

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE HISTORY OF A PHRASE

If you are being asked to think a number of unthinkable thoughts these days, *worldview* is at least partly responsible—at least for the way the request is phrased. Senator Fulbright used the phrase “thinking the unthinkable” in his now well-cavassed address on our present foreign policy and its deficiencies. The expression was apparently so convenient that a number of speakers and writers have adapted it to their own purposes and are asking their audiences to think a number of unthinkable thoughts.

The history of this particular phrase is one small example of the influence that a specialized journal with a limited circulation can have. As the editors of all small magazines know—and in this country that includes the editors of almost all journals of opinion—their confidence in the value of their undertaking rests largely on faith. There are, of course, the more or less regular quotations from or references to the journal, the rising and falling stream of letters, the oral expressions of appreciation (or criticism) from visitors to the office. But these and other tangible references are, at most, only indications of what the editors are most interested in—the stimulation and wide discussion of particular ideas and opinions. And the responsibility for initiating new ideas is notoriously hard to assign. The editors of, and the contributors to, small, specialized journals are sustained primarily by a belief in the value of being an intellectual ferment in the thought of their own times and by the confidence that others share this belief.

Nevertheless—and this brings us back to “unthinkable thoughts”—some of these tangible indications are of particular interest, because they suggest the currents which ideas often take. As far as we can determine, the phrase which Senator Fulbright has now made common currency first appeared in *worldview* in April, 1961. In that issue, William Lee Miller reviewed Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War*. Or, in his own words, he wrote not a review but a “comment

on the world of thought, or ‘analysis,’ out of which the book comes.” The point of his comment was succinctly put in the title of the review, “What Unthinkable Thoughts Do We Think?” Mr. Miller suggested that since, *pace* Mr. Kahn, we were prepared to think about thermonuclear war, we should “equally boldly think about and plan for other radical developments and courses of action, for example in disarmament, in tacit agreements to coexist, in losing the struggle, in international economic ventures.” In his reply Mr. Kahn did not adopt all of Mr. Miller's “unthinkable thoughts,” but he did adopt as the title for his next book, the phrase, *Thinking the Unthinkable*.

Since then the phrase has turned up in a number of isolated sources, but it has gained new life and renewed circulation since Senator Fulbright introduced it to a new audience. Now the coinage and circulation of a new expression is in itself not a high order of achievement, and the history of a particular phrase has at best a limited, if real, value. But it is not unduly fanciful to say that ideas, especially if they are “unthinkable,” follow the same uncertain, unpredictable course before they have consequences we can assess.

It is the particular function of *worldview*, speaking from a tradition deeply rooted in a Judeo-Christian view of man and society, to raise some unthinkable thoughts about international affairs and to question some of the unthinkable thoughts that others raise. In this particular issue, for example, Lionel Gelber attempts to do just this as he questions the value of Britain's entrance into the Common Market or the wisdom of working for a modern united Germany. In questioning the unquestionable, what is anticipated and hoped for, of course, is neither ready agreement nor easy dismissal but reasonable discussion.