Undoing Nuclear Insanity:
A Psychological Perspective

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During the past twenty-five years, social scientists have been studying conflicts of various sorts. As a result, we are beginning to understand malignant social processes. This understanding can help us to undo the increasingly dangerous and costly nuclear insanity of the superpowers. In a malignant process, the participants get enmeshed in a web of interactions and defensive–offensive maneuvers which worsen instead of improve their situations, making them more insecure, vulnerable and burdened.

I believe that the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are malignant and that it is vital to recognize that their pathological social process is relentlessly pushing us all closer to a nuclear holocaust in which, as someone noted, "the survivors might well envy the dead." Both the United States and the Soviet Union have spent and plan to continue to spend additional hundreds of billions of dollars on nuclear weapon systems in the illusion that it will be possible to "prevail" over the other in a nuclear war. Each, of course, wants to be in the position to prevail. However, the enormous sums already spent on nuclear weapons have worsened the situations of both sides: it has increased the chances of a nuclear holocaust and it has seriously wounded the economies of both nations.

Sane and intelligent people, once they are enmeshed in a pathological social process, engage in actions which seem to them
completely rational and necessary but which a detached, objective observer would readily identify as contributing to the perpetuation and intensification of a vicious cycle of interactions. We have all seen this happen in married couples or in parent-adolescent relations where the individual people are otherwise decent and rational. They trap themselves into a vicious social process which leads to outcomes—hostility, estrangement, violence—which no one really wants. So this can happen with nations: otherwise sane, intelligent leaders of the superpowers have allowed their nations to become involved in a malignant process which is driving them to engage in actions and reactions that are steadily increasing the chances of a nuclear war—an outcome no one wants. In such a process, both sides are right in coming to believe that the other is hostile and malevolent: the interactions and attitudes which develop in those involved in such a process provide ample justification for such beliefs.

The Characteristics of Malignant Social Process

Here, I want to describe some insights that social science research is developing about malignant social processes, to indicate how the superpowers seem enmeshed in one, and to suggest some ideas for getting out of it. A number of key elements which contribute to the development and perpetuation of such processes are depicted below.

Involvement in an anarchic social situation. There are social situations which do not allow the possibility of "rational" behavior so long as the conditions for social order or mutual trust do not exist. Social scientists have conducted many experiments with such situations.
A typical one that I have used in my research involves two people who play a game, called "The Prisoners Dilemma." Each player has to choose between pressing a green or red button. If both press their respective green buttons, each will win $1; if both press their red buttons, each will lose $1; if one presses red and the other presses green, the one who presses red will win $2 while the one who presses green will lose $2. Each player is "tempted" to press his red button: by doing so, he earns the most ($2 rather than $1, if the other presses green) or loses the least ($1 rather than $2, if the other presses red). Most pairs of players in such situations end up pressing their red buttons and both lose money. Yet they could both win money, if they could have mutual confidence that neither fear nor greed will lead the other to press his red button.

Research by social scientists indicates that when confronted with such social dilemmas, individuals can only avoid being trapped in a mutually reinforcing, self-defeating cycle by attempting to change the situation so that a basis of social order or mutual trust can be developed. Thus, in a Prisoners Dilemma experiment, if a third party is introduced who has the power to enforce agreements that both players make to choose green, then their confidence in the social arrangement of an enforceable contract will enable them to resolve their dilemma. Also, in such a situation, if the players are given information which lead them to believe that they have similar basic values and attitudes, they will usually develop sufficient mutual trust to cooperate in choosing green.

The current security dilemmas facing the superpowers result from the kind of situation captured in the Prisoners Dilemma game. A
characteristic feature of such "nonrational" situations is that an attempt by any individual or nation to increase its own security (without regard to the security of the others) is self-defeating. For example, consider the United States' decision to develop and test the hydrogen bomb so as to maintain a military superiority over the USSR rather than to seek an agreement to ban its testing and, thus, prevent a spiraling arms race. This decision led the Soviet Union to attempt to catch-up. Soon, both superpowers were stockpiling H-bombs. U.S. leaders believed that if the Soviets had been the first to develop the H-bomb, they would have tested it and sought to reap the advantages from doing so: undoubtedly, they were right. Both sides are aware of the temptations that the other has to increase its security "by getting ahead". The fear of "falling behind" as well as the temptation to "get ahead" leads to a pattern of interactions that increases insecurity on both sides.

Comprehension of the basic reality that nuclear war would be mutually devastating suggests that mutual security rather than national security should be our objective. The basic military axiom for both the East and West should be that military actions should only be taken which increase the military security of both sides; military actions which give a military superiority to one side or the other should be avoided. The military forces of both sides should be viewed as having the common primary aim of preventing either side (even one's own) from starting a deliberate or accidental war. How? By regular meetings of military leaders from East and West; by establishing a continuing, joint technical group of experts to work together to formulate disarmament and inspection plans; by positioning mixed military units on each other's
territory, etc. Crucially, we both must recognize that if military inferiority is dangerous, so is military "superiority"; it is dangerous for either to feel tempted or frightened into military action. Neither the U.S. nor the USSR should want its weapons or the other's to be vulnerable to a first strike. Similarly, neither side should want the other to have its command, control, and communication systems become so ineffective that the decision to use nuclear weapons will be in the hands of individual, uncontrolled units.

**Competitive orientation.** Using many experimental formats and diverse ways of inducing competition, social psychologists have shown that if the participants in a conflict see it as a win-lose, competitive situation, the resulting malignant social process will tend to perpetuate and, indeed, escalate the conflict. In one series of studies, we employed a two-person bargaining situation in which each person owned a trucking firm and earned $1 each time his or her truck delivered merchandise to a specified destination. The cost of the truck's trip was a function of its duration; if it took much time, the truck could lose money. Each firm had two routes to its destination: a long, two-lane alternate route that took much time and a short, main route. The mid-section of the main route was only one lane wide. The two trucks went in opposite directions so if both went on the main route, they would meet on the one-lane section. The bargaining problem was "who would back down" and let the other go through first. We stimulated competition by promising a bonus to the bargainer who earned the most money and by other methods also.

This research has demonstrated that the characteristics of a competitive conflict process are:
a.) Communication between the conflicting parties is unreliable and impoverished. Poor communication enhances the possibility of error and misinformation, reinforcing preexisting stereotypes and expectations toward the other. Most important, there is impaired ability to respond to the other's shifts away from a win-lose orientation.

b.) The view is stimulated that the solution of the conflict can only be imposed by one side or the other by means of superior force, deception, or cleverness. The attempt by each of the conflicting parties to create or maintain a power superiority tends to change the focus from the immediate issue in dispute to the more abstract issue of "power" for its own sake.

c.) A suspicious, hostile attitude develops that increases the sensitivity to differences and threats while minimizing the awareness of similarities. Such an attitude permits behavior toward the other that would be considered outrageous if directed toward someone like oneself.

In spite of public statements of the leaders of the two superpowers that define the conflict as a confrontation of two irreconcilable ideologies, and it is apparent that basic ideological differences do exist, their conflict need not be viewed as inherently a win-lose, cut-throat struggle. Neither the Soviet nor American ideology is consistent nor operational enough to guide action in the day-to-day decisions which shape history. Furthermore, both ideologies are vague. Their vagueness provides ample room for both the United States and the Soviet Union (or China) to find a basis of amicable relations.

The resurgence of the Cold War has intensified our perception of ideological differences, but in light of internal conflicts within both
"East" and "West" (the Sino-Soviet break and the trade disputes among the Western nations), we have an opportunity to revise our images of the so-called "struggle between Communism and freedom". The intensity of the current ideological struggle primarily reflects an outdated power struggle between two continental superpowers that have defined their prestige and security in terms of world leadership. The emergence of such a power struggle between the U.S. and Russia was predicted by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 and by others long before Russia adopted a communist ideology.

Historically, the quest for world power has been closely bound to strivings for national security, economic dominance, and international prestige or influence. It has commonly taken the form of the attempt to establish military supremacy over one's major competitors, but the drive for military dominance in the nuclear age is dangerously anachronistic. So too, crude economic imperialism no longer provides as much opportunity for economic gain as does scientific research and development. However, the quest for international power and influence can be reasonable for all societies. Later, I discuss fair rules for such competition.

Inner conflict within the parties. Although competitive conflict is necessary for long-lasting malignant conflict, it is not sufficient. The considerable experience of psychotherapists working with troubled couples indicates that malignant conflicts persist because of the internal needs of the conflicting parties. In a vicious circle, the malignant conflict may itself intensify the internal needs which support the conflict. For example, a husband and wife, each of whom has a deep sense of personal failure may each provoke the other to be abusive: the
other's abusiveness provides a rationalization for one's failure but being victimized also intensifies one's sense of failure.

There is little doubt that the superpower conflict has served important internal functions for the ruling establishments in the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet establishment has justified the continuation of its autocratic form of government, the Russian domination of the other nationalities in the Soviet Union, its control of the nations of Eastern Europe, and its subordination of communist parties in other countries in terms of its struggle against "capitalist imperialism". Under the guise of anti-communism, the U.S. establishment has justified its intervention in other countries to promote the interests of American business; it has supported the continuation and growth of the military-industrial complex; it has rationalized governmental secrecy so that many important governmental decisions are made without informed public discussion; and it has inhibited the development of significant and sustained political opposition to the policies of the national security establishment.

Hopefully, there is growing recognition within each superpower that the escalating dangers and costs of the arms race are dwarfing the gains from having an external devil. Obviously, many of the internal problems of both superpowers would be lessened if they were not engaged in such extravagantly non-productive expenditures as are involved in their arms race.

Misjudgment and misperceptions. Most people and groups have an egoistic bias toward perceiving their behavior toward the other as being more well-intentioned and legitimate than the other's behavior toward them. For example, research has shown that American students view
American espionage activities in the Soviet Union as more well-motivated than similar activities by Soviet agents in the United States. If each side in a conflict perceives its own motives and behavior as more benevolent and justified than those of the other side, the conflict is apt to spiral upward in intensity. Such bias leads to a parallel bias in what is considered to be an equitable agreement for resolving conflict. This makes agreement more difficult and thus extends conflict. Some of the difficulties the United States and the Soviet Union have in reaching agreements on arms control reflect their egoistic biases.

There are, of course, other types of processes leading to misjudgments. The intensification of conflict may induce tension beyond a moderate optimal level. This can impair cognitive processes in several ways. It may reduce the range of perceived alternatives, induce one to focus on the immediate rather than the long-term consequences of one's actions, polarize thought so that percepts take on a simplistic cast of being black or white, for or against, good or evil, increase defensiveness, and enhance the pressures for social conformity. Excessive tension or cognitive rigidity reduces the intellectual resources available for discovering new ways of coping with a problem or resolving a conflict. Intensification of conflict is the likely result as simplistic thinking and the polarization of thought pushes the participants to view their alternatives as being limited to victory or defeat.

There are three basic ways to reduce the misjudgments and misperceptions that typically occur during the course of conflict: (a) Making explicit the assumptions and evidence which underlie them and
examining how likely they were to have been influenced by any of the common sources of error; (b) Bringing in friendly, objective outsiders, to see whether their perceptions of the situation are in agreement or disagreement with one's own. The outsiders should have the independence to ensure that they are free to form their own views and the stature to be able to communicate them so that they will be heard. When this is unfeasible, the use of internal "devil's advocates" has been recommended as a way of challenging the assumptions and evidence underlying one's judgments. Here, too, it is important that the devil's advocates be sufficiently independent and prestigious to present hard challenges that cannot be ignored; (c) There are agreements that can be made with one's adversary to reduce the chances of malignant misjudgment of one another during conflict such as promoting continuing informal contact, and providing for regular feedback from the other of the other's interpretations of one's communications.

Unwitting Commitments. During the course of a malignant social process, the actions that the parties take may strengthen the beliefs that have given rise to the actions, committing the parties to their beliefs unwittingly. This well-investigated psychological process is termed "dissonance reduction". For example, in explaining his opposition to an American proposal made shortly before Pearl Harbor that Japan withdraw its troops from China, Prime Minister Tojo said, "We sent a large force of one million men [to China] and it has cost us well over 100,000 dead and wounded, [the grief of] their bereaved families, hardships for four years, and a national expenditure of several tens of billions of yen. We must by all means get satisfactory results from this." Similarly, the belief by leaders of the American government that
the Soviet Union would do us in militarily if it could leads to actions, such as intensifying our military build-up, that will, in turn, produce increased psychological commitment to the belief: after deciding to build the MX missile, doubts about the beliefs which support the decision will be reduced.

Self-fulfilling Prophecies. Social scientists have identified "self-fulfilling prophecies" as one of the most important mechanisms involved in pathological social processes. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, distortions are perpetuated because they evoke behavior which makes the originally false conception come true. You hear the false rumor that a friend is saying nasty things about you, you snub him; he then bad mouths you, confirming your expectation. Similarly, if the policy-makers of East and West believe that war is likely and either attempts to increase its military security vis-à-vis the other, the other's response will justify the initial move. The dynamics of an arms race has the inherent quality of a "folie a deux", wherein the self-fulfilling prophecies mutually reinforce one another. As a result, both superpowers are right to think that the other is provocative, dangerous, and malevolent. Each side, however, is blind to how its own policies and behavior have contributed to the development of the other's hostile attitudes. If each superpower would recognize its own part in maintaining their malignant relations, it could lead to a reduction of mutual blaming and an increase in mutual problem-solving.

Gamesmanship. What is so seductive about nuclear weapons and the scenarios of nuclear war that the strategists and decision-makers in both of the superpowers seem drawn to them like moths to a flame? There are so many dimensions of power—economic, political, cultural,
scientific, sports, educational, etc.—in which the power struggle could be played out. What is the special fascination to playing the international power game with nuclear weapons?

There are two key psychological features that make the power game with nuclear toys a supergame. The game is very tidy and abstract; and it has a tremendous emotional kick for those with strong power drives: the stakes are high (the fate of the earth is at risk), decisions have to be made quickly (there is no time for indecisiveness), and nuclear weapons are super, concentrated power.

To play the game, each side has to make assumptions about how its own weapons (as well as how its command, control, and communication systems) will operate in various hypothetical future nuclear war scenarios as well as how the other side's will operate. There is, of course, very little basis in actual experience for making accurate, reliable, or valid assumptions about these matters since none of these weapons or systems have been tested or employed in circumstances even remotely resembling the situation of any imaginable nuclear war. However, for the nuclear game to be played and for scenarios to be developed, assumptions about these matters have to be made. Once these assumptions have been made and have, by consensus, been accepted within one side's strategic group, they become psychologically "real" and are treated as "hard facts", no matter how dubious their grounding in actual realities. These "psychological realities" and dubious "hard facts" are then used as a basis for further decisions in the strategic game of preparing for the eventuality of nuclear war. These decisions may entail potential expenditures of hundreds of billions of dollars for new nuclear weapons—as, for instance, on the MX missile and the B-1
bomber—which will require the strategic gamesman on the other side to respond (also based on their "psychological realities" and dubious "hard facts") in a way which will prevent them from "losing" the nuclear war game. Citizens and elected officials must vigorously challenge the dubious "hard facts" underlying the "psychological realities" of the strategic gamesmen on both sides.

What can be done to reverse the malignant social process I have described, and how can we begin to reduce the dangers resulting from the military gamesmanship and security dilemmas of the superpowers? Let me address the latter question first.

A bold and courageous leadership in the United States would take a risk for peace. It would announce its determination to end the insane arms race. It would offer to agree on a package of "no first use of nuclear weapons," a non-aggression pact between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, a substantial reduction and equalization of the opposing conventional forces in Europe, and a verifiable freeze on further research, development, testing, and production of nuclear weapons.

At the same time the United States would initiate a GRIT process: GRIT stands for "graduated reciprocation in tension reduction", a psychological strategy for reducing international tension articulated by Professor Charles Osgood of the University of Illinois, a former President of the American Psychological Association. We would announce a unilateral reduction of, for example, 10 percent of our existing nuclear weapons and would invite the USSR and other nations to verify that they were being destroyed. We would request the USSR to reciprocate. We have such an excess of nuclear weapons that we could
afford to make several rounds of unilateral cuts in case the Soviets did not initially reciprocate, without losing our capacity to destroy Soviet society, even if they were to attack us first. Such repeated unilateral initiatives, if sincere in their intent and execution, would place the Soviet Union under the strongest pressure to reciprocate.

President Kennedy in his "Strategy for Peace" address on June 10, 1963 initiated something like a GRIT process by announcing a unilateral halt to all atmospheric nuclear tests, in the context of asking Americans to reexamine their attitudes toward the Cold War. This politically courageous action led the Russians to reciprocate and the superpowers agreed to end their atmospheric nuclear tests permanently. If American leaders could now show similar wisdom and courage, we might replace the arms race with a peace race.

Undoing the malignant social process

Arms control and disarmament agreement are only a first step: since the ability to make nuclear weapons will continue to exist—forever—we must remove the malignancy from the relations between the superpowers and eliminate any possibility that such a condition could develop among other great powers. A major way to do so would be the development of fair rules for international competition.

Fair rules. As Professor Amitai Etzioni, a distinguished political sociologist, has indicated, a set of rules would include such principles as the following: No non-aligned country would be allowed to have military ties with other countries, particularly not with any of the major powers; no foreign troops or foreign bases or foreign arms of any sort would be permitted to remain in or enter the non-aligned country;
creation of a United Nations observer force consisting largely of personnel from non-aligned countries and equipped with the necessary scientific equipment and facilities (including satellites) to check the borders, ports, airfields, roads, railroads, etc., would be deployed at the request of any of the major powers or by the Secretary-General of the United Nations; violations of the arms embargo—once certified by an appropriate UN Tribunal—would set in motion a cease and desist order aimed at the sender of arms or troops and a disarm order aimed at the receiver. Lack of compliance with such orders would result in appropriate sanctions—e.g., a trade and communications embargo, a blockade, the use of armed forces. Suppose some such rules could, in fact, be established, what effects might be expected? Clearly, the revolutionary ferment would not disappear. Communist governments might take power in some countries but they would have to obtain and remain in power without foreign military aid and they would not be able to provide military assistance to Communists in other countries. Such a government may be a tragedy to its people but we would fulfill our moral responsibility if we were to develop and enforce rules that could prevent outside military aid from forclosing the possibility that the people will overthrow a government that is obnoxious to them.

An agreement on fair rules for competition will require the governments that sell arms to other countries to give up this lucrative form of trade. Currently, it amounts to about $25 - $35 billion a year of which NATO countries originate somewhere over half, the Warsaw Pact countries about 40 percent. The Western bloc and the Soviet bloc should agree to end the arms peddling business: it is an even more destructive form of trade than drug peddling.
Developing a Cooperative Framework

A cooperative framework must be developed to resist the debilitating effects of the inevitable disputes associated with any system of rules. How can this be done? The psychological key to the development of cooperation can be stated very simply. It is the provision of repeated and varied opportunities for mutually beneficial interactions. One of the most well-established principles in psychology is the tendency for people to seek out and to repeat activities that they find rewarding.

Our reluctance to trade with the Soviet Union and our unsuccessful attempts to get our allies to limit their trade with them are indicators of an underlying view which hampers the attempt to strengthen cooperative bonds and fosters a malignant relation: the notion that anything which helps them hurts us and anything which harms them helps us. Clearly, it helps them if their children have available Sabin polio vaccine. But, does this harm us? Assuredly, it harms them if they are forced into a costly arms race but does this help us? If we were to refuse to sell grain to the Soviet Union, it would be harmful to them but would we gain in any meaningful way?

For many, appeasement and cooperation are equated. They feel that the only credible stance toward an adversary is a self-righteous, belligerent counter-hostility. However, there is a more productive stance: one that combines firmness and cooperativeness. One can communicate both a firm, tough resolve not to allow oneself to be abused, intimidated, or rendered defenseless and a willingness to cooperate to mutual benefit.

"Firmness" in contrast to "belligerence" aborts the development of
vicious spirals. It is, of course difficult to resist the temptation to respond with belligerence to provocations; it requires a good deal of self-confidence not to have to demonstrate that one is "man enough" to be tough, that one isn't "chicken". It is just this kind of firm, non-belligerent, self-confident, cooperative attitude which our experimental research indicates is most effective in inducing cooperation even when the other is initially hostile and provocative.

Can we adopt such an attitude? Our defensiveness is high. Throughout most of our history, we have been in the uniquely fortunate position of having pretty much our own way in foreign affairs. Initially, this was due to our powerful isolated position in the Americas and since World War II we have been the leading world power. We face a loss of status. We can no longer be isolated from the physical danger of a major war nor can we remain the uniquely, powerful nation. The Soviet Union, the nations of Western Europe, as well as other nations will not continue to grant the United States the uncontested primacy we had for several decades after World War II. We have to adjust our aspirations to the changing realities or suffer a constant frustration.

From what psychology has learned about malignant social processes, we have reason to believe that a nuclear holocaust is not inevitable. Such a process can be reversed if we recognize clearly its underlying irrationality and are willing to make the sincere, sustained effort necessary to substitute more constructive ways of managing our international conflicts.