PSYCHOLOGICAL MISTAKES AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Morton Deutsch

Bell Telephone Laboratories, Incorporated
Murray Hill, New Jersey

I believe the following points to be true:

(1) A large-scale nuclear war would bring about results that no person in his right mind could want.

(2) When a small war occurs, there is the risk that it could turn into a large war. This risk is made greater by the use of nuclear weapons.

(3) The know-how for making nuclear weapons cannot be destroyed. It will exist as long as mankind exists.

(4) When a nuclear power is faced with a possible major defeat, any war is likely to turn into a large-scale nuclear war, even if nuclear disarmament had previously occurred.

(5) A hostile peace will not long endure.

How do we move from a delicately balanced peace of terror to a sturdy peace of trust? How do we move toward a world community where law and simple human decencies will let mankind enjoy a happier life? These are the main questions which must be answered if the world is to avoid disaster. The world will never again be in a position where it cannot destroy itself.

However, opposing war as a means of solving problems does not mean opposing controversy among nations. Controversy can be helpful. It pre-

\* The views expressed in this paper do not represent, nor are they necessarily similar to, the views of any organization with which the author is affiliated.

This popular edition of a scholarly technical paper has been prepared by George W. Strong with the permission of Dr. Morton Deutsch. All rights reserved.
vents our getting stale.

Because of controversy, we are stimulated to work out answers to problems. Problem-solving is at the heart of changes to better things. So our objective is not to create a world where controversy is gone, rather a world where controversy is civilized; where it is lively rather than deadly.

I do not pretend to have answers to the difficult questions I have asked. I ask them because I have something important to say. I believe it is important to ask these questions. Too often we get turned away from them by a crisis in one place or a threat in another or an election at home.

"But," you say, "What answer can a psychologist have?" A study of war and international affairs has convinced me that some of the main ideas of international relations are psychological. Psychological ideas like "perception," "intention," "value," "hostility," "confidence," "trust," and "suspicion" appear again and again in discussions of war and peace.

My purpose here is to discuss these urgent matters as wisely as I can. I will use the knowledge which I have gained in a research career given to understanding the conditions which affect cooperation. My psychanalytic practice has been to help people overcome ways of thinking and acting which cause personal and social unhappiness.

Can we prevent war?

Is it possible that war must come? Is it true, psychologically, that man needs war in order to express his urge to destroy? True, there have been wars all through human history. In war men have found outlets
for all sorts of psychological drives—adventure, heroism, serving a cause, punishing others. However, psychologists know that just because a "behavior pattern" has lived on for hundreds or thousands of years—it does not mean that pattern must continue. For example, human sacrifice, slavery, witchcraft and child labor have existed through human history, but they have disappeared from modern society.

In 1911, philosopher William James pointed out that militarism and war are not the only means of gaining self-discipline and social togetherness. It is possible to find other means for gaining the same psychological goals. The view that there are different ways to satisfy psychological needs is, of course, a basic idea in modern psychology.

Even though man is psychologically put together the way he is, he can satisfy his drives without war. There is no reason to doubt that his drives can find satisfactory outlets in peaceful actions. Whether aggressiveness, adventurousness, idealism, and bravery take a peaceful or destructive outlet depends on two factors: (1) the social, cultural, and political background of the person, and (2) the socially approved opportunities for action in the community.

Some may say that war provides a more natural, spontaneous, or direct outlet for anger and aggression than any peaceful action. Such a belief is based upon a basic error. The highly mechanized warfare of modern times leaves out most of the direct physical contact between the aggressor and his victim.

War is very much over-rated as an outlet for direct aggression. It does not compare with the directness of reckless automobile driving, a boxing match, or a football game. War is defined to be such a good outlet only because of our cultural conditioning:
1) The military toys children are given to play with,
2) the identifying of heroism and bravery with war in so many novels, TV dramas, and films; and
3) the definition of patriotism in military terms in so many of our public ceremonies and holidays.

Modern war is not personal. It is difficult for one to understand the meaning of his actions when he kills by "remote control". If our airmen were suddenly ordered to fly to the Soviet Union (or if Soviet airmen were ordered to fly to the U.S.) to drop nuclear bombs, most of them would go. Would they follow orders if they had to burn, mutilate, or suffocate their victims one by one?

One danger of modern, impersonal war is that it does not permit the button-pusher to understand psychologically the destruction of his actions. Were he to understand his destruction, his actions might be discouraged rather than encouraged.

**Mistaken Ideas which Lead to War**

Neither war nor peace is psychologically a "must". Continually saying that war must come can bring about a "self-fulfilling prophecy". It makes war more likely. But--continually saying that peace must come does not encourage the tremendous effort necessary to build a lasting peace. A lasting peace has to be invented and built. There is no "must" about it.

A basic point in psychology is that man's action is determined by the world he understands. But his understanding is not always the same as the world which actually is. There are reasons why one's understanding may be twisted. Here are five common causes of mistaken ideas about
life. There are examples of how they work in international relations. How these mistakes can be changed is also pointed out.

1. The understanding of any action includes not only the action itself, but everything which surrounds the action. It is the picture and the picture-frame which count. "You did that extremely well," will be understood one way if a Captain is saying it to a Private, another if a Private is saying it to a Captain.

A common source of twisted understanding results from a mistaken idea or a false understanding of the "picture-frame" or context. The context of an action is often not immediately seen. It may not be obvious. When the context is not obvious, we usually choose a context which seems most likely in terms of our own experience. Two persons witness the same event. Since their experiences may be rather different, it is not surprising that they will choose different contexts. They may describe the same event in very different ways. Misunderstandings of this sort, of course, are very likely when the two persons come from different nations. The standard talk of tourists is funny or embarrassing stories about misunderstanding signs, customs and foreign ways.

First-hand study by some scientists leads them to believe that the Russians and Americans have a similar view of one another. Each says more or less the same things about the other. For example, each one says: "They are the aggressors"; "Their government takes advantage of the people"; "their people do not support the government"; They cannot be trusted"; "their policy is madness".

Mistaken ideas can come about because we do not understand the other's "picture-frame". For instance, the Soviet Union drags its feet on a disarmament agreement with adequate international inspection and
control. Americans say this is a way to block an agreement or to sabotage any agreement which might be worked out. But, under present conditions, an international control group would surely include a majority of non-Communist nations. Decisions on things important to the USSR would be made right along by the control board. But—the majority of the members would come from social and economic systems the USSR considers to be against Russia. When votes would be counted, the capitalist nations would win. The Soviet Union calls this unfair representation, and Russia turns down such proposals.

What would the Americans say if the Soviets could regularly outvote them at the UN or on an international disarmament control board? Would we make an agreement which did not give us a veto? I doubt it.

The twisted view that "the mass of their people are not really in favor of the government" is also based upon an unclear view of each other's total situation. We ask ourselves what if Soviet citizens had the choice of (a) living in Russia if it were like the United States—with a high standard of living and all the freedoms or (a) living in the present day Soviet Union? Which would they choose?

We think the answer is obvious. But, it is the question that is wrong. The right question is between their past and their present and future. Their present and future is surely very much better than their past.

The Soviet citizen says if Americans could choose between (a) living in Russia with a full employment and expanding economy, or (b) living under capitalism in a permanent depression crisis, that we would favor the Soviet Union. Again, it is the question that is wrong.

How can we change misunderstandings of this sort? Obviously, more
communication. A great increase in cultural exchange—scholars, artists, politicians, tourists, and the like. However, we should be aware of the results of psychological research: contacts of short length are more likely to support deeply rooted misunderstandings than remove them. To have any real effect, contacts must be long and personal.

From my research and practice as a psychologist, I believe that to avoid mistaken ideas and misunderstandings each side should be required to state the position of the other side to the other side's complete satisfaction, before either side argues its own position. Certainly this would not answer all problems, but it would help answer those based upon misunderstanding. It forces one to "wear the other fellow's shoes". As a result, it keeps one nation from tossing out for no real reason the other's ideas. This is the strategy followed by the good psychotherapist.

2. Our understanding of the world is often based in "second-hand" information, rather than in our personal experiences. Human communication always chooses what it wants to say or hear. The longer the chain of persons telling about any event, the more simplified and twisted will be the report. We point out the different, unusual, bizarre, controversial, violent, and unexpected. Also, we tell the boss only that information which fits in with the point of view he already has.

Look at international affairs. There are only a small number of American reporters in any country. They are under pressure to report items which (1) catch the reader's interest and (2) agree with the publisher's viewpoint. In a period of cold war, these two conditions do not help to get a clear understanding of what really is going on.

Seeing these dangers, shouldn't we offer to arrange with the
Soviet Union to use our radio and TV and leading newspapers and we use theirs? What can we lose by understanding them the best we can? I am sure plenty of persons would see to it that we were not led astray!

3. Our understanding of the world is often very much controlled by the need to conform with the views of other people. In some communities it would be hard for a person to live if he believed Negroes were his social equals. Or—-if he believed Communist China had some real reasons to complain about the United States. If he acted upon his beliefs, he would be run out of some communities. If he conformed to the ideas of other people without changing his own beliefs, he would have little self-respect.

I believe that most scientists, most specialists in international relations, and many of our political leaders personally favor the admission of Communist China into the UN. They favor our taking the lead in getting normal relations with Communist China.

But, conformity pressures keep silent most of us who favor such a change in policy. The power of conformity in the United States on this issue is very great. It is difficult to talk of Communist China in any ways except those which paint it all evil.

I believe this is an extremely dangerous situation. Without a basic change in United States-Chinese relations the world may be blown up shortly after China has a stockpile of hydrogen bombs. This may take less than ten years.

How can we break through such conformity? Again, psychological research gives the clue. When conformity is broken by even one person, other persons feel more ready to break with the majority. The lesson is clear. Those who disagree must say so. Their beliefs must be heard by others. There may be more such disagreement than they think.
4. Psychological research shows that persons want to see the world in the same light that they see themselves. If a person feels afraid, he tends to see the world as frightening. If he feels angry, he is likely to see it as frustrating or unjust. If he feels weak, he is likely to see it as powerful. If he is torn by self-doubt and self-conflict, he likely believes the world is against him.

Not only does a person usually see the world so that it makes his feelings and beliefs seem right,—he does the same for his actions. If a person is a heavy smoker, he is likely to consider cigarette smoking as not so harmful. If he drives a car and injures a pedestrian, he is likely to blame the pedestrian. If he is the pedestrian, he is likely to blame the driver.

In addition, a person wants to see all parts of his world as agreeable with one another. Thus, if somebody likes you, you expect him to dislike someone who dislikes you. If somebody disagrees with you, you may expect him to agree with someone who disagrees with you.

The danger of the pressure for self-agreement is that it often leads to a too simple black-white view of the world. Take, for instance, the idea that since the United States and the Soviet Union are opposed in some ways, we must be opposed to anything that the Communists want. We say any nation that wants friendly relations with the Soviet Union is opposed to the United States.

But, see how we can get trapped in this game. If the Soviet Union is against colonialism in Africa, must we be for it? If nations in Latin America wish to establish friendly relations with the Communist nations, must we feel threatened? If Canada ships food to Communist China must we suspect her loyalty to us? Nations which are not "for" us—are they necessarily "for" the Russians?
If a person answers these questions "yes", he believes that the cold war can end only by the total defeat of Russia or America. But is it not possible that the cold war can be worked out so that both sides are better off than they are now? If it can, then perhaps what benefits the Soviet Union may be a real help in keeping the cold war from turning hot.

The pressure for self-agreement often leads to unbending ideas. It is very hard to change our minds "in public"—because we fear loss of face. I believe this is part of our problem about the admission of Communist China to the United Nations. And the same holds for American policies toward Cuba. We are frozen into ideas which do not allow for new conditions. Americans believe a change of mind would be admitting our mistake—which could lead to a loss of face.

What can we do to avoid self-agreeing in little minds and unbending false pride? These dangers to careful judgement are most likely when a person feels under threat. He feels his self-esteem is at stake. I think then it is wise to seek the advice of trusted friends who are not so emotionally involved in the issues. Thus, I think it would be wise to talk with such nations as Brazil, France, and Great Britain on American policy toward Cuba and Communist China. They do not have the mix-up with these countries that Americans do. We could talk with more or less neutral nations like India, Sweden, Austria, and Nigeria. They could help the U.S. from getting a black-white view of the Russians.

5. Misunderstandings come from what psychologists call the "mote-beam mechanism". This means seeing things in others which we do not see in ourselves. Thus, things are seen as though they were only to be found in others. The differences between the others and ourselves
are made stronger. Since the things we do not want to see in ourselves (but do look for in others) are usually bad things, the mote-beam mechanism makes the other person look shameful or evil. Many Americans who live in the North easily recognize the shameful racial discrimination and segregation in the South. They do not see a clear picture of racial discrimination in their own communities.

In international relations it is easy to recognize the lack of freedom in the Soviet Union. We see Russian control in Eastern Europe. We complain about her veto in the United Nations. But do we see similar defects in the United States?

In many states most Negroes are not allowed to vote. The U.S. for a long time has had much control over Latin America. Our history is one of unfair treatment of the American Indian. We are stubborn in the UN, making believe that the representative from Taiwan is the representative of Mainland China. Since the mote-beam mechanism works on both sides, there is a tendency for each side to see the other as having no morals.

The mote-beam mechanism grows on a readiness to find fault, rather than to understand what makes the problem. Psychoanalytic work says that the ability to understand, rather than to find fault, comes from how a person uses his pride. Understanding is based on an ability to handle a problem. It is based on one's sense of purpose in overcoming his own defects.

I suggest that the United States won't need to overlook its shortcomings or to find fault with others when its society is really trying to get rid of defects and is dedicated to common purposes.
"Don't Confuse Me with the Facts..."

There are three major reasons why persons want to hang on to twisted or mistaken ideas.

1. **Major psychological value has been put in the mistaken idea.** Therefore, the person expects that giving up the idea requires tremendous personal change. This might mean insecurity and the loss of social face. The change could bring about unknown dangers. Therapy with neurotic patients shows that no matter how painful it is, a twisted but familiar idea is hard to give up. Not until the patient has enough self-confidence or confidence in his analyst will he begin to make changes.

In international relations, I think we have to say that a disarmed world—a world without violence as a means of bringing about changes—would be a changed world. It would be a world where some would feel that their tightly-held interests might be taken away. For example I am sure that many military men, scientists, industrialists, workers, and investors fear a disarmed world. They believe their skills and knowledge will become obsolete. They believe they will lose social status. They believe they will lose dollars. These fears must be answered carefully. If they are not, they could encourage an angry and armed world.

I suggest that we must carefully see in advance the psychological problems in the change to a peaceful, disarmed world. I recommend that we build a "policy of overcompensation" for those who might be badly affected. We want to change their psychological values from ones of military force to ones of peaceful purpose.

2. **Certain twisted ideas hold on because they lead a person into a communication blackout.** This is especially true when the mistaken
idea leads to an intense dislike for someone or something. In international relations, intense dislikes between the U.S. and Communist China have cut communications. This eliminates a possibility for a change in attitudes.

3. Twisted views are held on to because they can bring about new actions which make the false idea come true. This is called a "self-fulfilling prophecy." The terrible truth is that the self-fulfilling prophecy brings on more and more mistakes. The prophet will show the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.

The power of the self-fulfilling prophecy helps to explain personal problems. There is the anxious student who is afraid he might fail. He worries so much that he cannot study, and he does fail. It also helps our understanding of social problems. We see how prejudice and discrimination against the Negro keeps him in a place which seems to make right the prejudice and discrimination.

So too in international relations. The representatives of East and West believe that war is likely. One side increases its missiles. The other side follows with missile increases. This "proves" to the first nation that it was "right" all along. The power of the arms race shows that the self-fulfilling prophecies reinforce one another.