

Myths of the Cold War

by Murray N. Rothbard

I. The Arguments of the War Hawks Refuted

The Cold and Hot Warriors use a stock of arguments to support their position: some plausible, most of them hypocritical, all specious. Here is a refutation of the main points in their bellicose sophistry.

1. Peace or war? The Communists declared war upon us fifty years ago. Therefore, we are at war already; therefore, let us drop the bomb, etc.

This argument centers upon a deceptive and disastrous equivocation on the word “war.” It uses the term “war” to mean ideological conflict, and then cunningly switches the meaning to try to justify U.S. military action. The libertarian should, more than anyone else, be able to grasp the vital distinction. For the whole political philosophy of the libertarian rests upon it: upon the particular evil of physical violence used for aggression against others. The libertarian believes in ideological persuasion and is opposed to physical violence; he, above all, should stop using “war” as a loose and deceptive coverall.

But the Communists might stoop to violent revolution in America? Perhaps. But does anyone in his right mind believe that America faces the clear and present danger of overt, violent destruction by our tiny handful of domestic Communists?

But the Communists have behind them a military base in the Soviet Union? Right, and that is why we should be happy that the Soviet Communists realize the futility of nuclear war, and call for peace. Khrushchev and his successors have, frankly and honestly, been making their position unmistakably clear: they hope for internal adoption of communism in the U.S. and other countries, but they renounce any international, inter-state, *war*. This is what they mean by “peace,” and this is what “peace” has always meant: absence of inter-state conflict. Why, then, must we simply assume that the men in the Kremlin are lying and that they don’t want peace? Any rational person should prefer peace in the nuclear age. Let the ideological “war” with communism proceed, but let us also conclude military peace. Why, then, should we fear and hate the concept of “peaceful coexistence”? There is no basis on which to oppose it unless we think that freedom and free enterprise are ideologically *inferior* and could not survive an ideological debate with communism.

Let us, then, abandon this and all other similar equivocations, such as the concept of “indirect aggression.” *There is no such thing.* If, for example, the Cairo Radio beams broadcasts to Jordan calling upon the Jordanese to revolt, this is *not* aggression in any sense; it is an attempt at ideological persuasion. Anyone who doesn’t like it should broadcast his own messages to the Jordanese, and not try to suppress Cairo messages by force. Ditto for any other messages or propaganda that any group or ideology may make. There is another, better term for “indirect aggression,” and that is “exercise of freedom of speech.” There is no point to a “freedom of speech” that only permits people to say what you or I would like them to say. The only freedom of speech worth talking about is one that permits the speech of groups and ideologies that we hate.

There is *one* at least respectable argument by those who would lock up, or kill, domestic Communists: namely, that, in advocating communism, they are advocating crime (against persons, property, etc.), and therefore it is legitimate to take preventive action against them. The trouble with this argument is that it proves far, far too much. For, if one takes this position, what do we do with the *other* groups that are engaging in similar crimes: Socialists, New Dealers, Modern Republicans, Conservatives, etc., all of whom advocate crimes similar to those of Communists? And what do we do with our sturdy Rightists who advocate the crime of enslavement known as “conscription”? I am afraid that we could not stop at locking up only Communists: we would have to place in jail about 95-99 per cent of the American population—to say nothing about the rest of the world!—a program which, at the very least, would be rather impractical.

Furthermore, I think that we would *all* have to agree that actually *committing* a crime is far worse than simply advocating one; and if we are to lock up Communists for advocating crime at some vaguely distant date in the future, what in the world are we going to do with all those government officials who have actually been *committing* these crimes? What are we going to do with all the old New Deal rulers, and Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson, and all the Congressmen voting for “criminal” legislation? And what in the world are we going to do about General Hershey? And Harry S. Truman, the mass Butcher of Hiroshima? In short, if we are to incarcerate for a decade or more a handful of agitators for a crime at some vague date in the future, we must do something far worse, and much more immediately, to those who have already committed similar political crimes. As long as we let our Trumans and our George Marshalls remain scot free, and indeed lionize them as heroes, it is indeed grotesque to incarcerate our Eugene Dennises.

Returning to the problem of the Communist “war,” it is odd, indeed, that our War Hawks are willing to place the credence of Revelation (albeit a diabolic one) on any inflammatory statements made by Soviet Communists in 1917 or 1919 or 1921, yet place no credence whatever on any pro-peace statements made by the Communists *now*. Surely, here is a grave contradiction: to place absolute reliance on an old pronouncement of the Communists, and none whatever on a pronouncement made amidst the realities of our nuclear age. If, in short, the Communists have “already declared war on us,” *what evidence* will the War Hawks accept to prove that the Communists are ready to call this war off? *Any* evidence, short of immolating themselves on a Kremlin funeral pyre?

In fact, taking “war” in the ideological sense, “they” have been “at war with us,” *not* since 1917, but since 1848 as Marxism. But our War Hawks never mention this, for to do this would mean an embarrassing opening of the dike: it would mean that we would have to include all Marxists as our “enemy,” and then all Socialists, New Dealers, etc. And then we would realize that, to uncover enemies of freedom and free enterprise, we need not traipse off thousands of miles to launch a Holy Crusade against Moscow or Peking. We have plenty of such enemies here at home—enough to keep us busy for many years to come. Instead of hailing, for example, Senator Paul Douglas as a champion of the “Committee for the Freedom of All Peoples,” we had better devote more attention to Senator Paul Douglas as a destroyer of *American* freedom.

2. Peace would mean betrayal of the lovers of freedom in the “captive nations,” such as Hungary (or even Russia?), who long for us to liberate them. There follows a half-hour of

weeping over our “cowardly” failure to come to the aid of the Hungarian Revolution.

First, as to the hypocritical weeping over Hungary.^[1] When the Hungarians revolted, and for a few glorious days had overthrown the Communist regime, the great desideratum was to keep Russian troops out of Hungary. How was this to be accomplished? By American planes bombing the Kremlin and precipitating a nuclear World War III? By ultimatums to Russia that would have provoked World War III? Would this have benefited the Hungarians? Or us? By H-bombing Budapest, perhaps, as the Russian troops were entering? No, the Hungarians, along with the rest of the bleeding European continent, have already suffered two great American “liberations”; they could not possibly have survived a third.

There was one possible way, and one alone, to keep Hungary free of Russian troops in that tempestuous week: and that was to make an immediate deal with the Russians, that we would pull all our troops out of Europe if they would keep theirs out of Hungary. Would the Russians have accepted? At least we should have made the offer, and by the hysteria of the War Hawks at the very thought, one suspects that the Russians would have agreed. And, from this hysteria, we can gauge how sincere the militant mourners for Hungary really are.

There is, of course, the argument that pulling troops out would leave a “power vacuum” in Europe which someone, presumably the Russians, would have to rush to fill. This is an example of the mischief caused by using natural-science metaphors in the affairs of human action, and then taking them too seriously. There *is no* “power vacuum,” requiring something to fill it.

There is, indeed, something exceedingly odd about the argument that Americans should be cremated in a nuclear holocaust, because this is necessary to “preserve their Honor” by trying to liberate the slaves of communism. There are, let us say, 800 million people living behind the Iron Curtain. The very fact that all these people are still alive testifies to the fact that they, every one, prefer life under communism to death, with or without Honor. But if all the 800 millions prefer life under communism to death, prefer “slavery” to death, who are *we* to have the unmitigated gall to advocate murdering millions of Americans and Russians in order to free these slaves? If the Russian *muzhik* prefers his slavery to death, this is a choice which he has the right to make, and an anti-Communist who sends missiles to murder him to make sure that he dies Honorably is, simply... committing murder. And this—murder—mass murder—is what all the fancy and high moral slogans about Death With Honor boil down to.

Many Americans may each, individually, prefer death to life under communism. And that is their privilege. But they have *no* right, and as professed libertarians they have certainly no right, to murder countless millions of people because of this choice. In short, they have no right to cremate other people: Americans, Russians, or what have you, who would make the *opposite* choice, who would opt for survival. The War Hawks like to talk of *their* noble disregard for human life, on behalf of the spiritual ideals of honor, etc., and of their opponents’ miserable atheistic regard for life as a supreme value. But what is there noble, what is there spiritual, what in fact is there Christian, about mass murder of those innocents who do not share these values? Surely, it would be both more libertarian, more courageous, and more Christian for such conservatives quietly to commit suicide and insure their martyrdom that way, rather than drag millions upon millions of innocents to their death along with them.

If, then, the new crusaders are itching to liberate the slaves who look askance at liberation, their only truly honorable course would be to outfit themselves individually and corporately, without involving the rest of us Americans, or Americans officially as a nation, and go winging their way to fight the Russians on their own. With *this* kind of war, Americans can only be the gainer, whoever wins: if by some quirk the crusaders win, then those Russians left alive will be free (if they don’t die of radiation poisoning before they can enjoy their freedom), and if the crusaders lose, then they will have had their coveted Death With Honor, and the rest of us will be left alone to conclude peaceful

agreements with the Russians.

By their failure to commit suicide, we know that the 800 millions are not nearly as anti-Communist as their would-be saviors. And by their utter failure to revolt against Communist rule, which has now lasted for fifty years, we can well wonder just how anti-Communist the Russian slaves—and now the Chinese slaves—really may be. Mr. Eugene Lyons, for two decades now, has been trumpeting imminent revolution in Russia; I think it is about time that Mr. Lyons be asked to put up or shut up.

3. *Don't Shake the Hands of the Bloody Butcher.*

This introduces into international diplomacy all the irrelevant High Seriousness of the *code duello*, or “Whom Should We Snub at Mrs. Astorbilt’s Tea Party?” Yes, yes, Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev is a Bloody Butcher. On the Day of Judgment he will answer for his crimes, and roast a thousand years in hellfire. But there are a lot of Bloody Butchers around; the world reeks with them, is universally run by them, has been run by them, more or less, for many centuries. Lord Acton, the great British libertarian historian, once said that the Muse of the historian is not Clio, but Rhadamanthus, the avenger of innocent blood. I agree. But, in the meanwhile before the millenium arrives, what do we do with these Bloody Butchers? Khrushchev *is* a Bloody Butcher, but so is Churchill, and DeGaulle, and Franco, and Chiang, and Ky, and countless other “bastions of the free world.” Why did these hypocritical moralists, who not only do not blanch at these people but rush to Shake Their Hand, suddenly balk at Nikita? Certainly, Winston Churchill slaughtered far more men in his lifetime than had Nikita. So did F.D.R. Harry S. Truman, Butcher of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is not far behind. Our task should be: to reduce the annual quantity of butchery as much as possible. How do we do this, we anti-Butchers? By reviling Khrushchev or Kosygin as much as possible, and thereby making a peaceful *detente* impossible, and nuclear extermination ever closer? Or by seeing to it that peace prevails, and that therefore there is no mass international butchery to worry about? The chief instrument of butchery by state rulers over innocent civilians is *war*; refrain from war, work for peace, and we shall have done our part in reducing butchery in the world. But, on the other hand, if we send H-bombs and missiles to Moscow as pique for past Muscovite butchery, we thereby *add* immeasurably to the total amount of butchery in the world.

It is, indeed, surprising that the very same people who blanch so quickly at a few selected Foreign Butchers, never protest against the continued good repute of various Domestic Butchers, who are much more under our jurisdiction. Why hurl anathema at the Butcher of the Ukraine, while continuing to hail as Elder Statesmen the Butcher of Hiroshima and countless others?

The Buckleyesque horror at the Butcher of the Ukraine, coupled with the warm praise showered on the Butchers of China, Korea, Dresden, etc., leads one to believe that the whole argument reeks with hypocrisy. Trujillo was a Good Butcher, because he was Our Butcher, i.e., a good “anti-Communist.” Castro is a Bad Butcher, because he gives every indication of being one of Theirs. Despite the high moral tone of the War Hawks, it turns out that the high crime of Butchery is strictly relative, depending on who’s doing it.

In fact, the whole argument is pure hypocrisy, designed to fool the “mass base” of the Right, arid whip them into war hysteria. To demonstrate this, let us take Brezhnev and Kosygin, younger men who have not been implicated in any of the major butcheries of Stalin or Khrushchev. And let us suppose that they come over here for a visit. Does anyone believe for a single instant that they would not be equally denounced, that their visit would not be just as staunchly opposed as Khrushchev’s was by the rightist War-Hawk organs? Let us face it: the Butchery argument is a pure red herring, a demagogic device to whip up opposition to peace.

4. *We should not negotiate with the Russians, or Chinese, until they show by deeds, not words, that they favor peace.*

This is a typical State Department-type argument, rather than a War Hawk one. It doesn't make any more sense, nevertheless. *What* deeds are the Russians supposed to undertake, to "prove" their peaceful intentions? A deed like disarmament? *Who* is for complete and general disarmament, the Russians or us? A deed like ending foreign bases? *Who* has bases, encircling the other side, the Russians or us? A deed like finally liquidating World War II, concluding a peace treaty with one or two Germanies, and getting foreign troops out of Germany? Who advocates this, the Russians or us? A deed like expanding trade and cultural interchange between the nations? Who advocates this, the Russians or us? Who has called for abandonment of underground nuclear tests, for outlawry of nuclear war, etc.? Aren't these suggestions "deeds"?

What else can the Russians do—except voluntarily abandon communism? Is this the *only* deed that we will consider as satisfactory before agreeing on peace? Is such a demand on our part *peaceful*, or is it an ultimatum? The fact is that it has consistently, for many years now, been the *Russians* who have taken the lead in moves for peace: in calling for disarmament, for withdrawing troops, for concluding peace treaties with our former enemies, for Summit talks to reduce tensions and make agreements, etc. And in every case it has been the Americans who have held back and shown the utmost reluctance. What would *we* be saying now, I wonder, if the positions were reversed, if the Russians adamantly refused to negotiate unless we voluntarily gave up free enterprise? (Of course, we seem to be doing this anyhow, but that's another story.) If the Russians are willing to negotiate fully with us without asking for "deeds," why shouldn't we be?

As for the Chinese, we can have nothing to say about them. How can we, when officially they do not exist? In old-style international relations, the only sensible kind, "recognition" means simply that: the recognition of reality, of the existence of a government. Just because Woodrow Wilson and Henry Stimson launched the absurd policy of using recognition—or non-recognition—as a moral weapon, is no reason for us to pursue it.

5. The Russians have fixed a timetable for our destruction. Nothing we can do can alter that timetable; therefore, we should be tough with the Russians, not worry about provoking them, etc.

This is the great myth of the Russian "timetable," used to the hilt some years ago by Willi Schlamm in his *Germany, East or West*. All we need to do to puncture this nonsense is to consider what would happen if we delivered an ultimatum to Kossygin to resign and dissolve the government within twenty-four hours, else we drop H-bombs upon Russia. Does anyone believe that the Russians would not regard this as a war ultimatum and act accordingly? But if we have to admit that the Russians would be provoked into fighting after such an action, then the whole myth of a fixed timetable comes tumbling down. For then we would have to admit that *some* acts of ours would be so provocative as to induce the Russians to make war, which means that there is no fixed timetable, and that we had better watch where we warmonger.

It is understandable how youngish men who perhaps cannot remember the nonsense of F.D.R.'s fantasy about Hitler's timetable to invade Iowa by way of Dakar, Brazil, Panama, Guatemala, and Mexico, can swallow this timetable myth, but it is hard to understand how elderly conservatives, many members of America First and heated critics of the Roosevelt mendacity, can now credit and support an even more incredible and dangerous "timetable" swindle.

The whole idea that the Communists have some Master Timetable where all future history is writ, is sheer irrationality and diabolism. It is based on the view that the Communists are omniscient supermen, infallible, all-seeing, who *know* that on July 1, 1973, they will take over the earth. No shred of evidence has ever been brought forward to prove the existence of such a timetable, our warmongers having to fall back on flagrant, and apparently deliberate, misinterpretations of such phrases as "we will bury you." But, of course, something as mundane and earthbound as evidence has very little to do with the rhetoric of our War Hawks, whose attitude can best be explained as a *literal* belief that

Communists are agents of the Devil.

In this connection, it is interesting that Willi Schlamm, after assuring us that, because of the Master Timetable, nothing warlike that we could do can provoke the Russians to premature attack, ends by saying that if the Russians should perchance attack, it would not be a refutation of his theory. For it would simply mean that the Russians had, absolutely independently, decided to change their timetable! This, of course, is a very convenient way of having your theory without having to submit it to any test of evidence whatever. It is also the kind of reasoning engaged in by primitive savages to justify their superstitions.

It is curious, by the way, how the pro-war Right, on this as on many other occasions, who never tire of preening themselves as the lonely carriers of Western Civilization, are ready to revert to the most uncivilized modes of thought and action. It is also curious that the very people who devote much of their energies to attacking modern technology as being somehow demeaning to their aristocratic tastes, should enthusiastically embrace every advanced technological weapon of mass destruction. The air-conditioner or television set is crass materialism; the H-bomb and the guided missile are the arms of spiritual Righteousness.

Such, I believe, are the main War-Hawk arguments. We come now to Part II, where we consider the interesting question: Why be anti-Communist? What are the reasons that the American officialdom, press, etc., are so vehemently anti-Communist? Let us go down the list of these common reasons, one by one.

II. Why Be Anti-Communist?

1. *Communism permits no free elections* (the favorite Social-Democrat argument).

True and deplorable. But: what of Chiang, and Franco, and Ky, and Trujillo, and Rhee (who permitted elections only after jailing opponents)? When did they ever permit free elections? Why, then, are they our “heroic allies” while Soviet Russia and China must be fought to the death? Obviously, *this* is no reason to be for war against communism, any more than it would be to declare war on Chiang. And, by the way, the one place in Southeast Asia where there *were* partial free elections was in Laos, where the Communists won, and where our puppets stepped in to dissolve the legislature and jail the Communist leaders in breach of national and international agreements. This was done at American urging—this sabotaging of free elections, which apparently are only good when Our Side wins.

2. *Communism permits no freedom of speech.*

True, and still more deplorable. But: what of Chiang, and Franco, and Ky, and Castillo Branco, and Rhee? Since when did these Bastions of the Free World ever permit freedom of speech? There are surely countless other examples. But we don't whoop it up for war crusades against these nations; why against Russia and China? Again, a better reason will have to be found.

3. *Communism is a conspiracy.*

Social Democrats, the argument runs, are nice guys who are open and above-board; Communists, on the other hand, lurk in dark corners, as conspirators. It is about time that this nonsense be speared. How does one define the word “conspiracy”? *A conspiracy is an agreement—any agreement—between two or more people made in private.* If Jones and Smith and Robinson meet in Jones' home to decide to support Robinson at the next meeting for president of the local lodge, and they do not publicize their agreement, this is “conspiracy.” And so all of us, in one way or another, are “conspirators” about something. So what? The whole conspiracy bogey was introduced into the common law by kings who feared opposition to their rule, and wanted to crush all dissent. It's about

time we abandon this boggy concept, or else logically widen it until its use against only Communists becomes nonsensical.

4. *Communists believe in lying for their cause.*

Again highly deplorable. But which government officials don't do the same? What government doesn't employ propaganda bureaus in highly organized lying for what they think is the dumb public's benefit? What government official doesn't lie in his teeth for the supposed national welfare, and pride himself upon his deeds? Did not Professor Thomas A. Bailey, a leading partisan of F.D.R., admit that Clare Boothe Luce was correct in holding that F.D.R. lied the United States into war? And did not Bailey praise F.D.R. as a great democratic statesman for his political mendacity? Does any sane and informed person believe that General Marshall told the truth when he said he could not remember where he was on the night before Pearl Harbor?

5. *Communists do things like preventing Pasternak from accepting a Nobel Prize.*

Again deplorable. And what of the United States, bastion of the free world? We prevent an American Leftist from getting the Lenin Peace Prize, and prevent a Russian from traveling here to give it to him. We prevent Paul Robeson from getting a passport to visit abroad. We revile the editor of the *National Guardian*, and jail those whose crime is only to advocate communism. This is to say nothing of the similar actions of Chiang, Franco, and... So why go to war with Russia?

6. *Communists want to impose socialism on the economy.*

Correct, and here is the main reason why I am anti-Communist. But, here again: who doesn't? Doesn't Chiang, or Franco, or Ky, or Trujillo, or Rhee? America's foremost advocate of Chiang—an ardent free enterpriser—once admitted to me that Chiang and his associates are thoroughly socialist, and don't even have the slightest conception of free enterprise. So, what do we do? Fight Chiang as well? And, again, what about our home-grown Socialists, who don't belong to the Communist sect of socialists? They are far more popular and influential in the U.S. than are the Communist sect. What do we do to the Walter Reuthers and Mrs. Roosevelts, Norman Thomases, David Dubinskys, and editors of the *New Leader*? Do we slaughter them? And if not, why travel thousands of miles to slaughter Russians?

7. *Communism is Godless.*

Ah, here we come to what I suspect is the main reason why the "mass base" of the Right is anti-Communist. Yes, Communists are atheists. (The only adjective that the man-on-the-street seems to be able to apply to communism is "atheistic.") May I be so bold as to say: so what? Are we then *really* back in the early Seventeenth Century, and must we really slaughter every heretic we can find? (A pro-Right War Hawk has used a phrase that is quite revealing. He called pacifism a "Christian heresy." Torquemada rides again!) Bertrand Russell is an atheist; must we drop an H-bomb on London in order to rid ourselves of his presence? There are lots of atheists, furthermore, who are thoroughly anti-Communist. Some of my best ardently libertarian friends are atheists. It should not be forgotten that the most glamorous and conservative Republican leader of his generation, Robert G. Ingersoll, was an agnostic, which would be regarded by many of the pious Cold Warriors as even worse than atheism.

If this whole affair is to be turned into a mighty theological (instead of a political-economic) struggle, how do the War Hawks account for the plethora of Protestant bishops and ministers who are "fellow travelers" of the Communists, or who are even so wicked as to be for peace? How do they account for the Red Dean of Canterbury? Or, even further, what do they do about Metropolitan Alexei, head of the flourishing, pro-Communist Holy Orthodox Church of Russia?

I suspect that some Cold Warriors may have at least an answer to the latter questions: i.e., by suggesting that Protestants and the Russian Orthodox Catholics are not *really* Christian.

In its early years, the Soviets tried to exterminate religion in Russia. They soon gave it up as a bad job—as they gave up egalitarianism—and turned, instead, to sponsoring religion. Khrushchev himself admitted the popularity of the churches in Russia today. Is the Orthodox Church of Russia then bad because it is a state church, run by state rulers? Of course, but let us not forget that the Russian Church has *always* been a state church under the czars. And, we might note, in passing, the state church of that mighty bastion of the Free World, Great Britain.

And so we have it. The purpose of this paper has not been to advocate dictatorship, suppression of free speech, conspiracy, mendacity, socialism, or atheism. The purpose has been to show that, in every one of the common indictments of communism, there is nothing uniquely applicable to Soviet Russia or China, or to communism. All of these bad qualities adhere to a great many other social systems, including those of our most Heroic of Allies, and including the United States itself. There is, therefore, no reason for singling out communism or Russia upon which to launch a Holy War.

[1] Let us not forget the role of the British–French–Israeli aggression at Suez, which the *National Review* supported, in making the suppression of Hungary seem respectable.