

"THE ETHICS OF CALCULATION"

New York, N. Y.

Sir: In last month's *Worldview* Ernest W. Lefever wrote in defense of "the ethics of calculation." I have no quarrel with Dr. Lefever's plea for calculation as one tries to relate ethics to policy, but I think that he has gone far toward losing the ethics in the calculation and that his own example of calculation needs to be challenged radically.

One example of this loss of ethics in calculation is the sentence: "But genetic damage resulting from tests or general war or both, like the number of automobile deaths in the United States, is well within the range of what a civilized society is prepared to tolerate." I assume that "tolerate" is used in some technical sense and not in a moral sense, but even so the sentence is one of the most appalling that I have ever read. For one thing, the people who are killed in automobiles usually choose to ride in automobiles; whereas most of the victims of tests and of nuclear war would have had no chance to make such a choice. They would be the victims of a few distant policy-makers. I think that the traditional distinction between combatants and non-combatants in war does not fit the present realities, but, on any showing, future generations should be regarded as non-combatants. For contemporary policy-makers to assume that they are so right that they can nonchalantly condemn a large number of unborn children to various kinds of genetic distortion is the suspension of ethics.

I often think that in this respect there is among some of us an interesting parallel to the Communist suspension of ethics. The Communists sacrifice people who are now living for the sake of a political policy which is supposed to benefit future generations, but our tendency is to sacrifice future generations for a supposed benefit to people now living. Of the two types of ethical calculation, I think that the Communist calculation, as a form of ethical calculation, is more defensible.

All that Dr. Lefever says about the probable consequences of nuclear war needs to be challenged both in terms of some other consequences which are as important as those which he mentions, and in terms of some estimate of the consequences of the worst alternative to general nuclear war. His most arresting point is that "the maximum possible loss of life from a general nuclear war involving the

full capacities of the Soviet Union and the United States would be about twenty percent of the earth's population." He goes on to say: "There would be practically no casualties of any kind south of the equator." I can only outline my criticisms of his extraordinarily complacent presentation of these conclusions.

1. If his statistics are correct, they would not apply ten years from now if the nuclear arms race continues with full force. Since a war in any event is not likely in the immediate future, it is important to look at the probable consequences of present policy under the technological conditions a decade hence.

2. If there are to be no casualties south of the equator, what would be the percentage of the population north of the equator that would be killed or injured, and what would be the effect of this on the communities north of the equator?

3. Such a war would not only destroy the number of people of whom Dr. Lefever speaks; it would also destroy the fabric of community in many nations. It might even wipe out or almost wipe out whole nations which cover a small territory, such as Britain.

4. Dr. Lefever says that "the worst nuclear war now possible would leave eighty percent of the earth's population alive and healthy." They might be without bodily injury but what about their moral and emotional health? The moral trauma resulting from such a war would probably be beyond anything that we can imagine.

5. How much chance would there be for the survival of the institutions of political and spiritual freedom after such a catastrophe? Incidentally, these institutions flourish most north of the equator! Mere survival, bread and order, would for a long time be more important to people than freedom. If Dr. Lefever is interested in avoiding objectionable types of political systems by the policies which he recommends, he is likely to fail if they result in general war.

6. There is a whole range of questions which are almost never discussed having to do with what the worst alternative to general war might be if we are faced with ultimate choices. Suppose that Communist nations were able to extend their power, what in the long run might we expect? Just as Dr.

Lefever plays down the consequences of war, it might be quite as convincing to play down the consequences of allowing Communism to find its level in the world without decisive military opposition but with many kinds of resistance in the various countries. For one thing, Communism has shown that it can change in a few decades and become a less intolerable form of society. Its worst consequences might last for a shorter time than the worst consequences of a general nuclear war. Also, there is a question that needs much exploration as to how far Russia would be able to exercise oppressive control at a distance. She has difficulty even now with Poland. She has allowed Yugoslavia to get out from under her control. Is it not possible that the degree of oppressiveness of Communist control would depend upon the dynamics within a country? Forms of resistance to Communism in each country might still go on that would be more relevant to its characteristic type of power than nuclear bombs. If there developed a strong and fanatical Communist movement within a country, the worst type of oppression might take place for a limited period. In some cases proximity to Russia might have the same effect as it does in the case of Hungary and East Germany. What is likely to be the effect of more humane institutions in Russia on the degree of ruthlessness it would exercise abroad? What may be the effect of the rivalry of the great Communist powers in leaving a space for some form of freedom for other countries? I have raised these points, not because I am dogmatic about them, but because they are so seldom mentioned. I wish that Dr. Lefever would put his acute mind on them with as ruthless an openness to what may be the realities as he has tried to cultivate in regard to the consequences of war.

I am sure that Dr. Lefever and I would agree that the test of any policy is whether it succeeds in preventing *both* of these ultimate disasters. So long

as there is hope of doing so, we need to have a balanced policy based upon the calculation as to how to prevent them both. But I see in Dr. Lefever's argument a strange callousness that may undermine the imperative to prevent the general nuclear war. This could profoundly warp policy. We may grant that there are risks in any policy, but is it right to assume that the risks must always run in the one direction?

JOHN C. BENNETT
Dean, Union Theological Seminary

Raeford, North Carolina

Sir: In his article, "The Ethics of Calculation," Ernest W. Lefever cites a passage from Scripture to support his thesis: Luke 14: 32, 33. Dr. Lefever writes: "Incidentally, Jesus of Nazareth apparently assumed that statesmen had a moral obligation to calculate between two hostile camps . . ."

My question is: Has Dr. Lefever not lifted this passage of Scripture from its context and used it in a way which Jesus' words did not intend? Just prior to the verses quoted, Jesus has been talking about the absolute, radical demands of discipleship. He is advising those who would follow Him to count the cost. The illustration of the two kings taking stock of their military power is used only to draw attention to the seriousness of decision to be Christ's disciple. It does not give any content to what being a disciple means. In fact, the suggested use of this passage by Dr. Lefever is that Jesus is urging Christians to take sides with either one earthly ruler or another. What just precedes these verses strongly suggests just the opposite. It suggests that the Christians' king is Christ, and the method of dealing with the hostile world is the suffering servant method of the Cross, not military calculation.

MEIGS A. NEWKIRK

SUBSCRIPTION BLANK

worldview
170 East 64th Street
New York 21, N. Y.

Please enter renew my subscription to worldview

Check enclosed \$ _____ Name _____

Address _____

One Year \$2.00

(Make checks payable to worldview)