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'A Smell of Burning in the Air?'

In the two fascinating retrospective articles by most of the major living American participants in the Cuban missile crisis of 20 years ago this month, the most amazing statement came, on this page, from retired Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor: "I never heard an expression of fear of nuclear escalation on the part of any of my colleagues. If at any time we were sitting on the edge of Armageddon, as nonparticipants have sometimes alleged, we were too unobservant to notice it."

Taylor's principal colleagues, Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, Ball, Gilpatrick, Sorensen and Bundy, in *Time* magazine, did not directly discuss Taylor's point, but they did collectively state: "American nuclear superiority was not in our view a critical factor for the fundamental and controlling reason that nuclear war, already in 1962, would have been an unexampled catastrophe for both sides; the balance of terror so eloquently described by Winston Churchill seven years earlier was in full operation. No one of us ever reviewed the nuclear balance for comfort in those hard weeks."

Gen. Taylor describes himself as one of the "hawks" who favored launching "an air attack without warning on all the located missiles and IL28 bombers" that Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev had secretly introduced into Cuba, all the time denying he had sent any "offensive" weaponry. President Kennedy, however, followed the more cautious course of enforcing a selective naval blockade, a "quarantine." The joint article states, indirectly, the rationale for that choice: "The gravest risk in this crisis was . . . that events would produce actions, reactions or miscalculations carrying the conflict beyond the control of one or the other," Kennedy or Khrushchev, and "when great states come anywhere near the brink in the nuclear age, there is no room for games of blind man's bluff."

Taylor, a thinking man's general if ever we have had one, nevertheless, seems to me to exemplify a central problem of the nuclear age: the gap between governmental insiders with intimate knowledge of the weapons' destructiveness and the public, which has only a subconscious, or at least subliminal, fear of being the victim of nuclear war. It's the old busi-ness of not seeing the forest for all the trees.

Since Hiroshima, certainly since the Soviet Union also achieved "the Bomb," there have been in this country recurrent waves of public alarm,

even outright fear, that it might be used. Crises over Berlin in Europe and Quemoy-Matsum in Asia, over an alleged "bomber gap" and then a "missile gap" all produced public symptoms of alarm or fear. In turn, that produced successive presidents into arms control and reduction negotiations, just as President Reagan's public alarms about a current "window of vulnerability" and his tough anti-Soviet rhetoric have produced both new negotiations and the widespread nuclear freeze movement.

As to Cuba, maybe it never occurred to Gen. Taylor that we all might be incinerated, but it surely did to unaccounted Americans and others. John Foster Dulles, back in the Eisenhower era, truculently talked of going to "the brink of war," but it was the 1962 missile crisis that had millions holding their collective breath at what seemed like the brink of Armageddon.

In his speech making the missile crisis public, Kennedy included these words: "We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth—but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced." This was coupled with the most specific threat of nuclear attack on the Soviet Union ever, before or since, stated by any American government: "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. [emphasis added]."

After it was over, the president spoke of the dangers of misjudgments by two nations "so far depa-rated in their beliefs." And when "you put the nuclear equation in their struggle . . . one mistake can make this whole thing blow up." His brother Robert Kennedy, wrote, in his posthumously published "Thirteen Days," of the moments before the first interception of a Soviet vessel as "the time of gravest concern for the president. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? . . ."

And what of the Russians? In his memoirs Khrushchev said that "we had installed enough missiles [in Cuba] already to destroy New York, Chicago and the other huge industrial cities, not to mention a little village like Washington." The two most powerful nations, he said, "had been squared off against each other, each with his finger on the

button." The Americans "were no less scared than we were of atomic war."

To escape "the catastrophe of thermonuclear war," Khrushchev said in a message to Kennedy at the height of the crisis, they should jointly unite "the knot of war." Weeks after that had been done, Khrushchev spoke the most dramatic words of the crisis when he told his Soviet critics that there had been "a smell of burning in the air." Maybe Gen. Taylor never got a whiff of it; the world was fortunate that both Kennedy and Khrushchev did.

But that is history; what are we to learn from it relevant to today?

For one thing, that any American government tends to become complacent about the chances of nuclear war because it is so difficult to negotiate with the Soviet Union what we see as equitable agreements. For another, that non-government people, individually and collectively, must never let up on the pressure to force governments to think and rethink how to lower tensions, to resolve lesser disputes that could grow into nuclear crises, to explore and re-explore the minds of our adversaries, not just see them in our own image. Many American backers of the nuclear freeze idea, myself included, support it not because it is an end in itself (it surely isn't) but because it serves as an immense pressure point on our government to face the question of how to lessen the danger of nuclear disaster.

We may say, as successive American governments including Ronald Reagan's have said, that Moscow has an unfair advantage because it has no public opinion to contend with. But the movers and shakers in the Soviet Union are just as concerned as we are about survival in the nuclear age, however they may try to bluff it out in public. The record of the atomic age is far too replete with ignored or rejected Soviet and/or American prof-ifers for negotiations that, in retrospect, probably represent lost opportunities to find agreements.

Eternal vigilance in today's world is more than the price of liberty; it is the price of survival. Those of us in whose nostrils that "smell of burning" still lingers, for whom it was the vivid reality it apparently was not for Gen. Taylor, must never forget it. We must see that our successors, though they never caught a whiff, nonetheless never cease to remember that the nuclear "balance of terror" is, and will remain, the backdrop against which all major international dramas are played and replayed.

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U.S. plane flies over Soviet freighter taking missiles from Cuba.