

FEARFUL WARRIORS

A Psychological Profile of
U.S.-Soviet Relations

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“In our time only a madman can start a war, and he himself will
perish in its flames.”

Khrushchev

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Chief Corrective: Realistic Empathy

Empathy is the *great* corrective for all the forms of war-promoting misperception that have just been discussed.

It will be remembered that empathy is defined, at the opening of Chapter 2, as simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. It is distinguished from sympathy, which is defined as feeling with others. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question. It is true that, to the extent it is possible, warmhearted sympathy may contribute much to peace, perhaps even more than empathy contributes, but that is not what we are talking about now. We are not talking about warmth or approval, and certainly not about agreeing with or siding with, but only about realistic understanding.

How can empathy be achieved?

Of course, those who have studied an opposing nation intensively can do it much better than the rest of us can, but all of us can do it after a fashion and can supplement our own thinking by listening to others who have special knowledge. The essentials do not depend on special erudition or on any special gift of sensitive, imaginative intuition. They depend mainly on an ordinary newspaper-reader's knowledge, plus a continual honest effort to be fair and to ask oneself repeatedly such elementary questions as: How would I feel if I were faced with the situation the Soviet Union now faces? How might my feelings be influenced by past experiences, such as what I, if I were a Russian, went through in World War II? Or my Communist education? How would I interpret recent American behavior if I had a tendency to put the worst plausible interpretation on whatever the American government does?

What is needed is much more than the cold, calculating chess-player's type of empathy described and illustrated in Chapter 4. Although the needed kind of empathy does not by definition im-

ply feeling with, it does imply understanding or at least genuinely trying to understand the feelings of other people. It means jumping in imagination into another person's skin, imagining what it might be like to look out at his world through his eyes, and imagining how you might feel about what you saw. It means *being* the other person, at least for a while, and postponing skeptical analysis until later. It means trying to understand the other from the inside looking out, not merely from the outside looking in. Most of all, it means trying to look at one's own group's behavior honestly, as it might appear when seen through the other's eyes, recognizing that his eyes are almost certainly jaundiced but recognizing also that he has the advantage of not seeing our group's behavior through the rose-colored glasses that we ourselves normally wear. He may have grounds for distrust, fear, and anger that we have not permitted ourselves to see. That is the point where honesty comes in. An honest look at the other implies an honest look at oneself.

Empathy so defined should go far to correct each of the five motivated types of error described above:

- Most clearly it should counteract exaggerated fear based on the diabolical enemy-image, since it immediately humanizes the image of the enemy and makes it possible to recognize, for instance, the possible defensive motives behind his most aggressive behavior.
 - It should counteract the self-deceiving parts of the moral self-image by cutting through the rationalizations that sustain it.
 - It should counteract the "pro-us" illusion by exposing the reasons the other might have for anger and for long-term fear.
 - It should counteract overconfidence by bringing out the weaknesses on one's own side that wishful thinking might have led oneself to gloss over, and counteract worst-case thinking by bringing out the strengths on one's own side that worst-case thinking by the other might seek out and stress.
 - It should counteract excessive territorial claims by bringing out the reasons why another country or people might have claims and psychological reasons for identifying with the disputed land as valid and as genuine as one's own.
 - In all of this it would counteract the process of selective inattention, because absence of realistic empathy is probably the most inclusive, the most predictable, and the most war-promoting of all the forms of selective inattention. What is or may be in