

A MODEST PROPOSAL

Alan Lightman

Alan Lightman writes on science issues. Among his books are *Time Travel and Papa Joe's Pipe* (1984) and *A Modern Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court and Other Essays on Science* (1986). Both the title of this essay and Lightman's satiric method derive, of course, from Jonathan Swift's biting "Modest Proposal" (1729). (Swift's essay is reprinted in Appendix E.) Swift's subject—the widespread suffering caused by famine in Ireland—is very different from Lightman's; but both satirists attempt, through their outrageous proposals, to jar the ignorant and the uncaring out of their complacency and force them to contemplate a critical problem.



There are so many of my generation who have never felt a war. By and large, this is a good thing, of course, but as we postwar babies slowly climb into the seats of political power, I wonder about the consequences of today's terrible weapons coming into the hands of such innocents. Current leaders, whatever their politics, at least can recall the appalling death scenes at Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Hamburg, Tokyo, and Dresden.¹ I've seen only photographs. I've read books. I was riveted to the television set by *The Day After* and talked it over in horror for several days with my wife.² Then it wore off, like the memory of a nightmare.

Some of the scientists of my age, not waiting for any particular seniority, have already put their minds to designing the new generation of space-based weapons, spurred on by President Reagan's Star Wars speech last year. The team of fighter jocks immortalized in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* seem to have been curiously reincarnated in the dozen or so young physicists "pushing back the edge" in space weapons design in "O Group" of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. These intellectual test pilots are mostly in their late twenties and all male. They inhabit a world of empty Coke bottles and

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¹All these cities suffered near-total destruction by Allied aerial bombing during the latter part of World War II.

²In 1983, the TV movie, *The Day After*—dramatizing the effects of a thermonuclear bomb dropped on a typical, medium-sized city—became a media event weeks before it was even broadcast, inspiring intense and widespread discussions in schools, churches, homes, and public meeting places.

all-night bouts with top-secret research and share an admiring respect for each other's brain power. A "right stuff" ethic flourishes in all areas of science. But in O group at Livermore this is combined with the glamour of space, the thrill of inventing new kinds of nuclear weapons, and youthful idealism. O group physicist Lawrence West, age 28, told the *New York Times*, "We can try to negotiate treaties and things like that. But one thing I can do personally, without having to wait for arms control, is to develop the technology to eliminate them myself, to eliminate offensive nuclear weapons [with defensive ones]. . . . The number of new weapons designs is limited only by one's creativity." What more dangerous creature than the inexperienced macho, armed here with pencil and paper. Chuck Yeager, Gordon Cooper, and John Glenn all prided themselves in hanging their hides over the edge. How much hide hanging has been done, and can be done, by the fellows of O Group? None of them has seen a nuclear explosion. Since the 1963 Test Ban Treaty, there haven't been any in this country above ground.

On the technical side, there is increasing agreement among weapons experts that a space-based ballistic missile defense system is unworkable for the foreseeable future and, even if put into action, would be costly and dangerous. Technical issues aside, however, the glamour of *Star Wars* shimmers and beckons. Millions of us, children and grown-ups alike, saw the movie and were mesmerized by images of death-dealing laser rays, sleek crafts shooting it out in space, and handsome young men battling the forces of evil. These heady visions seep into the unconscious and resonate with the leftover daydreams of little boys.

What we seem to be concocting, in these vastly improved weapons now planned, is an increasingly volatile mixture of the concrete with the abstract: the weapons themselves, bristling with multiple warheads and computer chips and calculated accuracy, are there all right, occupying volume—but not of this world. Earthbound ICBMs, waiting silent and preprogrammed in their Midwest silos, are dreamlike enough. While weapons orbiting in space dissolve almost completely into a mist of make-believe.

Last Sunday afternoon, my wife was out gardening and my daughter upstairs napping. Antsy from one of the more cerebral new books on nuclear weapons, I got up from my chair, paced around the house, and hit upon a plan of action, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. All in all, it's a modest proposal. A small country, safely distant from the superpowers, should be destroyed with nuclear weapons as the world looks on. This can be done periodically, say every 20 years, so that the carnage of nuclear destruction stays fresh in our minds. Evidently, the hundred thousand or so people