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TALK OF THE TOWN

Love That Bomb

It's not just the Indians who fetishize nukes.

by Malcolm Gladwell

In the American hierarchy of things that kill people, bombs have never had much moral cachet. There is no National Bomb Association dedicated to the inalienable right of hunters to off Bambi's mom with, say, fragmentation grenades. Even in the shrillest debates on Capitol Hill, no freshman Republican has ever got up to declare that "bombs don't kill people, people do." In the movies, it's the bad guy who plants the bomb in the good guy's car; the good guy uses a .44 Magnum. When it comes to how we think about blowing each other away, there is an unspoken assumption that the kind of weapon you point is nobler than the kind you wire up to an alarm clock.

A similar ordering obtains on the level of international relations. "Weapons of mass destruction"--poison gas, germ-warfare agents, and, above all, nuclear bombs and missiles--are bad. Guns are, if not exactly good, the

backbone of one of America's most profitable export businesses. Such distinctions have little to do with how deadly guns and bombs have proved to be in real life. On that score, firearms, which claimed tens of thousands of American lives last year, win hands down. In most states, they can be bought almost as easily as toaster ovens. (We will ban cigarettes long before we will ban handguns.) But a bomb is something that evil geniuses like the Unabomber use. Bombs have elaborate detonators and timing devices, and must be defused by experts. Guns are dumb; bombs are brainy (and nuclear bombs are the brainiest of all).

Imagine if, last week, India had conducted provocative military maneuvers along the Pakistani border, or had started infiltrating commandos across it, or, for that matter, had merely continued along the pugnacious path that the new government there had

publicly charted. None of those conventionally bellicose acts would have turned India into International Public Enemy No. 1.

This is not to minimize or excuse what India has done in conducting the underground nuclear tests that disturbed the world's peace last week. Nuclear weapons have always received special consideration, for very good and very obvious reasons, and the fact that not one has been fired in anger since the Second World War is among the greatest successes of modern diplomacy. That India has chosen to flaunt its sinister expertise in this area is rightly a cause for indignation: India has triggered an arms race on the Asian subcontinent; it has further destabilized an already unstable region. The imposition of sanctions is entirely justified. Still, it is worth asking why this particular act--among the

infinite variety of nasty things that countries do to one another and to their own citizens--is treated as uniquely outrageous. For if there is a lesson to be learned from the last fifty years--from what has been done by Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, the Rwandans, and the Bosnians, among others--it is that human beings don't need weapons of mass destruction in order to engage in mass destruction. Human ingenuity and human depravity are such that guns and machetes will do. It is true that with a bomb you can kill people faster and more emphatically. But here we risk reënacting, on the international stage, the inanity of our domestic things-that-kill-people hierarchy. Pol Pot, instead of shooting and starving millions of his countrymen in the course of several years, could presumably have herded them together and detonated a small nuclear device in their midst. That the former genocidal act did not compel us to action but the latter most assuredly would have is not evidence of moral seriousness on our part. It is evidence of moral myopia.

The Indians are not the only ones to fetishize the bomb. A decade after the fading of the Cold War, the United States and Russia continue

to maintain arsenals of tens of thousands of atomic and hydrogen bombs, for what purpose no one can say--unless it is to serve some sort of vague national prestige. To the Indians, this action, or inaction, evidently speaks louder than all our anti-proliferation words. No wonder the announcement of the tests last week was greeted with euphoria by so many Indians. To them, the bomb is a way of earning respect--a salve for what President Clinton quickly diagnosed as their belief that "they have been underappreciated in the world." Clinton spoke of India as a school principal might speak of a troubled but promising adolescent suffering from low self-esteem. If this was diplomacy as guidance counselling, it was nonetheless a shrewd insight.

It is important that India be firmly divested of the nuclear illusion, but it is equally important that we divest ourselves of it as well. The bomb fetish is a James Bondish fantasy. It is also an embodiment of the high-modernist creed that form--in this case, the mastery of the scientific--carries automatic moral weight. And it is this creed that has led us to channel our indignation disproportionately into those instances in which evil meets a predetermined set of technical criteria. To the

victims of mass slaughter, the distinction is without a difference.

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