousands fewer warheads, less accurate and more visible, with a much longer fuse -- taking six or seven hours from bomber takeoff to bomb delivery, assuming that it evaded the air defenses and was not ordered back because of some misunderstanding. Now we talk of targeting within less than the length of a football field. The fuse is shortened to a span of from five to thirty minutes and once fired, for whatever reason or accident, the missiles cannot be recalled.

It has been observed that the U.S. and the USSR are like two protagonists up to their chins in high octane gasoline, each holding

a match and a match box for lighting. One may have six other matches in the box, the other seven or eight, but what does it matter, no one is ahead, one match strike by either and all is over, forever, for both. No more tension, no more super powers, no more world.

Any rational person observing this situation would certainly counsel that the two individual persons involved throw away the matches simultaneously and together, get out of the explosive situation, and begin to resolve their differences in a more rational and survivable manner, especially if they are in a place housing the rest of humanity who are not directly concerned in their differences with each other.

If such counsel is reasonable for individuals, what would possibly make it unreasonable for nations, even two super powers?

There is an old scholastic adage, Ex malo bonum: out of evil good may come. Possibly, if at the moment, our leaders and citizens are generally not talking to each other, for a wide variety of good, bad, and ambiguous reasons, this great evil, the nuclear threat to both of us and to all humanity, may furnish sufficient motivation to start talking lest what we mutually threaten may indeed happen, even accidentally, to both of us and to everybody else besides. Ex malo bonum. Do we need greater motivation to start talking seriously, calmly, and, let us hope, creatively, while we still can. The Day After is too late, and the clock is ticking ominously, right now.

Talk is important, but talk alone won't do it. The talk must be about something very specific that we never seem to get around to discussing. Even when we were talking, we avoided the most important

subject. Our conversation took on all the characteristics of a chess game with the press kibitzing on the sidelines. What was the latest move, who lost what and who gained what, who seems to be winning, who is humiliating or vanquishing whom, by fair means or foul? This kind of conversation goes nowhere, even if we seem to win which we often don't, and even if we did, no one would really win the ultimate engagement. The whole world would lose with both of us losing all we hold dear, too.

So what subject of conversation am I suggesting to the two men as they step out of the pool of gasoline? Only one basic subject with many answers: What is really in the common interest of the U.S. and the USSR? I am not even sure that the two principal leaders should initiate the conversation, given the present atmospherics. I would much prefer that a dozen or so individuals, each enjoying by common consent, the rather complete confidence of his or her countrymen. They should also represent a broad spectrum of their countries concerns: business and labor, the professions of law, medicine, religion, and education, the military and political order, too.

Certainly there are ten or twelve such persons in the U. S. and the USSR. They cannot speak for their countries officially, but unofficially and personally, they can judge very well what is in their countries best interest.

I would prefer that the initial conversation be off the record, in a quiet and secluded place (like an uninhabited island or a remote

high village in Nepal) with no telephone or telex and relatively few conveniences and no distractions or hoopla. A helicopter could bring in food and drink and the group would come close together as they practiced mutual survival by cooking and cleaning up afterwards. No agenda, except to discover and formulate by unanimous agreement what is today in the best interest of both countries and indeed the world, given the current situation.

The conversation could be freewheeling, but still focussed on this single subject. No two groups on each side of a bargaining table, but decent human beings dispersed around a camp fire or on a beach or hilltop close enough to hear each other, close enough to have a very human kind of conversation and open discussion. It might well be the most important discussion in the history of the world.

The conversation would of necessity begin on a very general level of agreement. If I were opening the discussion, I would propose that we agree that it is not in our common interest to destroy each other, all our wonderful institutions, and all the world with us. I would expect little disagreement on this proposition. Another good opener would be: It would be in our common interest to know each other better, both our hopes and our fears. Who would disagree with this? Another opener: Since we have only one planet on which to live in our solar system, wouldn't it make sense to find ways of co-existing in peace, whatever the mutual tolerance and forbearance that might require (to be determined in future discussion).

I can think of many such reasonable propositions, albeit general, but at least a start on a new kind of conversation. The conversation would undoubtedly become more intense and, again, more creative, as common ground would be explored in ever more specific terms of ways and means.

Suppose, just suppose, that this unusual group of Russians and Americans eventually formulated, by common consent, some fifty or more propositions that expressed what in their personal judgments would be in the common interest and welfare of both their countries, a kind of new and updated Zorin-McCloy agreement, but much broader in scope.

Suppose finally that each delegation then returned, in a week or a month, to their respective governments (who would know of the meeting, but maybe not have had too much hope for it) and say:

"Look, here is a list of agreements on a wide range of subjects that in our judgment would be good for them and for us, too. Why don't you study the list, discuss it with us if you wish, and then have a new kind of summit meeting where you begin by agreeing to a long list of issues that you mutually accept. Maybe that would be enough agenda for a new kind of summit, especially if you agreed as well to do something about these agreed upon propositions."

I can readily think of several Russians of high standing there with whom such a conversation would be both exciting and exhilarating and, I believe, with a good outcome. Others better acquainted there could think of many more. Of Americans who might participate, there are not a few. Why not try? If it did not work,

work, the government leaders could repudiate it all, but once the world learned of this list, assuming it would be creative and reasonable, governments might not find repudiation all that simple. Anyway, it is worth a try, in my judgment, and we are really starting from ground zero now, so why not try something new? Our lives may well depend upon making a new beginning, quietly, modestly, understandingly, and creatively. For myself, I would add prayerfully and with hope. At least, even if not a roaring success, we would initiate a conversation not now taking place.

May I close with an incident that is, in some way, a genesis for my proposal. In 1979, I was U. S. Ambassador heading a delegation of more than 80 Americans to the U. N. Conference on Science and Technology for Development in Vienna. I have attended more U.N. conferences than I like to remember. In most of them, an enormous amount of energy and adrenalin was expended (especially in the cold war years) in feuding with the Soviets.

In order to avoid this, I arrived early and after getting the lay of the land, invited the head of the USSR Delegation, Dr. Gavichiani, and five of his top scientist delegates to have lunch with five of our scientists and me, on Sunday, at the Fisherhaus Restaurant in the Vienna Woods. After drinks -- most of the Russian and American scientists knew each other -- we sat down for lunch in a private dining room.

After ordering our meals, I suggested a bit of business. I mentioned past squabbles and waste of time and energy during U.N. Conferences and suggested that we attempt to identify a

number of key issues at this conference on which I suspected we were already in agreement. Gavichiani nodded and I tabled five propositions to which all the Russians present quickly nodded, Da, yes.

Then I said, you now can come up with five more. Gavichiani said, "Unfair, you proposed all the good ones, but at least, I have three more." He proposed them and all of us said, "Of course, yes, agreed."

Then, as the meal progressed towards dessert (Sachertort mit schlag!), I said there was another matter I would appreciate his negotiating with the President of the Conference, Madam Feinberg, Minister of Science and Technology in Austria. Gavichiani was astonished. "You want me to negotiate for the U.S.?" "Sure," I replied, "I didn't do very well yesterday when I talked with her. I assume you have a message from Kosygin (Gavichiani was Kosygin's son-in-law). I have one from Carter. She says only the President of Austria will speak at the opening session tomorrow morning. I think you and I should speak a word of welcome from our Presidents, and a Third World delegate as well." He gulped and said, "Okay."

The next morning as we filed in for the opening session in the Stadthalle, Gavichiani came to me and flashed the thumbs up signal (he must watch U.S. television) saying, "Mission accomplished."

We didn't have one bad word or squabble with the Russians during the whole conference.

It can work. As Einstein said, "With the splitting of the atom, everything changed, except our way of thinking, and so we drift towards unparalleled disaster."

Let us stop the drift and begin talking.

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