

The Precision of Death in an Era

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The Korean war scare evaporated a few days ago. It ended on an ABC television talk show and a few squiggly inches in the papers the next day quoting Defense Secretary Schlesinger saying, "Whatever possibilities (of war) there were, which were basically low, have receded in recent weeks."

The end.

Before that there were days and days of nervous-making publicity. North Koreans digging tunnels into

South Korea, fistfights, infiltrators, atomic warnings and poof! it's over, but we live in what Charles A. Beard in 1939 called "the era of universal jitters over foreign affairs . . . The daily press and the radio, thriving on hourly sensations, do their best to inflame readers, listeners and lookers with a passion for putting down the wicked abroad . . ."

Beard dated the beginning of the era of jitters around 1890; it has intensified exponentially in our time when war chases peace around the hours of the clock. Schlesinger had not yet pronounced the Korean crisis

in remission until next time it's needed before introducing us to a new peril.

Somalia.

Where is Somalia and does it matter? The Soviets are putting missiles there, Schlesinger says, and a touring American senator from Oklahoma confirms that he saw missile bunkers, dollies and a crate, clearly of Soviet origin, in the port of Berbera. You'll know where that is once you've found Somalia, and then as you stare at the open page of your atlas you can ask yourself why a person from Oklahoma would care.

of Universal Jitters

Poster

He might have a care about what happens to a people when they have the jitters too long. Does going through decades of this unstringing us? Do perceptions and values begin to change after several generations live out their lives being told by those with prestige and authority that there may not be a tomorrow, but if there is one, they may wish they had died yesterday. Once upon a time people imagined the end of the world would come when the sun got cold. No more.

When you're in the foxholes long enough, do you remember how you

came to be in one or why? The eye of the mind locks onto an infinite Hindu cartwheel of Americans, Egyptians, Cambodians, Jews, Irishman, Turks, Christians frozen forever putting daggers into each other. Life as a way of rolling death. If cancer doesn't get you, the Commies will. Smoke cigarettes or jog through the parks chased by cardiologists imploring you to allow them to measure your serum cholesterol. Hopes for peace in the Middle East rose today but on the other side of the world a U.S. and a Russian sub rammed each other when the radar on both

craft were disabled by schools of tuna with aluminum scales. A Navy Department spokesman refused to confirm or deny . . .

Schlesinger says the American Presidium might conceivably start a nuclear war but within moderation. No missile fusillade is contemplated, only one shot, an atomic shell over the bow of the Ukraine. Comrade Dictator, the loss of Kiev is not to be regarded as a hostile act but a warning that our government would

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Precision of Death in a Jittery Era

COMMENTARY, From B1

The Secretary of Defense is a practitioner of the military doctrine that one way to immobilize potential enemies is to appear slightly unpredictable, a tich mad. Never let them presume they understand the logic of our self interest. Keeps 'em off balance and guessing. So from time to time we must do things that are not in our self interest in order to serve our self interest. But what is the difference between feigning emotional instability in high places and official madness? Will the other side know, and does it give us a clue as to who wrapped the tuna fish in the tin foil?

The President, against the advice of his Defense Department, has asked Congress for money to build a \$1.2-

billion nuclear cruiser. There are so many new weapons. Have you heard of the PGM's? Precision guided munitions. Ours are called Maverick and TOW; the Russians' are called Sagger and Snapper; the British version is Swingfire and the Franco-German seeing-eye cannon ball is called HOT. Automatic death from a long way off.

Half a million scientists and engineers around the globe spend their full time working on new weapons. Their collective accomplishment has been to make war so automatic as to drain from it the appearances of valor. Soldiers dress like businessmen and the determination of victory is a computational procedure. The Cambodians capture 39 seamen on

the Mayaguez; we lose 40 men getting them back so they win, but hold on, a recount reveals only 37 lost. We win and the liberated seamen celebrate by threatening to file suit. To have meaning, death and the threats thereof must come at gracious intervals.

"You won't catch me complaining of any war," wrote Robert Frost in September, 1914, "much less a great war like this that we wage on both sides like mystics for a reason beyond reason." Six decades of death later, mysticism is replaced by madness and no reason by too many. Put us out of our jitters, kill us, but stop explaining why.

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