

Three minutes to midnight

AS WE ENTER the new year, hope is eclipsed by foreboding. The accelerating nuclear arms race and the almost complete breakdown of communication between the superpowers have combined to create a situation of extreme and immediate danger.

In response to these trends and as a warning of where they lead, we have moved the *Bulletin's* "doomsday clock" forward by one minute—to three minutes before midnight. It is a measure of the gravity of the current situation that only once in our 39-year history—in 1953 in response to the advent of the hydrogen bomb—have we seen fit to place the warning hand any closer to midnight than it stands today.

Over the last decade the clock has moved steadily forward, never back. We last advanced it three years ago in response to the development by the superpowers of nuclear weapons designed for war-fighting rather than war-deterrence. Since then this trend has only accelerated, carrying us ever deeper into a new, more dangerous phase of the arms race. Captives of a tortured logic, the superpowers are pursuing security by means of weapons and strategies that can only produce insecurity. In so doing they are collaborating in an assault upon the basis of the only true security to be had at this point in history: mutual deterrence grounded on the knowledge that to wage nuclear war is to commit national suicide.

The growing momentum of the arms race over the last three years would be reason enough to reset the clock. But it does not stand alone; something else has been happening during these years, and especially over the last few months, something we view with great alarm. It is a process George Kennan characterized some years ago as "the militarization of thought and discourse." And it is far advanced.

As the arms race—a sort of dialogue between weapons—has intensified, other forms of discourse between the superpowers have all but ceased. There has been a virtual

suspension of meaningful contacts and serious discussions. Every channel of communication has been constricted or shut down; every form of contact has been attenuated or cut off. And arms control negotiations have been reduced to a species of propaganda.

The point is not simply that discussions have proved difficult, that negotiations have been slow and protracted, that talks have been impeded by distrust. It is, rather, that the United States and the Soviet Union seem, for the moment at least, to have given up on the possibility of serious talks. They are, it appears, at the point of abandoning altogether the effort to seek accommodation through negotiation.

WE THUS STAND at a fateful juncture, at the threshold of a period of confrontation, a time when the blunt simplicities of force threaten to displace any other form of discourse between the superpowers. This is an appalling prospect. It is chilling to think that the edgy reflexive brutality manifest in the Soviet downing of the Korean jetliner and the lightheaded appetite for military intervention displayed by the U.S. government in the Caribbean are harbingers of what lies ahead.

Serious negotiations between the superpowers over arms control and other matters of mutual concern, no matter how meager their immediate harvest, hold out hope—the hope that rational discourse will prove equal to the challenge of finding a way out of our nuclear predicament. No doubt there is an element of wishful thinking and denial in this; after all, thus far the talking has done little to impede the momentum of the arms race. But hopelessness is, in its way, no less dangerous than denial. And it is a sense of hopelessness that the current behavior of the superpowers threatens to induce.

The most heartening development of the last few years has been the great upsurge of public concern about the nuclear arms race. Millions throughout the world have become aroused, have undertaken to educate themselves, and sustained by a belief in the power of argument and moral witness, have sought to engage the issue politically. It would be tragic, if they were now to lose heart.

THE MOVING OF THE CLOCK should thus not be construed as a counsel of despair. It is an expression of alarm, a warning, a call to attention. Let us also make it an occasion for rededication to the effort to bring the resources of our culture—language and rational argument, the methods of science and the lessons of history—to bear on the arms race. The odds may be long. But it is our deepest conviction, as scientists and citizens, that there is no other way. □

— The Editors

