

FIRE OR ICE?

Lee Owens, San Diego State College

The following words of Robert Frost appeared in the March, 1939, Atlantic Monthly:

"Some say the world will end in fire
Some say in ice
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice."

Today I would like to examine the dichotomy of this poem in the light of today's threatened world. In 1945, the first conclusion, the end of the world in fire, became a realistic possibility with the advent of the atomic bomb. The threat of continued war with Japan was averted, but mankind now faced a new kind of threat. Our ability to cope with this awesome power will ultimately decide our fate.

Since the end of the second World War, we have had armed conflict after armed conflict. These have often led us to the brink of the holocaust predicted by Frost. But strangely enough after each of these we had a cooling off period. These "cooling off" periods have deceived us into a continuing belief that we need no longer concern ourselves with a fiery demise, but that we would now have to fear the icy death of cold war.

During the Korean conflict (and notice I use the word conflict, for in today's sophisticated world, the loss of a few hundred lives and millions of dollars in property constitutes little more than a mere conflict) both the free world and the communist world were ready, willing, and able to escalate to nuclear armaments. At that time the might of the United States had not been tested as far as nuclear armaments were concerned, and Russia wanted to prove that she could assume world leadership. As for the United States, we had no idea of the strength of the determination of our adversaries.

Why we didn't have a nuclear war is best explained by Dr. Bernard Kiezzel, sociologist at Oxford, when he stated, "It was a miracle." And indeed, it was. But a miracle of mixed blessing, for it led to a dichotomous situation.

During the cooling off period that followed the Korean conflict, many nations began to test their political strength. The battle ground shifted from the Far East to New York City and the United Nations.

The weapons were no longer rifles, tanks, and bombs; but threats, invective and cold war propaganda. The world won't end in fire, we told ourselves, and we began preparing for a long cold war winter.

Out of this cold war turmoil came a new hot crisis. The world powers re-alligned themselves. It was now France and England versus the United States, Russia and Egypt versus England, and Israel apparently versus everyone. There were threats, walk-outs, broken treaties, and severed diplomatic relations. And all over a little stretch of water that linked the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. Yes, this was the Suez crisis, and once again we were on the brink of war. Strange as it may seem, tempers cooled, and countries once again went to the bargaining tables. We had survived this period of brinkmanship, only to be tossed back into the cold war. From fire, to ice.

In 1956, African states began to assert their independence. Such names as Patrice Lumumba, Kasavubu, and Mau-Mau became common household words as we once again found ourselves threatened. This crisis grew and grew until the entire world was involved when the United Nations was forced to use its influence to send a "peace-keeping" force into the Congo. At that time Russia asserted her desire for world supremacy by attacking the position of the free world nations. This attack was not to be halted, and has, indeed, continued to today. So while the armed conflict subsided, flared, and subsided again, the cold war continued.

Realistically the Cuban crisis has been going on since 1959, when Castro first came to power. Examples of this recurring crisis are: the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 when Khrushchev declared, "That an attack upon Cuba was the same thing as an attack upon the Soviet Union."

Then there was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when United States planes discovered armed missiles within 90 miles of America. President Kennedy ordered an embargo against Cuba, and the world stood back and watched the United States and Russia prepare for war.

Prepared we became, embattled, we did not become. Russia and the United States were content to fight with words and leave the bombs for some other time.

At that time, the continuation of the cold war seemed the lesser of two evils. We went back to the conference table. But as always, the cold war heated up again.

After a short pause, we are again balanced on the brink of a nuclear escalation. It is more important to realize that the problem in South Viet Nam exists, than to expand upon it. The problem here is that problem that has been with us since the end of the Second World War, and before. The dichotomy that Robert Frost outlined in 1939 has the world today in the unhappy position of choosing between two very unsatisfactory ends. We can either escalate the next conflict, or one of the ones presently on the fire, or we can hope to do away with this choice, and face the equally horrendous choice of slow demise in the cold war.

In light of what has happened in the past, even if the world powers remained as they were when the whole thing began, one comes to the conclusion that fire will be the ultimate end of mankind. But the world has not remained in its former state. There is a new ember glowing that may very well set off the final conflagration. Red China now has the means to start a nuclear war. If our CIA men are right, she could do this within seven years. Her actions in the past lead us even more relentlessly to the conclusion that Frost outlined for the first, and in practical terms, the final end. . .

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I hold with those who favor fire ..."