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## Pacifism and the West: An Apology for Suicide

By Juliana Geran Pilon, Ph.D.

The National Forum Foundation Executive Director

*Editor's Preview:* One of the most penetrating discussions of the rights of individuals and nations to defend themselves is offered in this essay by National Forum Foundation Executive Director Juliana Geran Pilon. Originally presented during the Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) seminar, "The Morality of Defense," in November of 1987, her remarks go to the heart of the modern foreign policy debate in a unique way — by turning back the clock over two thousand years.

When Athenians gathered in 399 B.C. to sit in judgment over the seventy-year-old self-proclaimed gadfly Socrates, what they heard was not a plea for forgiveness but a proud, dignified accusation of the verdict. Socrates declared that what he deserved was not the death sentence but rather a reward for attempting to force his fellow citizens to face truth, justice, and beauty. In words that would inspire for centuries thereafter, Socrates refused to stoop to a genuine defense of his actions and what he saw as begging for forgiveness and life. He dismissed such an option with the words: "The difficulty, my friends, is not to avoid death, but to avoid unrighteousness."

### **The Problem of Pacifism**

I can only applaud such a statement, and later will argue that Socrates was ultimately right—but, let me add, not without serious qualification. What requires vigorous rebuttal, it seems to me, is the suggestion that defense and the notion of "avoiding death," even when the attack is unjustified and based on falsehood, should somehow be unrighteous and



a sign of weakness.

Yet Socrates appears to have held just such a position. To be sure, he couches it in a qualification, noting that the context is a legal framework involving tacit consent. That qualification, however, is ultimately unsatisfactory, and even outright disastrous if applied to the international scene. In today's complex and dangerous world, it seems particularly important to defend the concept of legitimate individual and national self-defense. For the alternative is either totalitarian triumph or at the very least a virtual repudiation of human dignity.

Let me return, however, to the arguments in Socrates' misnamed *Apology*. A somewhat more serious attempt at explaining the reasons for his refusal to fight against what he clearly saw as an undeserved death sentence is put forth in another dialogue, the *Crito*. When his

friends implore him to escape from prison, Socrates outlines a mock dialogue with the laws. He has the laws speak in the following words: "Well, then, since you were brought into the world and nurtured and educated by us, can you deny in the first place that you are our child and slave, as your fathers were before you? And if this is true, you are not on equal terms with us; nor can you think that you have a right to do to us what we are doing to you. . . . And because we have a right to destroy you, do you think that you have a right to destroy us in return? . . . And when we are punished by [our country], whether with imprisonment or stripes, the punishment is to be endured in silence; and if she leads us to wounds or death in battle, thither we follow as is right; neither may any one yield or retreat or leave his rank, but whether in battle or in a court of law, or in any other place, he must do what his city and country order him. . . ."

When Socrates asks Crito—obviously rhetorically—whether the laws speak rightly, Crito offers no resistance. Yet Socrates' argument is disturbing on many counts.

In the first place, the idea that a quasi-contractual arrangement exists between a citizen and his state based on services provided by the state even prior to a citizen's ability to assent in any way to receipt of such services makes a mockery of the concept of voluntariness implicit in any contract. It is true that elsewhere, in the *Apology*, Socrates notes that he could have left the country had he disagreed with its legal system—evidently implying a later, and conscious, consent. Even so, Socrates never entertains the idea that individuals

have inalienable rights that no law should violate, and hence he has no conception of legitimately defending such rights.

Yet such a conception is—or should be—at the basis of a moral argument in favor of self-defense. For if someone is innocent and attacked, whether on the basis of a mistake or deliberately, maliciously, criminally, there should be no question whatever about the rightness, indeed necessity, of self-defense. It is when the Socratic argument is used in the context of a totalitarian state that its absurdity becomes quickly apparent. The captive citizens of a communist state may have no choice but to accept being punished for, say, exercising their freedom of religion. Yet surely we do not expect them to yield voluntarily, even gladly, to the unjust punishments caused by a legal system that has only contempt for such freedom. Being born in a state and being “nourished” by it carries no moral obligation to eternal submission.

On the contrary, when an individual becomes the victim of unfounded attack, when his life is threatened on the basis of merely unpalatable speech—as was the case with Socrates—the world applauds a courageous protest, and international law recognizes his full right to refugee status should he be able to flee his oppressive circumstances. To do otherwise, in fact, would be to sacrifice his own humanity and to do—in Socrates’ own words—what is “unrighteous.”

### **National and International Defense**

Now let me pass—by logical *legerdemain*—to the international context. If a nation, by analogy, is threatened by an aggressive neighbor, I

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Dr. Juliana Geran Pilon is the executive director of the National Forum Foundation in Washington, D.C. A former consultant to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and, for many years, the senior policy analyst in United Nations studies and visiting scholar in East-West relations at the Heritage Foundation, she is the co-author of *The U.N.: Assessing Soviet Abuses* (1988) and the author of *Notes From the Other Side of Night*, based on the experiences of her Rumanian youth, and nearly a hundred articles and reviews. She appears frequently on radio and television, including Radio America, the BBC, Nightline, C-SPAN and PBS. Dr. Pilon earned her Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago and has taught on college campuses around the country.

argue that no prior commitment to an international regime should prevent legitimate defense even if that regime should somehow rule against the wronged nation. Actually, the U.N. Charter clearly recognizes this right, both by forbidding all U.N. members from using threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, and also by recognizing that nothing contained in the Charter can authorize the U.N. to intervene in matters which are “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.” Part of “domestic jurisdiction” is, clearly, self-preservation.

be taken to prevent war from breaking out among antagonistic nations. Such measures are nothing but an extension of defense, indeed an intrinsic part of it, and in the nuclear age they are not only wise but indispensable.

When Socrates’ argument for pacifism or nonresistance is applied in the international context, its weakness is particularly vivid as one considers the recent performance of the United Nations—especially the General Assembly. For, Charter provisions aside, the U.N. has consistently turned against Western attempts to rebuff aggressive acts by Third World

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In Article 51, the Charter specifically protects “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense,” further ensured by the provision in Article 52 which says that states in the Charter “preclude the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with such matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security as are appropriate for regional action”—thus allowing for such organizations as NATO, ASEAN, and the Warsaw Pact, and hence a fairly broad conception of what actions are legitimately part of self-defense.

Defense cannot, after all, realistically be expected to be simply a spontaneous reaction to an actual attack. In a recent article published in the fall issue of the *National Interest*, State Department legal advisor Abraham Sofaer notes that “the U.S. has always assumed that that Charter principles provide a workable set of rules to deal with the array of needs that potentially require the use of force, including such threats as state-sponsored terrorism and insurgencies, even if they are not deemed to amount to an ‘armed attack.’”

And surely the most significant aspect of modern defense is deterrence, which is usually obtained by military readiness and an effective defense system such as the Strategic Defense Initiative pejoratively and misleadingly known as “Star Wars.” In addition, there are a broad variety of diplomatic and economic measures that must

or Marxist states.

The U.S. in particular has been condemned by large U.N. majorities for its bombing of Libya, without consideration for that government’s repeated terrorist attacks against U.S. citizens; the U.S. has been condemned for its action in Grenada, despite clear threats against Americans there as well; and more recently the World Court condemned U.S. actions in Nicaragua despite massive Soviet military input.

Indeed, the fact that a nation may benefit in certain respects from the existence of an international system—such as the U.N. or the World Court—in no way should prevent it from fully insuring its self-preservation. This is particularly the case, by the way, with the World Court, whose jurisdiction is not even recognized by most nations, including the Soviet Union. As for the United Nations, its politicized and one-sided agenda makes it highly questionable whether the U.S. and indeed Western nations in general benefit from the system at all.

Perhaps no one knows that as well as the tiny nation of Israel, which has been under siege at the United Nations at least since 1967, the year that U.N. member waged a successfully, undeniably defensive seven-day war which unleashed the wrath of the U.N.’s majority. Speaking before the General Assembly on June 18, 1982, Prime Minister Menachem Begin urged that the first step toward the reali-

zation of a peaceful world should be to ban aggressive war. He chided the well-intentioned but short-sighted authors of the Paris Pact of August 27, 1928, better known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, for omitting the adjective "aggressive" in Article 1 of the Pact.

The article reads as follows: "The High Contracting Parties solemnly declare in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another."

This text, charged Begin, turned the Kellogg-Briand Pact into a mere *pium desiderium* which was obviously powerless to prevent the events of the 1930s and 1940s. He recommends that the words "they condemn recourse to war" should be replaced with a stronger version—"they give up recourse to war"—and also that a qualifier should be added at the end of the sentence: "except in self-defense."

Continues Begin: "Self-defense is a most sacred right and duty of man. Our world is divided into different planes: there is the North and the South, the West and the East; the developed and the developing countries; the poor and the rich lands. But in our time there is also still the division between tyranny and liberty. As long as tyranny is armed, liberty must have and develop weapons for its defense. Otherwise, slavery will engulf the whole of mankind and all the pacts and the visions will be in vain. Pacifism is a beautiful idea, but if it confronts aggressive totalitarianism it is the greatest provocation, inviting attack, subjugation and destruction."

I take exception with the suggestion that

pacifism is "beautiful" in any way. For war must never be ruled out lest it invites war and slavery. And Socrates should never have suggested that anyone can be or should be a "slave" to any legal arrangement.

### **Individual Liberty and Self-Defense**

**I**t is perhaps no accident that Plato's *Republic* fully subordinates the individual to the state in the name of universal harmony and happiness. It is also no accident, I would agree with British philosopher Karl Popper, that one of Plato's disciples was none other than Karl Marx. For neither thinker ultimately appreciated the concept of *individual* human rights. The precept that a person is "the child and slave" of the laws, as Socrates tells Crito, has a chilling modern totalitarian ring.

As against this approach, I suggest that it is the preservation of individual liberty indeed that should be the focal point of departure for a modern approach to national self-defense. It is the preservation of individual liberty that must provide the principal argument for a strong defense program—in particular, against the principal enemy of the free world, the Soviet Union.

But how so, in the era of *glasnost*? To depart from the lofty height of philosophy and descend into the practical world of the U.S.-Soviet conflict, the question is: should the U.S. continue on its course of vigilance and megadollars spent on defense? Is Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev a man cut of another cloth, a liberal in red clothing?

I leave to Sovietologists speculation

about the meaning and implications of Gorbachev's approach to reform—for such speculation is surely abundant, ranging from charges that Gorbachev is simply a modern-day Stalinist to the better known euphoria that has him placed in the tradition of Western liberalism. Instead, let me simply cite a few facts.

In the first place, the dismal economic picture of the USSR alone would indicate that some reforms would be contemplated, quite apart from any peaceful and liberal intentions of its ruling class. In 1987, for example, the Soviet gross national product grew by less than one percent, according to a report by the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency released in April of 1988. At the same time, according to the just-published report *The Military Balance 1988-1989* by London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, the USSR continues to modernize "all elements of the strategic nuclear forces" in its arsenal. The report also notes that "there is as yet no indication that the increase in the rate of defense spending has been cut since the beginning of Gorbachev's tenure."

This observation is entirely consistent with the CIA-DIA report, which goes on to explain why there will be no such cuts in the future either: "Gorbachev probably would be reluctant to leave himself open to charges of weakening Soviet defenses by pushing reforms or resource shifts that many in the military leadership oppose."

In fact, Gorbachev may have gotten away with many reforms—or at least promises—as he has partly because they have been tolerated by the powerful Soviet military leadership in the expectation of future gains. *Military Balance* predicts that

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improvements in the Soviet economy as a result of a felicitous outcome of the Gorbachevian *perestroika* will probably strengthen the military as well, in the distant if not the immediate future: "any permanent improvement in the overall

cinctly: "the USSR is building new generations of offensive strategic and nuclear forces, as well as conventional land, sea, and air forces and strategic defense forces, going far beyond legitimate requirements for defense."

"defense is — or should be — a spiritual, not merely a physical matter."

economy and in industrial efficiency resulting from these [reforms], even at the short-term expense of the military, will in the long term benefit the defense sector—a fact which appears to have been explicitly recognized by the military leadership."

A more detailed picture of the Soviet military threat appears in the Defense Department's publication entitled *Soviet Military Power: An Assessment of the Threat, 1988*. In his introduction, Secretary of Defense Frank C. Carlucci explains that since 1981 virtually every component of Soviet military power has been expanded and modernized, the military budget has continued to grow at a rate of 3 percent per year, and "the Soviets' willingness to use military force to exact compliance through threats and even by crossing international borders in armed aggression, as they did in Afghanistan, is undeniable."

In his introduction to the 1987 edition of the publication, then-Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger put it suc-

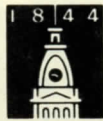
A few figures might be helpful: during 1977-1986, the USSR built 3,000 ICBMs and SLBMs, the U.S. only 850; the USSR 140,000 surface-to-air missiles, the U.S. 16,200; the USSR 24,400 tanks, the U.S. 7,100; the USSR 90 submarines, the U.S. 43; the USSR 28,200 artillery pieces, the U.S. 2,350. To be sure, the new INF treaty will involve a reduction in both American and Soviet weapons, but the danger is far from over; there is still enough in both countries' arsenals for world destruction. And Gorbachev's course does not suggest any reason for laxness on our part.

For at stake is not only the defense of U.S. territory. At least as important is the preservation of the American way of life, the principle of individual liberty and human dignity. In this respect, it is more than fitting to turn to Socrates for inspiration, for some of his words do ring as true today as they did two and a half millenia ago when he addressed the mystified, misguided Athenians. Before the

accusing audience, ready to condemn him to death, Socrates defended his mission which he believed was to teach men that the unexamined life is not worth living. He accepted his sentence—unjust and severe as it was—with dignity, despising the very idea that death is to be feared. Rather, it is injustice and error that must be shunned. "I would rather die and speak after my manner than speak in your manner and live," declares the unrepentant philosopher.

With such a message I would leave you, if only to put in perspective the idea that defense is—or should be—a spiritual, not merely a physical matter. Else there should be little point in survival, for survival, truly, is not only not enough but is superfluous if all one saves is an empty vessel, from which the soul has fled. Socrates understood that defining one's being is by far the harder matter, and requires a scrupulous philosophic dedication to a constantly, mercilessly examined life that alone is worth living.

Such an ideal should not only be compatible, however, with a courageous dedication to self-defense but should, in fact, precede it. For individuals whose commitment to human dignity is strong will defy the enemies of liberty, and do so successfully. So let me end on a note of gratitude to the ancient philosopher, for having at least stated that self-respect and not mere physical survival is the ultimate, priceless human value. **A**



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