

WEAPONS

War of the Icons

When the Russian girl Valentina Tereshkova, quite without pilot training, went into orbit on June 16, 1963, her action, as reacted to in the press and other media, was a kind of defacing of the images of the male astronauts, especially the Americans. Shunning the expertise of American astronauts, all of whom were qualified test pilots, the Russians don't seem to feel that space travel is related enough to the airplane to require a pilot's wings." Since our culture forbids the sending of a woman into orbit, our only repartee would have been to launch into orbit a group of space children, to indicate that it is, after all, child's play. The first sputnik or "little fellowtraveler" was a witty taunting of the capitalist world by means of a new kind of technological image or icon, for which a group of children in orbit might yet be a telling retort. Plainly, the first lady astronaut is offered to the

West as a little Valentine 梠r heart throb 案uited to our sentimentality. In fact, the war of the icons, or the eroding of the collective countenance of one's rivals, has long been under way. Ink and photo are supplanting soldiery and tanks. The pen daily becomes mightier than the sword.

The French phrase "guerre des nerfs" of twenty-five years ago has since come to be referred to as "the cold war." It is really an electric battle of information and of images that goes far deeper and is more obsessional than the old hot wars of industrial hardware.

The "hot" wars of the past used weapons that knocked off the enemy, one by one. Even ideological warfare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proceeded by persuading individuals to adopt new points of view, one at a time. Electric persuasion by photo and movie and TV works, instead, by dunking entire populations in new imagery. Full awareness of this technological change had dawned on Madison Avenue ten years ago when it shifted its tactics from the promotion of the individual product to the collective involvement in the "corporate image," now altered to "corporate posture."

Parallel to the new cold war of information exchange is the situation commented on by James Reston in a New York Times release from Washington:

Politics has gone international. The British Labor Leader is here campaigning for Prime Minister of Britain, and fairly soon John F. Kennedy will be over in Italy and Germany campaigning for reelection. Everybody's now whistle-stopping through somebody else's country, usually ours.

Washington has still not adjusted to this third-man role. It keeps forgetting that anything said here may be used by one side or another in some election campaign, and that it may, by accident, be the decisive element in the final vote.

If the cold war in 1964 is being fought by informational tech-

nology, that is because all wars have been fought by the latest technology available in any culture. In one of his sermons John Donne commented thankfully on the blessing of heavy firearms: So by the benefit of this light of reason they have found out *Artillery*, by which warres come to quicker ends than heretofore . .

The scientific knowledge needed for the use of gunpowder and the boring of cannon appeared to Donne as "the light of reason." He failed to notice another advance in the same technology that hastened and extended the scope of human slaughter. It is referred to by John U. Nef in *War and Human Progress*:

The gradual abandonment of armor as a part of the equipment of soldiers during the seventeenth century freed some metal supplies for the manufacture of firearms and missiles.

It is easy to discover in this a seamless web of interwoven events when we turn to look at the psychic and social consequences of the technological extensions of man.

Back in the 1920s King Amanullah seems to have put his finger on this web when he said, after firing off a torpedo:

"I feel half an Englishman already."

The same sense of the relentlessly interwoven texture of human fate was touched by the schoolboy who said:

"Dad, I hate war."

"Why, son?"

"Because war makes history, and I hate history."

The techniques developed over the centuries for drilling gun-barrels provided the means that made possible the steam engine. The piston shaft and the gun presented the same problems in boring hard steel. Earlier, it had been the lineal stress of Perspective that had channeled perception in paths that led to

the creation of gunfire. Long before guns, gunpowder had been used explosively, dynamite style. The use of gunpowder for the propelling of missiles in trajectories waited for the coming of perspective in the arts. This liaison of events between technology and the arts may explain a matter that has long puzzled anthropologists. They have repeatedly tried to explain the fact that non-literates are generally poor shots with rifles, on the grounds that, with the bow and arrow, proximity to game was more important than distant accuracy, which was almost impossible to achieve – hence, say some anthropologists, their imitation of hunted beasts by dressing in skins to get close to the herd. It is also pointed out that bows are silent, and when an arrow missed, animals rarely fled.

If the arrow is an extension of the hand and the arm, the rifle is an extension of the eye and teeth. It may be to the point to remark that it was the literate American colonists who were first to insist on a rifled barrel and improved gunsights. They improved the old muskets, creating the Kentucky rifle. It was the highly literate Bostonians who outshot the British regulars. Marksmanship is not the gift of the native or the woodsman, but of the literate colonist. So runs this argument that links gunfire itself with the rise of perspective, and with the extension of the visual power in literacy. In the Marine Corps it has been found that there is a definite correlation between education and marksmanship. Not for the nonliterate is our easy selection of a separate, isolated target in space, with the rifle as an extension of the eye.

If gunpowder was known long before it was used for guns; the same is also true of the use of the lodestone or magnet. Its use in the compass for lineal navigation had, also, to wait for the discovery of lineal perspective in the arts. Navigators took a long time to accept the possibility of space as uniform, connected, and continuous. Today in physics, as in painting and sculpture, progress consists in giving up the idea of space as either uniform, continuous, or connected. Visuality has lost its primacy.

In the Second World War the marksman was replaced by automatic weapons fired blindly in what were called "perimeters of fire" or "fire lanes." The old-timers fought to retain the bolt-action Springfield which encouraged single-shot accuracy and sighting. Spraying the air with lead in a kind of tactual embrace was found to be good by night, as well as by day, and sighting was unnecessary. At this stage of technology, the literate man is somewhat in the position of the old-timers who backed the Springfield rifle against perimeter fire. It is this same visual habit that deters and obstructs literate man in modern physics, as Milic Capek explains in *The Philosophical Impact of Modern Physics*. Men in the older oral societies of middle Europe are better able to conceive the nonvisual velocities and relations of the subatomic world.

Our highly literate societies are at a loss as they encounter the new structures of opinion and feeling that result from instant and global information. They are still in the grip of "points of view" and of habits of dealing with things one at a time. Such habits are quite crippling in any electric structure of information movement, yet they could be controlled if we recognized whence they had been acquired. But literate society thinks of its artificial visual bias as a thing natural and innate.

Literacy remains even now the base and model of all programs of industrial mechanization; but, at the same time, it locks the minds and senses of its users in the mechanical and fragmentary matrix that is so necessary to the maintenance of mechanized society. That is why the transition from mechanical to electric technology is so very traumatic and severe for us all. The mechanical techniques, with their limited powers, we have long used as weapons. The electric techniques cannot be used aggressively except to end all life at once, like the turning off of a light. To live with both of these technologies at the same time is the peculiar drama of the twentieth century.

In his *Education Automation*, R. Buckminster Fuller considers that

weaponry has been a source of technological advance for mankind because it requires continually improved performance with ever smaller means. "As we went from the ships of the sea to the ships of the air, the performance per pound of the equipment and fuel became of even higher importance than on the sea."

It is this trend toward more and more power with less and less hardware that is characteristic of the electric age of information. Fuller has estimated that in the first half century of the airplane the nations of the world have invested two and a half trillion dollars by subsidy of the airplane as a weapon. He added that this amounts to sixty-two times the value of all the gold in the world. His approach to these problems is more technological than the approach of historians, who have often tended to find that war produces nothing new in the way of invention.

"This man will teach us how to beat him," Peter the Great is said to have remarked after his army had been beaten by Charles XII of Sweden. Today, the backward countries can learn from us how to beat us. In the new electric age of information, the backward countries enjoy some specific advantages over the highly literate and industrialized cultures. For backward countries have the habit and understanding of oral propaganda and persuasion that was eroded in industrial societies long ago. The Russians had only to adapt their traditions of Eastern icon and image-building to the new electric media in order to be aggressively effective in the modern world of information. The idea of the Image, that Madison Avenue has had to learn the hard way, was the only idea available to Russian propaganda. The Russians have not shown imagination or resourcefulness in their propaganda. They have merely done that which their religious and cultural traditions taught them; namely, to build images.

The city, itself, is traditionally a military weapon, and is a collective shield or plate armor, an extension of the castle of our very skins. Before the huddle of the city, there was the food-gathering phase of man the hunter, even as men have now in the

electric age returned psychically and socially to the nomad state. Now, however, it is called information-gathering and data-processing. But it is global, and it ignores and replaces the form of the city which has, therefore, tended to become obsolete. With instant electric technology, the globe itself can never again be more than a village, and the very nature of city as a form of major dimensions must inevitably dissolve like a fading shot in a movie. The first circumnavigation of the globe in the Renaissance gave men a sense of embracing and possessing the earth that was quite new, even as the recent astronauts have again altered man's relation to the planet, reducing its scope to the extent of an evening's stroll. The city, like a ship, is a collective extension of the castle of our skins, even as clothing is an extension of our individual skins. But weapons proper are extensions of hands, nails, and teeth, and come into existence as tools needed for accelerating the processing of matter. Today, when we live in a time of sudden transition from mechanical to electric technology, it is easier to see the character of all previous technologies, we being detached from all of them for the time being. Since our new electric technology is not an extension of our bodies but of our central nervous systems, we now see all technology, including language, as a means of processing experience, a means of storing and speeding information. And in such a situation all technology can plausibly be regarded as weapons. Previous wars can now be regarded as the processing of difficult and resistant materials by the latest technology, the speedy dumping of industrial products on an enemy market to the point of social saturation. War, in fact, can be seen as a process of achieving equilibrium among unequal technologies, a fact that explains Toynbee's puzzled observation that each invention of a new weapon is a disaster for society, and that militarism itself is the most common cause of the breaking of civilizations. By militarism, Rome extended civilization or individualism,

literacy and lineality to many oral and backward tribes. Even today the mere existence of a literate and industrial West appears quite naturally as dire aggression to nonliterate societies; just as the mere existence of the atom bomb appears as a state of universal aggression to industrial and mechanized societies.

On the one hand, a new weapon or technology looms as a threat to all who lack it. On the other hand, when everybody has the same technological aids, there begins the competitive fury of the homogenized and the egalitarian pattern against which the strategy of social class and caste has often been used in the past. For caste and class are techniques of social slow-down that tend to create the stasis of tribal societies. Today we appear to be poised between two ages --one of detribalization and one of retribalization.

Between the acting of a dreadful thing,
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a Phantasma, or a hideous
Dream: The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little Kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

(Julius Caesar, Brutus II, i)

If mechanical technology as extension of parts of the human body had exerted a fragmenting force, psychically and socially, this fact appears nowhere more vividly than in mechanical weaponry. With the extension of the central nervous system by electric technology, even weaponry makes more vivid the fact of the unity of the human family. The very inclusiveness of information as a weapon becomes a daily reminder that politics and history must be recast in the form of "the concretization of human fraternity."

This dilemma of weaponry appears very clearly to Leslie

Dewart in his *Criticism and Revolution*, when he points to the obsolescence of the fragmented balance of power techniques. As an instrument of policy, modern war has come to mean "the existence and end of one society to the exclusion of another". At this point, weaponry is a self-liquidating fact.