

UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

June 5, 1982

Dear Archbishop Bernardin:

Thank you for your letter of May 17. I apologize for having twice to leave our meeting and hope you understand that this was unavoidable. I appreciate very much your visiting the Department of State to discuss with us the grave subject of nuclear war.

I am in full agreement with you that prevention of nuclear war is a moral and political imperative. No other issue is of greater concern to the President and to the Secretary of State. Our foreign policy, our defense posture, and our arms control strategy all have this as their primary objective. We want to create a political and military environment in which nuclear weapons -- for as long as they exist -- will not be used. And over the longer term, we would like to create a moral environment in which the existence of such weapons would be unnecessary and unacceptable.

For the present and foreseeable future, we have but one realistic strategy to prevent nuclear war; this involves deterrence -- maintaining a nuclear capability of our own sufficient to convince the leadership of the Soviet Union that starting a war would entail unacceptable costs to their society; it also involves working with the Soviets to minimize the possibility of a nuclear war starting by accident or misunderstanding, and engaging them in an effort to reduce to the greatest degree possible our respective arsenals of nuclear weapons.

His Excellency
The Most Reverend,
Joseph L. Bernardin,
Archbishop of Cincinnati,
Chairman, NCCB Committee on War and Peace,
100 East -Eighth Street,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Some have proposed that because the effects of nuclear war are so horrible, any alternative would be preferable and that the United States should therefore unilaterally declare that it will not under any circumstances use nuclear weapons. To make this pledge credible, we would have to eliminate our stock of nuclear arms. I consider this to be a terribly dangerous course, one which presents a grave threat to our safety and to the existence of the values of our society. This course would remove the most effective external restraint upon the Soviet Union. There is no evidence from which to conclude that the Soviets would then act in a responsible manner, forswearing intervention in the affairs of others or actual aggression against those nations. Evidence, derived from Soviet actions in Afghanistan and Poland, points to the contrary. With the ability to use or threaten to use nuclear arms, the Soviets would be more able to increase their influence and control throughout the world, and could apply conventional force more freely in the knowledge that escalation of a conflict would eventually work to their favor. Our friends and allies, particularly those in Europe, would have to make an accommodation with the Soviets or face destruction by conventional or nuclear force. We eventually, would have to do the same. I do not need to explain what this would mean for our ability to preserve our way of life and the freedoms that we, Western Europe and others enjoy.

There is one overwhelmingly important fact — nuclear deterrence has worked. While there have been some 130 military conflicts since WW II, there has been no nuclear war. We must not easily abandon the very policy which has prevented holocaust.

As Secretary Haig recently pointed out, we are not faced with a choice between our values and our existence. By maintaining a military balance with the Soviets and sustaining deterrence, we can protect the essential values of Western civilization -- democratic government, personal liberty, and religious freedom --and preserve the peace. By failing to maintain deterrence, we are actually increasing the risk of war and destruction, either by nuclear or still terribly devastating conventional weapons.

Deterrence would also be undermined, though in a more subtle way, by a freeze of nuclear weapons at current levels -- even assuming we were able to solve the difficult problem of verification. A freeze would lock in a Soviet advantage in two critical areas: land based intercontinental ballistic missiles, the most destabilizing of the nuclear weapons, and intermediate range nuclear weapons. The latter present a serious and intimidating threat to out allies in Europe. The former present the possibility, particularly as technological advances increase the Soviets' ability to counter our submarine and aircraft based missiles, that the Soviets could destroy so much of our land based ICBM force in a first strike that we would be able only to inflict "acceptable" damage upon the Soviet Union in retaliation. In other words, our deterrence would be seriously impaired. This, of courser, is a scenario of madness. It would require momentous depravity by the Soviet leadership to engage in such a first strike. But we have seen such depravity in leaders throughout history, particularly those with dictatorial powers, not responsive to the will of their people. And inwartime, passion and desperation can overtake even more rational leaders.

In addition, because of the advantages the Soviets would gain from a freeze, we fear that they would look upon it as an end in itself and would not have an incentive to join us in achieving what we consider to be our primary arms control objective -- the substantial reduction of nuclear weapons. Again, the Soviet pattern of behavior is instructive. They were not willing to discuss seriously limitation of anti-ballistic missiles with us in the late 1960's until we decided to build such missiles ourselves. Similarly, the Soviets were not ready to discuss limitation of intermediate range missiles, until the US and NATO countries decided in 1979 to deploy comparable systems of our own. I am convinced that only by moving ahead with development of our MX (intercontinental) and Pershing (intermediate range) systems can we persuade the Soviets to join us in arms reductions. They will not talk seriously until they believe we can either equal or surpass them. I wish this were not the case, but my colleagues' and my experience in dealing with the Soviets over many years strongly indicate that it is so.

We do not enjoy being in a situation in which we have to arm before we can disarm, in which we have to worry about another country acting on terribly dangerous first strike calculations, and in which we must devote the massive resources necessary to deter conventional and nuclear aggression. But the Soviet government, out of motivations both ideological and nationalistic, is regrettably not willing to refrain from trying to control or influence the affairs of other nations and of developing the military and other means to do so. It views the existence of different, more successful systems as a threat to its legitimacy and security. If the Soviet government were democratic, representing the wishes of its citizens and allowing the free flow of ideas and free expression of beliefs, I do not think we would be in this situation. The best and perhaps the only environment for a stable, lasting peace free from the threat of nuclear war will be one in which democratic systems are more universal, where people can meet freely with their counterparts from other nations, where ideas can be exchanged and beliefs pursued. Encouraging the creation of such an environment must be our ultimate goal.

Sincerely,

Lawrence S. Eagleburger