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The Greatest Story Never Told

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The conference held at Ballyvaughn, Ireland, in August 1987 was the beginning of an on-going international intellectual interchange on topics related to the discourse of peace and security and international society. It will include annual meetings, the second to be held in summer 1988, again in Ballyvaughn. Sponsored by the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the conferences are intended to foster general inquiry into these scholarly topics and to stimulate research and teaching that incorporates these perspectives at University of California campuses. This year's series of working papers comprises the writings which seventeen authors submitted to their colleague-participants in preparation for the 1987 conference. Some have been updated somewhat before publication here. Some have been published elsewhere and are reissued here by permission. The Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation hopes that these working papers will help to interest even more scholars in pursuing these lines of thought.

James M. Skelly
Series Editor

These papers are available at the IGCC printing and mailing cost of \$2.50 each. For air mail delivery to an address outside North America, add \$2.

The Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation is an interdisciplinary Multicampus Research Unit of the University of California, established by the Regents in June 1983. The mission of the IGCC is to promote research and teaching on international conflict and cooperation, with particular emphasis on threats and avoidance of nuclear war. The IGCC Central Office is located at the University of California, San Diego.

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The Greatest Story Never Told

A Parable:

The community lived on the slope of the volcano. Volcanos were known to be dangerous, but the chiefs took this volcano for granted. So did the community. After all, it was normal for human beings to live on the slopes of volcanos. They always had. No one had ever seen this particular volcano erupt. In any case, what choice was there? It was believed that the heat of the volcano kept away the great ice fields that threatened to flow down from the north and render the climate unlivable. It was widely accepted that the crust of lava that had formed on the surrounding land was beneficial to crops. But the volcano itself was something most people, most of the time, preferred not to think about.

Most of the chiefs, known as Realists, agreed that the time that had elapsed without an eruption was proof that the danger of eruption had been highly exaggerated. They celebrated the volcano's virtues as a defense against ice, a guarantor of climatic balance, even a grace of the gods. Other chiefs, known as Tarp Warriors, acknowledged the danger of eruption and proposed that special tarpaulins be invented and stretched over the village to shield it from any hypothetical lava. This proved to be a popular idea. Still others, Volcano Controllers, believed that the volcano could be capped, or that deep holes could be sunk to divert some of the subterranean pressure. This too was a popular idea.

Rumbles were heard from beneath the ground. Occasionally, members of the community sounded alarms. They pointed out that although the probability of an eruption might be minuscule on any given day, even tiny probabilities mount toward certainty as time goes on, and a single eruption would wipe out the village. They urged the villagers to find another place to live. The chiefs dubbed them Doomsayers. Some intimated that they were secretly ice-lovers; others said that at the very least these Doomsayers were ignorant of the properties of ice.

There were soothsayers who sang the community's stories. Every evening the community gathered to hear them set the words of the chiefs to music. When asked why they did not warn of the volcano's dangers, the soothsayers said this was not their function: chiefs, after all, were chiefs for a reason. The soothsayers' main task was to inform the community of the chiefs' words. They consulted the same volcanologists who advised the Realists, the Tarp Warriors, and the Volcano Controllers. The volcanologists helped them modernize their songs. It was known that occasional soothsayers had prophesied destruction, but they had gotten into serious trouble with the chiefs. Such people had no business in the soothsaying profession, it was said; they gave it a bad name.

Journalism Normalizes

This parable is not exact, of course. The nuclear buildup, and the threats it presumes to guard against, are political, not natural. Journalism is not exactly soothsaying either. And--luckily--the public does not depend totally on a handful of journalists for information.

But journalism shares with soothsaying the capacity to shape and limit the way we understand the world. Journalism renders some views legitimate, others illegitimate; still others invisible. It draws boundaries around the society's main political conversations. It writes the slate of questions even if it does not predetermine the answers.

When it comes to reporting international matters, especially the arms race, the American journalist's word processor turns into a megaphone. It amplifies the noises out of Washington--principally from the President, but also from the chief cabinet secretaries, the top military officers, powerful members of Congress, major lobbyists. What these powers think important, journalism thinks important. The reporters who cover the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department tend to breathe the same ideological air. Their style may be raffish, but their posture is one of insouciant subservience; they let the officials they cover define the key questions. They speak a language in which certain questions can be asked and others cannot. When they need balancing opinions, they go to experts who speak that language. The point is not that American journalism sides with the White House, although often enough it does; at times, in the insiders' revealing phrase for independence, it "wanders off the reservation." But even when the media give modest voice to modest dissent, *they still define the issues as the various wings of the Establishment define them.*

That is the rule. There are exceptions, sometimes conspicuous ones. There are reporters more and less conscientious, editors more and less obsequious, reports more and less thoughtful. But on the whole, in the grey normality certified by what is *and is not* covered, journalism abdicates an independent point of view on the most urgent question in the history of the human race. It takes the arms race for granted. It speaks the language of those who would manage the arms race, not radically reverse it. It lends credence to the arguments of strategists, not the arguments of those who think the strategic logic of the arms race is itself the heart of the problem. As the *Village Voice's* Geoffrey Stokes has put it, "most news organizations (though not, I think, most reporters) are infinitely more comfortable as stenographers in the laps of the powerful than as watchdogs howling outside their doors." This is not what a thermonuclear world cries out for. Consider three cases in point.

1. Star Wars

On March 23, 1983, President Reagan announced a "Strategic Defense Initiative" that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Reagan, endowed with presidentiality, seized the initiative as presidents are wont to do; the media gave him the benefit of many (though not all) doubts. From the start, it was his version that was permitted to define the background and rationale of SDI. The media relayed at face value his claims that America had "fallen behind" in the '70s, and that Russian missiles could slip through the "window of vulnerability" and obliterate American land-based missiles--as if the United States didn't have thousands more H-bombs carried by bombers or by submarine-launched missiles. The initial press response, for the most part, helped certify that SDI was unequivocally peace-minded; in the mainstream media, few voices were heard to dispute the premise that peace could be secured by extravagant--indeed, untested--technology.

Who could resist presidential logic? The Russians, if anyone were inclined to give *them* any benefit of any doubt. Those spoilsports insisted that SDI could serve as the shield to free the sword of nuclear offense; even more, that those nifty new gadgets could themselves attack. Little was heard, at first, of such arguments. To cite Russian grumbles, in fact, was essentially to discredit them, as if to say: Of course you understand that the Russians are paranoid, thereby masking their own demonic designs. The press did acknowledge that domestic criticism existed, and indeed adopted Senator Edward Kennedy's "Star Wars" catch-phrase, to the administration's chagrin. In a once-over-lightly story on Kennedy's response, for example, the *Washington Post* quoted Kennedy's charge that Reagan's speech had consisted of "misleading Red-scare tactics and reckless Star Wars schemes," and added: "Two senators who are declared Democratic presidential candidates, Alan Cranston...and Gary Hart...also issued critical statements." But nothing was said of the logic of their criticisms. Opposition could be put down to *partisanship*, which our antipolitical culture considers self-seeking and self-disqualifying rather than well grounded.

Government officials denied that SDI constituted any threat to the Russians, and that, so far as most of the press was concerned, was that. It took the loyal opposition months to gear up; by that time, Reagan's rhetoric and program had the momentum. To a dazzled and distracted public, moreover, SDI may well have seemed a technological fait accompli. Network graphics and newspaper diagrams seemed to certify that SDI lay virtually ready, just the other side of the technological horizon. Animations became staples of the news: wondrous rays blithely zapping marauding missiles, cute explosions "taking out" enemy blips. Courtesy of George Lucas movies and the video game industry, the cheery visual language was familiar. It was easily assumed that what can be drawn can be planned, what can be planned can be built, what can be built can

protect. The diagrams helped confer upon SDI the force of the feasible; the opposition looked like progress-bashing grumps.

Eventually, some of the press lap dogs jumped off and started barking. Prominent scientists were widely heard to doubt that Star Wars is technically feasible and to maintain that, if feasible, it is "extremely dangerous and destabilizing." The press has traced the process by which Administration claims have shrunk since 1983; major spokespeople (though not Reagan or Secretary of Defense Weinberger) have acknowledged that SDI is intended to "enhance" deterrence by protecting missiles, not replace deterrence by a hypothetical city-protecting shield. In a long, thorough six-part series in March 1985, five *New York Times* reporters noted that "hard questions about the program are not getting much of a hearing in the inner councils." "Dark Side of 'Star Wars': System Could Also Attack," read one headline. *Time's* reporter William J. Broad wrote about Reagan's and Edward Teller's long-standing commitment to SDI, though neither the mystique nor the history came across anywhere near as damagingly as in Broad's 1985 book, *Star Warriors*.

But the main problem with press coverage of SDI is more profound than any particular slant or citation. The white space between the lines is more important than the lines themselves. In large measure, the debate in the press--as in Congress and the "arms control community"--has been couched as a debate between old, stale deterrence and new, improved strategic defense, utopian if a bit woolly, that claims the moral high ground. At least as quoted, experts who wax skeptical about Star Wars offer no alternative other than arms control: no glimpse of drastic mutual reductions in nuclear weapons and an East-West political settlement. Neither do the media. Thus is the debate kept manageable.

Once the debate is managed as Nuclear Status Quo versus SDI Techno-Deliverance, no wonder public opinion lines up behind Reagan's impossible dream--at least when the issue is couched as a yes or no for techno-deliverance. Barely reported is a 1986 poll in which the majority expressed opposition to any SDI scheme that didn't protect the whole population--that is, the only SDI dreams that won popular approval were the impossible ones: almost everyone acknowledges that a fully missile-proof "shield" over the whole United States cannot be built. Furthermore, the press barely mentions the *political* motives behind Star Wars, which, after all, co-opted much of the surging nuclear freeze sentiment of the early '80s. No less an astute politico than Henry Kissinger wrote just before Reykjavik: "Banning SDI perpetuates the strategy of mass civilian extermination that produces *pacifism and unilateral disarmament*" (emphasis added). How intense are such fears in high places? *There* would be something worth reporting.

2. The Soviet Test Moratorium

Occasionally the news media describe Russian and American proposals for arms control as equivalent propaganda ploys. But usually the Russian moves are viewed as stratagems while the American ones are played at face value. When a significant Russian move is belittled, downplayed, trivialized, one can hear the champagne corks popping in the White House press office.

The most egregious example of this process in recent years is the treatment of Mikhail Gorbachev's unilateral nuclear test moratorium, which took effect on August 6, 1985, was thrice renewed, and eventually ended in February 1987. Anticipating Gorbachev's formal announcement of his unconditional test cessation, Reagan beat him to the press room by a few hours and invited the USSR to send observers to witness an underground test in Nevada. The *New York Times* headline was "U.S. and Russians Make New Offers on Nuclear Tests." The lead: "President Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, each offered new proposals on the testing of nuclear weapons today." Presto! The moratorium was downgraded to the status of "proposal." A news analysis on an inside page equated the two as pre-summit maneuvers, and the next day's editorial went further, calling the Soviet move "a cynical propaganda blast" and making the astonishing claim: "In tense times, [a test ban] might even stimulate the arms race by damaging confidence in the reliability of weapons...."

"Mr. Gorbachev's proclamation would ring hollow," the *Times* editorial continued, "even if it had not come immediately after an energetic series of Soviet test explosions." A reader with newspapers to burn would have had to turn to the *Washington Post* to discover that the Soviets had exploded eight bombs in 1985--and the United States, nine. The *Post's* headline was the forthright "U.S. Rejects Arms Test Suspension," though two paragraphs down the moratorium and the invitation were also equated as "proposals." (The papers are not consistent, though. When, on December 19, 1985, the Soviets offered to open up their nuclear test sites to inspection if the United States would agree to join the moratorium, the *Post* ran a solid piece--but on p. 49.) When Gorbachev made his initial announcement, the *Los Angeles Times's* two-column headline on p. 6 was "U.S. Invites Soviet Experts to Observe Nevada A-Test." Under it, one headline made the point that "Moscow Would Gain Little Data From Offer," but the other misleadingly said the United States "Rejects Proposal for 5-Month Moratorium"; only in the 12th paragraph did it mention that the Soviets were not simply *proposing* a moratorium, they were *undertaking* one. It was one thing to report the White House's reasons for refusing to reciprocate Gorbachev's move; it was another to distort the nature of that move.

Possibly by way of self-rectification, the *Los Angeles Times* made the USSR's third moratorium renewal on August 18, 1986, its top story of the day. So did the *New York Times*, which now

viewed the moratorium as an actual "test halt," not a mere proposal. The December announcement that "Soviets Will End Freeze on Nuclear Arms Tests" was likewise the *Los Angeles Times's* top story, and the *New York Times's* headline was even stronger: "Moscow, Rebuffed by U.S., Is Planning To Renew A-Tests."

The media feel the political winds. By the end of 1986, the moratorium had gone on long enough, and Reagan had been sufficiently injured by Contragate, that editors had grown a little less inclined to echo his contemptuous dismissal of the Soviet moratorium.

3. Reykjavik

Thermonuclear news is reliant on tips and insider leaks, so the Iceland summit of October 1986 was seen through a funhouse mirror especially darkly. During the meeting itself, official secrecy left the media in supreme confusion.

In the immediate aftermath, as the story was still breaking, the media's emphasis was on how far Reagan and Gorbachev had gotten--deep cuts in strategic arms, possible elimination of all ballistic missiles in ten years--until, in the end, Reagan insisted on Star Wars and Gorbachev insisted on keeping it on ice for ten more years. The initial media frame was that the summit had failed, and that Reagan had a good deal to answer for. "Nonexistent Weapons Undid Summit," was the headline of a *Washington Post* news analysis that said the summit "fell apart" because neither leader would compromise further on a "weapons system that does not exist--a glimmer in the eye of those trying to develop it...."

Expecting that its failure to produce any arms control agreement would play badly in the congressional elections, three weeks away, the administration faced a formidable public relations challenge. As Reagan thawed out from Iceland, his handlers were already proclaiming a new "spin": the Russians had bollixed up a far-reaching agreement by being pigheaded about Star Wars, but success was still in sight; in then-Chief of Staff Donald Regan's words, the summit had been "like going 99 yards and not scoring on the last yard." "Spin control," the project was called, an exercise in news management so frontal as to come in for wry comment in the major media themselves. The top administration officials fanned out to the key newsrooms. ("Secretary of State George P. Shultz's schedule looked like that of a political candidate," wrote the *Post's* Eleanor Randolph, "as he was interviewed on the 'CBS Morning News,' during lunch at the *Washington Post*, at a State Department news conference at 4:30 p.m., and on subsequent tapings for two evening television shows: CNN's 'Crossfire' and ABC's 'Nightline.'") Former heavyweights were wheeled out to sing songs of reassurance, which the media dutifully amplified. The night after the summit, for example, *MacNeil/Lehrer's* learned analysis engaged those disinterested parties McGeorge Bundy and Henry Kissinger, each outdoing the other in optimism that nothing catastrophic had happened, East-West diplomacy would carry on as usual.

The *Post*, as usual, was the least gullible of the major papers, undermining Reagan by quoting scientists who said that confining SDI research to the laboratory for ten more years, as Gorbachev had demanded, probably would *not* slow down development of the SDI maxishield--though it *would* interfere with development of a more limited strategic defense.

Enter now Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, then the Armed Services Committee's ranking Democrat (now chairman) and a man with as good and loud a press as anyone in Washington. The press took up Nunn's cry: Thank God SDI had blocked an agreement, for if ballistic missiles had been abolished, the West would stand defenseless against a Soviet onslaught in Western Europe, not to mention Soviet air defenses. The Establishment lined up, like loose filings gathered up by an aroused electromagnet. Thus Leslie Gelb in a front-page, frame-setting piece in the *New York Times* asked: "Has the Administration explained how it is prepared to maintain security for the United States and its allies in a world without nuclear weapons, in a world where Soviet conventional military superiority might then prove decisive?"

Note the unexamined presumption that the Soviets have "conventional superiority" in any usable sense. Reputable military analysts doubt that the Warsaw Pact has anything like the tank margin or secure supply lines it would need to launch a successful attack in Europe--assuming it has the slightest interest in doing so. Yet Nunn's vastly debatable premise, usually presented as if beyond dispute, shows up over and over in post-Reykjavik journalism. "Cutting A-Arms: Safer or More Dangerous World?" inquired the *Times's* new military correspondent, Bernard E. Trainor, citing as his only sources certain unnamed "arms experts" who "question the value of any agreement...that would dramatically change the level of nuclear weapons." Trainor quoted nary an "expert" to challenge his argument that "without the restraining influence of the threat of nuclear holocaust implicit in nuclear weapons, the likelihood of conventional war might rise dramatically." Nor did any other *Times* "news analysis" dispute the notion that conventional East-West war would be looming around the corner. If Trainor's piece were not enough, 11 days later the *Times's* John H. Cushman, Jr., checked in with "Ban on A-Arms: Wisdom Questioned," which concluded that "the questions raised by the military analysts suggest that both sides may be playing to emotions rather than military common sense."

Once the Iran-contra scandal surfaced in November, the upshot was yet another reframing: optimist Reagan became fumbling, doddering Reagan (or, if you prefer, Reagan of the "inadequate management style"). Stripped of that Teflon coating which the media had themselves done a good deal to spray onto him, Reagan took his knocks from the Establishment. James Schlesinger wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that "at Reykjavik the Administration suddenly jettisoned 25 years of deterrence doctrine," that Reagan's "casual utopianism and indifferent preparation" may have catered to SANE and the left wing of the British Labour party but at the

same time "endanger[ed] Western security." James Reston spent an entire *Times* column seconding Schlesinger's alarm.

No visible politician in American life is prepared to think out loud about the possibility of a nonnuclear world; the very thought of it, even in the form of Reagan's befuddled lurch at Reykjavik, therefore looks plain gaga. Even so profound a critic as Garry Wills, in a brilliant *Time* essay on the expiration of Reagan's magic, professes himself aghast at "the nightmare love-in of Reykjavik." The media, having benignly assured us for years that there is no alternative to a more rational conduct of the thermonuclear status quo, quiver in apprehension that some transformation might actually be thinkable.

Why the Media Play the Game

Why, in so many respects, do the media serve as the megaphones of power? And why, when they diverge from the White House at all, do they diverge in the name of a conventional wisdom that normalizes, if it does not indeed love, thermonuclear arms?

Only the blind could overlook the revolving door. The *New York Times's* Leslie Gelb moved from the Pentagon (supervising the Pentagon Papers) to the Brookings Institution, back to the *Times*, to the State Department, then to the *Times's* "national security" beat; his *Times* successor, Richard Burt, entered from a mainstream think tank and later exited the *Times* into the State Department, where he is now ambassador to West Germany. Bernard E. Trainor is a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general. Would the *Times* assign a retired Sandinista official to run the Managua bureau? There is, moreover, a symbiosis between the national security correspondent and the national security apparatus. The reliable reporter gets privileged information, which translates into scoops, while elements of the apparatus get to leak at will.

But the explanation for the limits of "national security" reporting must go beyond the fine mesh of institutional connections. For all his insider credentials, for example, Leslie Gelb has been one of the least slavish of the top Pentagon reporters. The deeper issue is that the revolving door and the mutual back-scratching society cramp the debate because the main parties speak the same language. World War II images lurk in the background—tank counts, missile counts, all crude measures of old-fashioned "superiority," shrouding the deathliness of a single thermonuclear bomb. The fear of looking "soft on the Russians" still runs rampant; the faulty but easy premise is that opposition to Moscow's *politics* must logically translate into a tilt toward Washington's *strategy*.

In general, the media relay the language of power. Reporters who work the thermonuclear beat are chosen for their mastery of the tones and vocabulary of World War III planning. Media honchos are persnickety enough to look independent, but not so much so as to shift the debate. Typically, Ted Koppel of ABC's "Nightline" prefers that his expert guests be former government officials because, as one of his booking producers put it once, "Ted was much more comfortable with a

former player." Deploying one insider against another, the media get to feel "serious"; they conduct their own flirtation with political power. The present and former "players," of course, have narrowed the discourse of the permissible. There are things they cannot, and will not, say. The abolition or drastic reduction of nuclear weapons is an alien prospect to them. They will not wax emotional about the possibility of unprecedented devastation; emotions would threaten their ability to manage the flirtation with Armageddon.

Add to this some of the limits of everyday journalism. Three rules of thumb: 1. *Journalism reports vivid conflict, not consensus.* The bombs haven't gone off, so there is no news. Since the arms race is taken for granted by the key players, where's the "story"? 2. *What newsworthy people do is what's newsworthy.* The president, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee make the news. 3. *Legitimate sources are the ones worth quoting.* The only game in Washington is the one played by the administration and the sanctioned experts. The Right having bought, harangued, and mobilized its way into political power, the result is a one-winged debate: Right versus Center. The likes of Daniel Ellsberg and nuclear freeze movement founder Randall Forsberg don't get cited.

The occasional charts and graphics listing the throw-weights, missile balances, and so on are skewed, more often than not, toward the American view of things. But the more poisonous effect is that they numb the mind. They set the board for the game of counting and fussing. The war that would cause suffering beyond the scope of human imagination is kept at bay, kept abstract, kept routine, because journalism is content to let the main players play by their own rules. After all, if the main players can't be trusted to manage the future of all life--if their rationales and rationalizations leave untouched the unconscionable likelihood that deterrence cannot be trusted to deter foolproof and forever--then the defenses we have all worked out for staying cool would start to crumble, and then where would we be?

Why Power Resents the Media Anyway

Then why does power resent the journalists? And why does the Right blast the media for liberal leanings?

Partly because the mood managers and disinformers, if they had their druthers, would prefer megaphones without any static at all. Failing to land every last billion dollars they want, failing to win every propaganda victory, they lash out at interference. They refuse to understand that to keep credibility up, the press has to distance itself from power even as it keeps the debate shriveled. The newsroom's limited "balance"--on the one hand, on the other hand--disrupts the White House's longing for absolute containment of the public mood.

But caution: sometimes power's resentment of the belatedly roused press is at least half feigned. Power learns to cope with a snipe from Leslie Gelb or Sam Donaldson. It resorts to "spin

control," of which the media dutifully, cynically, helplessly take note. It plants stories. Breezily it confirms and denies--knowing that the press will pass on their confirmations and denials even when privately skeptical.

Who, Then, Is Responsible?

There are tendencies on the Left as on the Right to presume that the media manipulate popular sentiment at will. If things were so simple, it would be hard to understand what is refractory and at times fluid about American opinion. Let us grant, then, that the media's modicum of independence does aerate what would otherwise be the closed room of American politics. Nonetheless, what remains terrifying is the yawning abyss between American power and American knowledge. According to a 1985 poll, only 19 percent of Americans knew that the United States did not have a "no-first-use" policy. The media--as well as the schools and political parties--stand condemned by that little fact. Journalism in particular cannot rise to the occasion by playing the game of deadlines-as-usual: not when the overshadowing presence of our time is an event that has not taken place and yet which, should it take place, will not be reportable.

Talk of responsibility makes the press quiver; they gather the wagons around and trundle out the First Amendment. Editors and reporters insist it is not their job to set agendas. But this has to be naive, for in their normal rounds they report not "how things are" but how power and convention *say* things are. It would be a miracle, therefore, if the press got out ahead of respectable opinion, the two parties, and the great tidal movements of public sentiment. If leading Democrats line up with the Pentagon, or fail to put forward a clear alternative to perpetual reliance on the threat of annihilation, reporters are not going to seek out dissidents. If there is no political force to insist that the future of the earth must rest on stronger ground than the assumption that deterrence will last forever, do not look to the news media to conjure it.

In the never-ending work of saving the world, there is plenty of responsibility to go around. The press now knows it was late and gullible on the Iran-contra scandal. Is the fantasy of perpetual deterrence the issue they want to be late on? Or will they be climbing all over each other for scoops--for the best views of the ash and the flowing lava--at the moment the volcano begins to erupt?

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*These papers also appear in *Multilingua* (January/April 1988).