
This is a short book, based on the 1984 Frank W. Abrams Lectures at Syracuse University, but the issues which it raises are profound. The problem addressed concerns the inability of democratic institutions to cope with some of the major issues of contemporary public policy, which, Dahl explains, are so complex that they challenge the democratic assumption that ordinary people are competent to make choices. The extreme case is that of nuclear strategy. In Dahl's words: 'No decisions can be more fateful for Americans, and for the world, than decisions about nuclear weapons. Yet these decisions have largely escaped the control of the democratic process' (p. 3).

In the first half of the book Dahl compares the relative advantages and disadvantages, in nuclear matters, of democratic control versus control exercised through the 'principle of guardianship' (which stems from the belief that since most adults are not qualified to make complex decisions, it is preferable to leave such matters to a qualified minority). In nuclear strategy, Dahl notes, the situation that we have actually allowed to emerge, almost unwittingly, is of the second type. But in this area of public affairs, where catastrophe looms, is not wisdom more important than democracy? Yet even if it is, who and where are the philosopher-kings?

After much agonizing, Dahl comes to three conclusions. First, that existing democratic processes are not satisfactory when it comes to handling unusually complex issues. Secondly, the minority which now makes the decisions on complex issues lacks the special knowledge and 'virtue' required of 'true guardians'. Thirdly, true guardians or philosopher-kings are unlikely to make such decisions in future since rulers are not likely to be true philosophers, while true philosophers are unlikely to become rulers. Together, these three conclusions 'create a problem with no evident solution' (p. 53).

The obstacles in the way of a solution are compounded, in Dahl's opinion, by the presence of two seemingly irreconcilable facts. The delegation of some authority to leaders on nuclear weapons is unavoidable. But the fact that 'moral and technical judgements are highly interdependent' means that it is impossible for a democratic society simply to delegate authority to leaders to make technical judgements about the most efficient means to achieve given ends. The de facto guardians we have today, for example, lack the superior moral competence required for true guardianship: 'delegated authority', he argues, 'becomes alienated power'.

Dahl's response is to try to redesign democracy to meet its new challenge. His 'Vision of a possible future' is based on the oldest democratic ideal of all, that of an educated and involved public. What is novel is his attempt to enlist the newest communications technology in the 'urgent democratic goal' of fostering politically competent citizens. He hopes to ensure that appropriate knowledge is easily and universally accessible to all citizens, to create opportunities for all citizens to participate in political discussions in a relevant way, and to provide for the formation of a highly informed and representative body of public opinion.

Robert Dahl accepts, without any fight, that his ideas are over-optimistic and are unlikely to be adopted on a large scale by any country in the near future. But this is the best estimate he can offer of how to adapt resources and institutions in order to ensure that nuclear strategy and the democratic process do not remain strangers. Democracy has flaws, but Dahl is convinced that it is 'definitely superior' to systems based on the idea of guardianship. As a solution to our predicament, Dahl's trust in a better educated and more involved public means that the book ends with a whimper rather than a bang; but when it comes to nuclear weapons, I, for one, am always willing to settle for that.

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This book has many merits, and one questionable assumption. It proceeds from the observation that the UN has been left on the sidelines, frustrated by its lack of clout, whenever the United States and the Soviet Union have decided to engage in serious arms negotiations.

Beker's interest is in how the UN, 'left with the unworlthy role of playing bureaucratic and
procedural games with its machinery for disarmament' (p. 33), has transformed disarmament from a 'security concept' to 'a vehicle to reallocate resources in order to get rid of the "law of the great powers" and create a more equal world order' (p. 175). Against the history of the Non-Aligned Movement from 1961 to 1982 he demonstrates how UN pursuit of the New International Economic Order 'has changed dramatically the political culture and the climate in which security, disarmament, and world order issues are examined' (p. 174). For the UN majority, 'disarmament became a corollary of their NIEO politics' (p. 60).

There is an interesting story to be told here, and Beker (who served in Israel's UN delegation from 1977 to 1982) tells it well. It is refreshing to see the Non-Proliferation Treaty (and its aftermath), the 1978 Special Session on Disarmament and UN votes on nuclear and conventional weapons subjected to thorough analysis in the context of Third World insistence (which Beker identifies with 'NIEO philosophy') on sovereign equality and distributive justice. These chapters are first class and very fully documented.

The factual content of this book alone will endear it to readers bewildered by the paradoxical expansion of agenda items and resolutions and the proliferation of 'negotiating', 'deliberative' and other organs which have flourished pari passu with the UN's relegation to the margins of effective action on disarmament.

Beker's one questionable assumption—from which much of his indignation flows—is that 'the politics of NIEO and its manifestations in disarmament debates mark a departure from the provisions of the Charter' (p. 89): provisions which, for him, comprise the legitimization of a principle of hierarchy, with the great powers recognized as (in Hedley Bull's phrase) the 'responsible managers of international affairs' (p. 115). Certainly that principle is to be found in the Charter. But so is much else, including the principle of sovereign equality and the goal, in Article 26, of 'a system for the regulation of armaments' to ensure 'the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources'. So it could equally be argued that relating disarmament to the UN's strong development orientation (including NIEO) as well as to security is a proper and even laudable consequence of the Article 26 exhortation. For all its attendant hypocrisies and impracticalities, this may be a logical evolution in UN history, derived from first principles, rather than a negation of the Charter system.

Be that as it may, Beker is undoubtedly right to portray 'the real debate on disarmament at the UN' as 'a political-diplomatic extension of the struggle to change the international order' (p. 99); and he has furnished us with a most readable criticism of that process which is at once polemical and scholarly.

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Books on nuclear proliferation tend to take the form of symposia rather than full-length treatments by a single author. Perhaps this issue requires too much specialist knowledge: the details of the processes by which nuclear weapons might be fabricated, and the international arrangements designed to prevent this; the approaches of the main suppliers, and the reasons why a diverse number of near-nuclear countries have yet to go the whole way but might do so in the future. The other notable feature of this issue is that it is a problem that is always imminent but never quite upon us. Past alarmism has not been warranted yet future potential does not permit complacency. As James Schlesinger notes in his foreword to Jed Snyder's and Samuel Wells's edited collection, the 'structure of the problem' has not changed greatly over the past two decades.

As a result of both these facts there is rather a standard format for books on nuclear proliferation, to which this one also conforms: a set of case studies on potential proliferators (in this case, Israel, India and Pakistan, Iraq, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil); a discussion of the policies of the major suppliers (in this case, the United States and the Soviet Union, with, curiously, no discussion of the main European suppliers except in passing), and then an assessment of the proposals for greater international control. The familiarity of these issues and the standard format means that the main value of books such as this lies in getting one up to date.