

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON
Lebanon Valley College

WHO'S AFRAID OF ATOMIC BOMBS?

A review of *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz*. by Campbell Craig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; no price listed; ISBN: 0-231-12348-5.

WHEN WE THINK OF WAR TODAY OR IN THE RECENT PAST, we think of places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Israel and Palestine, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Rwanda, or Sierra Leone. The striking thing about all of these conflicts—apart from their disturbing ubiquity—is that, if we exclude the involvement of the United States or Israel, none of them involve airpower, sea power, or heavy artillery. In the twenty-first century, most wars are fought with weapons that can be carried by a single human being. In places like Sierra Leone and Rwanda, these weapons were often machetes rather than guns.

Despite the weapons involved, these wars have been bloody and cruel, and broadly speaking, they raise the kinds of ethical and political questions that war has always raised. Still, it is a striking fact of contemporary life that most of us are far more concerned with the very limited firepower that terrorists may command than we are with the almost unfathomable firepower contained in the more than twenty thousand nuclear weapons currently deployed in the world. According to the National Resources Defense Council and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in 2002 the U.S. had 10,640 nuclear weapons (excluding those “marked for disarmament”), while Russia had 8,600 (excluding those “marked for disarmament”). The world’s other nuclear powers—the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, and perhaps North Korea—have over 1,000 such weapons.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the threat posed by this arsenal has almost vanished from public discourse. We worry about the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons, or terrorists cobbling together a “dirty bomb,” while the Bush administration continues to fund research into various “tactical” (i.e., usable) nuclear weapons. This is because we can imagine Islamic radicals or terrorists using nuclear weapons, and we can imagine the U.S. “taking out” a hardened, underground Iranian weapons plant with tactical nuclear weapons, but most of us no longer take very seriously the possibility that the U.S., Russia, or China would actually use its nuclear arsenal in a major war. It’s comforting to

believe that deterrence has eliminated the possibility of nuclear war; still, we know that on several occasions between 1957 and 1962, the US and the USSR came very close to such a war, and it's naïve to suppose that nothing could ever bring the US, Russia, or China to the brink of such a war again.

Campbell Craig has written a clear-headed history of Modern American Realism in international politics that focuses on the impact of the thermonuclear revolution on the Realist approach to American international relations. He traces Realism's roots to Nietzsche's idea of the will-to-power and its implication that conflict is a permanent feature of history, and to Weber's *Machtpolitik* and its assumption that the nation-state's struggle for survival motivates all modern politics. Realism is based on three premises: (1) the primacy of the nation-state, i.e., the fundamental importance of the state's survival, (2) an international balance of power as the optimal means of assuring the state's survival and staving off a Hobbesian war of all against all, and (3) the privileging of the *Raison d'Etat*, i.e., the idea that moral values should not constrict the state's foreign policy: private morality should not extend to international relations.

In its emphasis on the primacy of the state, Realism has been challenged by two kinds of Idealism: (1) Marxism, which foresaw the withering away of the nation-state in the dialectical unfolding of history, and (2) liberal universalism, a loose label for the kind of thinking that lay behind the establishment of the League of Nations or the United Nations and that underlies the spirit of many contemporary NGOs. Many of us would agree that a world in which people act in the name of ideals would be ethically superior to a world in which people act merely in the name of national interests. But the Realist would argue that the world is fundamentally a dangerous place, and that, in the always hazardous world of international relations, our security demands that we place the state's interests ahead of any ideals.

Craig organizes his book around three of the most important American Realists of the twentieth century: Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz. American Realism may be said to begin with Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), in which Niebuhr argues that human greed and lust for power are intrinsic to the species (this is the Protestant theology of Original Sin), and that both Marxism and Dewey's liberalism are hopelessly idealistic. In the late '30s he attacks the pro-Soviet left and liberal antiwar idealists, and argues for U.S. intervention in World War II to save "democratic civilization." In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), he lays the groundwork for what would become American Cold War Realism: the children of darkness seek always to expand their power, and the children of light will be their victims unless they can recognize and confront (or "contain") them.

Niebuhr is a major figure in liberal politics—a leader of New York's Liberal Party, a columnist for *The Nation*, a founder of Americans for Democratic

Action—yet he vigorously opposes any conciliation of the USSR. As a Cold War Realist, Niebuhr argues that the Soviet blockade of Berlin must be broken, even at the risk of war, in order to maintain the balance of power in Europe and stop Soviet expansion. He supports the decision to build a hydrogen bomb, and he accepts the possibility of a “just” nuclear war. As late as 1957, he supports Henry Kissinger’s belief that we can develop “tactical” nuclear weapons that could be used to fight “limited” wars. However, he is uncomfortable with the idea of a preemptive nuclear strike and with the doctrine of “massive retaliation,” and this discomfort leads finally to Niebuhr’s recognition of the untenability of the Realist position. There is no way to ensure that a nuclear war would remain “limited” because, if the Realist premise that the state’s survival takes absolute priority is correct, then any state facing defeat in such a “limited” war would certainly escalate the war in order to ensure its survival. If “limited” nuclear wars are impossible, and if both a preemptive first strike and defensive massive retaliation are morally unacceptable, then what’s left? Realism insists that the state must always be prepared to resort to force, even if only as a last resort, in order to protect its interests. But if nuclear weapons are unusable, then in the face of such weapons, the House of Realism collapses.

To his credit, Niebuhr recognizes this, but he is unable to articulate an alternate position. If there is no security in nuclear weapons, neither is there any security in nuclear disarmament. If nuclear war is suicidal, it nevertheless remains true that war is likely to remain a prominent feature of the landscape of history, and at some point, inevitably, one war will escalate into a nuclear confrontation. Logic suggests that long-term peace requires some sort of global state (the “new leviathan” of Craig’s title), but Niebuhr is deeply pessimistic about the likelihood of the establishment of such a state.

The Jewish émigré Hans Morgenthau arrives in the U.S. in 1937, and in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (1946), he attacks what he calls Marxist and liberal “optimism” regarding international relations. Like Niebuhr, Morgenthau believes that a “lust for power” is the primary motivating force of all politics, and that a status-quo balance of power between the U.S. and the USSR is the best we can hope for in terms of US foreign policy. Also like Niebuhr, in the 1950s Morgenthau defends the US decision to develop a hydrogen bomb, is tempted by the idea of “limited” nuclear war, and supports massive rearmament by the US in Europe as the best means of ensuring a balance of power (and thus, peace). But again, like Niebuhr, Morgenthau finally concedes that Realism’s basic premises suggest that no nuclear war is likely to remain “limited,” and in the early 1960s he denounces those like Kissinger and Herman Kahn who believe a nuclear war is winnable. Morgenthau suggests that nuclear weapons require a polity that transcends the nation-state, simply because national sovereignty is incompatible with the destructive potential of thermonuclear weapons, though he is not optimistic about the development of such a polity. A thermonuclear war is unjustifiable for any reason, and because waging war in defense of the state’s survival is the *ultima ratio* of Realism, a Realist foreign policy in the

thermonuclear age is absurd.

Neither Niebuhr nor Morgenthau has a solution to the impasse presented by nuclear weapons, but Kenneth Waltz argues that a re-imagined Realism can guide foreign policy in the nuclear age. In *Man, the State, and War* (1959), Waltz argues that Niebuhr and Morgenthau made the error of practicing "normative" Realism, i.e., they urged particular policies for particular normative ends (the preservation of democratic civilization). Waltz argues for a non-normative, strictly analytical and descriptive "Structural Realism" (sometimes called "neorealism") which would strive simply to explain, and not to justify, the operation of international relations. Waltz retains the three premises of traditional Realism, and he agrees with Niebuhr and Morgenthau that (1) only a supranational polity can prevent war in the nuclear age, and (2) the development of such a polity is highly unlikely. But while Niebuhr and Morgenthau remained stuck at that impasse, Waltz suggests a solution: paradoxically, nuclear weapons can create a stable balance of power that will forestall nuclear war, especially if the world order is essentially bipolar, as it was between 1945 and 1989. The fear of a nuclear holocaust, and the knowledge that one's adversary can, even after absorbing a nuclear first strike, deliver a devastating retaliatory nuclear counter-strike, coupled with the state's fundamental desire to survive, can preserve peace. Thus Waltz calls for an arms race (on both sides) as a means of promoting a kind of balance of nuclear fear. Nuclear proliferation is a good thing, and more nuclear weapons are better than fewer, because a diverse nuclear arsenal guarantees the state the power to deliver a "second strike" of such destructive violence as to forestall any attack. Nuclear weapons proliferation can, argues Waltz, create a world of defensive-minded, conservative, secure nation-states.

As Realists, Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz agree that in the arena of international power politics, war between the great powers is probably inevitable. However, the development of thermonuclear weapons makes the avoidance of that inevitability imperative. Niebuhr and Morgenthau seem resigned to the tragedy that the "inevitable" is unavoidable. Waltz demurs, and assumes that an international "structure" built around the fear of nuclear retaliation can effectively deter war.

Campbell Craig has written a fair-minded history of Realism's response to the development of nuclear weapons, and in his conclusion he offers his own Realist assessment of our situation. First, he calls into question Waltz's contention that nuclear proliferation is a good thing, pointing out the danger of assuming that nuclear-armed states can always control their arsenals, and that such states will always respond rationally to the potential threat of nuclear retaliation. Next, he suggests that a genuinely Realist assessment would concede that nuclear deterrence cannot succeed forever, and then when it fails, hundreds of millions of people will probably be killed. Finally, he argues that the fear of nuclear holocaust might be the impetus for the creation of a "new leviathan," a

transnational polity or "world state" that would control the entire world's nuclear arsenal, and thus eliminate the possibility of nation-states engaging in nuclear war. Craig is not naïve about the likelihood of such a polity emerging, which is why the word "glimmer" is at the front of his title. But he ends his book with a fair question: Which is worse? (1) the establishment of a world government, with all of its attendant difficulties and dangers, including the prospect of something like civil or guerilla war pitting one or more regions or states against that world government? Or (2) persisting in our present model, in which sovereign nation-states struggle to preserve and extend their interests and power, relying always (if only as a last resort) on war, and knowing that nuclear weapons are going to continue to proliferate among nations like Iran and North Korea, and that sweetness and light will not always characterize the relations among such heavily armed nations as the U.S., Russia, and China?

GARY GRIEVE-CARLSON is Professor of English and Director of General Education at Lebanon Valley College. In the 1980s he was on the staff of Council for a Livable World, an arms-control group founded by the physicist Leo Szilard.

©2007 Gary Grieve-Carlson. All rights reserved.
Grieve-Carlson, Gary. "Who's Afraid of Atomic Bombs?" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*
vol. 8 no. 2 (Spring 2007): 189-193.
PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/08.2/grieve-carlson.pdf>