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A SUMMIT FANTASY

“The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave.”

George Washington, *Farewell Address*

Anyone who can add and subtract—and that includes everyone except officials of our national government, both Republicans and Democrats—should be able to figure out that there is no way of solving our domestic economic problems with trillions of dollars going into military expenditures.

With that much money spent on the production of nonconsumable goods, there is no way of substantially reducing the budget deficits, even if taxes were raised and welfare payments were cut back even further; no way of bringing interest rates down; no way of checking inflation; no way of restoring the prosperity of our

peace-time economy; no way of lifting every American family above the level of destitution.

Other positive measures will be necessary for our economic recovery, especially to increase productivity and to reduce unemployment, but unless we first take the negative step of cutting back military expenditures to the level needed solely for national defense (defense against military aggression), the positive measures, however well devised, will not do the trick.

National defense is one thing; an escalating competitive arms race is quite another. The amount of money needed for the one is miniscule compared with the amount needed for the other.

How, then, can we avoid spending trillions in an effort to keep ahead or abreast of the Soviet Union in a nuclear arms race that terrifies our allies and threatens the peace of the world, not to mention the survival of the human race?

Can we bow out of the arms race? Maybe, I said to myself, maybe some President of the United States could talk straight from the shoulder to his opposite number in the Kremlin. I cannot image Mr. Reagan doing that at a summit with Mr. Breshnev, but those two will not last forever. Maybe some future president, perhaps the very next one, could arrange to do it at a summit confined to a duet between the two heads of state, held as far as possible from Moscow and Washington, under the enchanting influence of Bora Bora, perhaps.

Maybe...maybe...What would the President say? Might it not go something like this?

“I wish to inform you, Mr. Chairman, that the United States is withdrawing from its nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. We will reduce our military expenditures to those required for national defense, in the strictest sense of that term—the use of land, naval, and air forces to repel invaders and to counteract threats of imminent invasion. We will no longer attempt to match the Soviet Union in nuclear power, so that we can retaliate in kind if you strike first.

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Chairman, just between you and me, I do not believe that your build-up of offensive nuclear weapons was ever intended to accomplish a devastating first strike. How would you profit from our total destruction, even if you did not suffer like destruction in return?

“I think I have guessed your secret. You have inveigled us into this arms race in order to ruin our private property, free enterprise capitalist economy. There are ominous signs that you are succeeding. Your scenario for our economic collapse is working, but we are going to call a halt to it and turn it around by pulling out of the arms race into which you have drawn us—to do us in without firing a shot.

“May I add, Mr. Chairman, that your economy is showing signs of suffering the same strains. Your destructive efforts in our direction are back-firing. The crushing weight of an escalating nuclear arms race afflicts us both in the same way. The choice of guns over butter has everywhere the same effect—the more guns, the less butter. Don’t you see, Mr. Chairman, that what you are trying to do to us, you are also doing to your own people?”

The Chairman appeared to nod assent, but not decisively enough to be interpreted as an affirmative response. The President went on.

“Withdrawing from the arms race does not mean that we are going to return to the ostrich-like insolationism of the America Firsters before the Second World War. We look forward to peaceful cooperation with other nations in all efforts to solve our common global problems.

“The smile on your face, Mr. Chairman, betrays your thought. You are thinking that fear will prevent us taking this step. Fear of what? Fear that you will conquer us? Fear that you will over-run our allies in Western Europe if we withdraw from Nato? Fear that we will regret giving you a free hand in the Near East, in India and Southeast Asia, in Africa, and even in Central and South America?

“No, Mr. Chairman, we have no such fears, for they are all without foundation. Our allies in Europe are quite capable of taking care of themselves in relation to the Soviet Union. They will rejoice in having their independence restored. As for the rest of the world, they are also free to choose between your way of life and ours; and if they choose yours, so much the worse for them, but not for us.

“The existence of a communist economy in China with almost a billion people constitutes no threat to us. Why should the existence of similar economies in other populous parts of the world threaten us?

“With military expenditures reduced to the Japanese level, we think we can outproduce Japan and regain our leadership among industrial nations.” Here the Chairman smiled for the third time, but his face froze fast as the President continued. “We have no doubt that, with the burden of the arms race lifted from its shoulders, Soviet Union, or anywhere else, especially if these other nations are foolish enough to divert their productive forces away from consumables.

“Why, Mr. Chairman, why would you be foolish enough to continue in that direction? Our change of policy, our withdrawal from Nato, the dismantling of our foreign bases, must persuade you, if anything can, to give up the myth of encirclement. Far from trying to encircle you, we are not even trying to contain communism.”

At this point, the Chairman’s eyes were open wide, staring, apparently, into the future. The President brought his speech to a conclusion.

“May I be so bold, Mr. Chairman, as to recommend to you and the Politburo that you follow our example and dismantle your swashbuckling nuclear armaments? No more Salt talks with all their intricate and unintelligible calculations of who has what, where, and why. That gets us no place. Instead, let us both de-escalate down to the minimum needed for reasonable defense of our national borders. If you do not go along with us, we will go ahead alone. So much the worse for you. How about it, Mr. Chairman?

A very long pause. A broad smile. Then, in a deep, almost guttural tone, “Yes, Mr. President, I think you make sense. You may be right. Maybe we should do the same thing, maybe...maybe...”

Two jiggers of ice-cold vodka raised in a toast to the triumph of reason. And then I woke up.



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