OLD DOGS AND NEW TRICKS: DISARMAMENT AND ALTERNATIVES TO WAR

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The world population is growing, and the environment is deteriorating. The developed nations consume an immense fraction of the world's energy and resources, while many underdeveloped nations remain in poverty. Last year, the world spent over $600 billion on military forces and weaponry — that's about $1 million per minute, and represents about 5% of the world's gross national product. If this money and manpower were diverted into productive economic endeavors, or health and educational programs, much of the disparity between nations could be reduced, and programs to regulate population growth and preserve environmental resources could be made effective. However, as a world and as a nation, we go on packing more and more explosives into the powder kegs and increase the tensions that could easily ignite the fuse. The catastrophic consequences of any war that pushed the superpowers over the nuclear threshold are well known. Humanity simply must disarm, and work out peaceable ways to resolve international conflict; otherwise, it may never even have the chance to work on the world's long-term problems. But the rhetoric of war flourishes, and the arms race goes on and on and on. How can one possibly be optimistic?

As I see it, students of operant behavior have reason to be professional optimists. We can teach old dogs new tricks, especially if we can identify and change the variables that maintain old tricks. We have taught social interaction to chronic schizophrenics, imitation to autistics, and complex discriminations to pigeons. We need that optimism and those skills to alter the suicidal course of our species.

For present purposes, the "old dogs" are the dogs of war — or, more exactly, the nation states that prepare war against each other. The "new tricks" that are needed are effective international cooperative behavior to control weaponry and warmaking, and to redirect our resources to reduce economic inequities. Our leaders are persisting in old tricks, arming "to maintain peace" while pursuing disarmament negotiations. As behaviorists, we are likelier than most to consider actions and their effects, rather than statements of intention or interpretation, and to propose new strategies on the basis of results (or their lack). I will argue today that these old tricks have failed, and that disarmament and survival require alternative approaches.

Consider the history of disarmament negotiations, which I will summarize briefly. The first international disarmament conference was called by Czar Nicholas II in 1898. In his manifesto, he said: "The intellectual and physical strength of nations, labor and capital alike, have been unproductively consumed in building terrible engines of destruction" . . . (The arms race is) "transforming the armed peace into a crushing burden that weighs on all nations and if prolonged will lead inevitably to the very cataclysm which it is desired to avert." Does this sound familiar? It could easily have been said by a delegate to the United Nations second session on disarmament in June 1982.

The conference convened at the Hague in 1899, with much public acclaim. But the ministers representing the major governments were openly skeptical. I offer some representative quotations from 1899, culled from Tuchman (1966).

"As to restrictions on the development of new weapons, it is doubtful if an international agreement could prove effective."

"Proposals not to transform guns or increase their calibers must fail because new guns can be manufactured and stored until needed."

"Any form of international control would be an invasion of sovereignty."

"It would be ideal if this peace and disarmament idea were wrecked on another nation's objections without our having to appear in the foreground."

"The (real) work of the conference (to avoid any restraint on armaments) must be covered with a cloak of peace."

At least some delegates obviously considered the conference to be a public-relations effort rather than a major attempt to solve one of humanity's most difficult problems. Despite these expressions by the delegates, some agreements were achieved. The dum dum bullet was banned; development of balloon-launched projectiles was stopped for 5 years; and asphyxiating gases were banned (over a solitary dissenting vote by the USA). A second conference in 1907 confirmed these understandings and worked out new rules of naval warfare, but their ineffectiveness was obvious when WWI erupted a few years later.

More conferences followed after WWI. The League of Nations strove to limit the post-war growth of armaments, but the treaties negotiated under its auspices were ineffec-

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tive. For example, the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 committed its signatories, including France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the US, to renounce war, and the No Force Declaration of 1933 committed Britain, France, Germany, and Italy to refrain from the use of force to resolve disputes. These were hailed as major achievements, but within a few years, Manchuria, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, and Pearl Harbor were struck by violent attacks and the cataclysm of WWII ensued.

The development of nuclear weapons, which pose the ultimate threat of extinction, should increase the urgency and effectiveness of disarmament negotiations, but it has not. Fourteen treaties to control the testing and proliferation of nuclear weapons have been negotiated since 1959, all include the US and the USSR as signatories. Some of the specific agreements have been effective: for example, neither superpower has conducted atmospheric tests since the 1963 test-ban treaty, and neither has violated the provisions limiting the magnitude of underground tests since the 1974 threshold test ban treaty. However, the 1963 treaty pledging “discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons” has been followed by 20 years of vigorous underground testing, and the nonproliferation treaty of 1968 pledging “cessation of the nuclear arms race” has been followed by 15 years of steadily increasing numbers of increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons on both sides.

Nuclear arms-control and disarmament negotiations have been accompanied by commentary that is strikingly similar to that of the prenuclear age. For example, Paul Nitze, a leading arms-control negotiator, said in 1950: “To rally public support for rearmament, it is recommended that US leaders constantly put forth reasonable-sounding disarmament proposals which the Soviets are unlikely to accept. Of course, should the Russians show unexpected flexibility, we would have to consider very seriously whether we could accept such agreements.” (Quoted from Scheer, 1983.) Some thirty years later, Kenneth Adelman, President Reagan’s nominee to head the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, was quoted (Science, 1983) as saying “I can’t think of any negotiations on security or weaponry that have done any good . . . (Arms talks) would be unlikely to result in success . . . My policy would be to do it for political reasons . . .” Not much seems to have changed since 1899.

In December 1982, Adelman cast the sole dissenting vote on a comprehensive test ban treaty in the United Nations. He was, of course, acting on instructions, but at least his vote was consistent with his view of the futility of general arms-control agreements.

The historical conclusion is that verbal behavior, in the form of treaties resulting from disarmament conferences, has had little effect on the warlike behavior of nations. A few highly specific prohibitions have been effective, but negotiations to achieve “general and complete disarmament” and to “put an end to war” have failed. No behavior analyst would pursue a behavior modification program that had so little effect for so many years, and the political leadership is equally likely to be discouraged by failure.

**One is inclined to suspect that arms-control and disarmament negotiations have been pursued more for their success in avoiding serious restraint on armaments than in controlling them.**

Alternatively, one could easily construe these negotiations as maintained by their effect in placating the peace-seekers and generating support for the political leadership. If either construction is accepted, disarmament negotiations fail in their stated purpose because the process of negotiating is instigated and maintained by national economic and political factors; the effectiveness of the outcome in regulating international behavior is irrelevant.

At the international levels it has often been suggested that negotiations fail in their stated purpose because the opponents do not trust each other. Indeed, as Osgood (1962) pointed out, negotiations are no problem once trust is established. Let’s consider what trust might mean in behavioral terms, and how it might be promoted.

We are likely to use the term “trust” when one party does something that offers another an opportunity for advantage. A unilateral nuclear weapons freeze, for example, would offer the other side an opportunity to develop a commanding lead in weaponry. This course is rejected by the United States because, “You can’t trust the Russians,” but in fact this statement simply labels the absence of trusting behavior. Although most of our history suggests that trusting is unlikely to be initiated by either side, there is some evidence suggesting that trust in this sense could be developed.

**THE KENNEDY EXPERIMENT**

Etzioni (1967) describes the following sequence of events, known as “The Kennedy Experiment”. On June 10, 1963, with the US well ahead of the USSR in nuclear arms, President Kennedy announced a unilateral suspension of atmospheric nuclear testing. The speech was widely publicized in Russia. Five days later, premier Kruschev announced a halt in production of Russian strategic bombers, and 10 days later, the Soviets agreed to the establishment of a direct communications link (the “hot line”). Russia then refrained from atmospheric testing, and this unilaterally initiated and reciprocated suspension of testing was confirmed by treaty two months later. Note that the treaty recognized an existing state of affairs — it did not have to be negotiated from opposed positions under the constraints of national politics.

Although it can be argued that both sides were making symbolic gestures — the US did not need further tests at that time, and the USSR was about to phase out that line of bombers — this was at least the beginning of mutual trust, and further trust developed out of it. In the UN, the USSR removed its objections to sending observers to Yemen, and
the US removed its objections to full member status for Hungary. Kennedy approved the sale of wheat to the USSR, and discussions began on direct commercial flights between New York and Moscow. The USSR proposed a pact banning nuclear weapons from outer space (which neither side wanted at the time) and the US agreed. The resolution, passed in the UN and later confirmed by treaty, again served to formalize an existing state of affairs.

A combination of internal political pressure in that pre-election year, concerns by European allies, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the expansion of the Vietnam war prevented further moves from the US, and similar factors may have been operating in the USSR to bring the experiment to an end. It was hardly a controlled experiment, but it had the advantage of focusing on a class of behavior — unilateral action that defines trust — and reciprocity resulted. It set up a positive feedback relation that worked for several months. It was just the sort of interchange that Osgood (1962) had proposed, and the time has come for a systematic replication.

It seems unlikely that the leaders of the US or USSR will initiate a replication unless there are powerful contingencies at work. These contingencies must come from within, and the United States will have to take the lead because of its open society and relatively more responsive form of government.

As fear of nuclear war and outrage over misdirected resources increase among the citizenry at large, maintenance of political power will depend increasingly on responsiveness to organized demands for moves toward disarmament. The passage of the Freeze resolution by the House of Representatives attests to the broad-based sense of urgency in this matter, but the resolution is flawed by its call for negotiated mutuality and verifiability. It would be tragic if those in power divert the force behind the Freeze movement into unproductive negotiations.

As behavior analysts whose judgment is based on procedures and results, we must use all our skills and influence to urge the antinuclear movement into new directions, otherwise, all of humanity may be trapped in stereotypic responses that lead toward biological, not just behavioral, extinction. We must press for new versions of unilateralism that could generate another round of trusting behavior, and that could be selected and strengthened by their long-term political and economic consequences. A radically different new trick of this sort is essential for disarmament, maintenance of the peace, and the redirection of resources on which our survival as a species ultimately depends.

References

Footnotes
1 Based on a symposium presentation at the meetings of the Association for Behavior Analysis, May 1983.
2 The term "positive" does not connote "desirable". The nuclear arms race is itself a positive feedback system, in which development of a new weapon by one party is followed by comparable development by the other.