Throughout America’s nuclear history, as we have seen, cycles of heightened fear, activism, and cultural attention to the bomb gave way with surprising suddenness to intervals when the nuclear reality seemed to sink out of sight. Another such dramatic shift came in the later 1980s, as Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, moved to liberalize Soviet politics and end the Cold War. The long-stalled arms-control process resumed, and by 1988, President Reagan was strolling in Red Square with the head of a state he had earlier denounced as an “evil empire.”

Certainly, grave dangers remained. Thousands of nuclear missiles still existed; the prospect of nuclear exchanges in regional conflicts or nuclear blackmail by rogue states like Iraq or North Korea loomed on the horizon; and the world faced the massive challenge of dealing with tons of radioactive materials generated over a period of half a century—materials that would remain deadly for millennia. Nevertheless, the terrifying possibility of global thermonuclear war had clearly diminished radically, at least in the near term. The collective sigh of relief was almost audible.

Chapters 12 and 13, both written and first published in 1989, are products of this moment of transition. The brief book review that constitutes chapter 12, slightly modified from the version that appeared in the October 1989 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, comments on an upbeat and rather polemical study by a political scientist arguing that not only was the nuclear threat over, but that it had never been as
serious as many had believed, and that the activists who had campaigned against it had been misled and deluded from the first.

I have included this review because the book in question captures the mood of relief—like a collective exhalation of breath after an extended period of tension—triggered by the mid-1980s improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations and the consequent decline of nuclear fear. It also serves as a useful reminder that successive antinuclear campaigns had not only won enthusiastic recruits, but had stirred skepticism and even hostility among those who considered challenges to the U.S. policy of deterrence through retaliatory readiness to be naive, if not profoundly threatening, to America’s national-security interests.

SHOULD ANYONE still remain unaware of the precipitous decline of Cold War tensions since 1985 and the change in perceptions of the nuclear threat, a useful benchmark is John Mueller’s Retreat from Armageddon: The Obsolescence of Major War (New York: Basic Books, 1989). Mueller’s work, a freewheeling speculative essay embedded in a history of the Cold War, epitomizes the current U.S. mood of passivity, conservatism, and glasnost-induced optimism. The theme of the essay is easily stated: Just as the world outgrew slavery and dueling, so it is outgrowing war. In this model, World War II is an aberration brought on by one man, Adolph Hitler. In recent centuries, and especially since 1918, the West has been undergoing a profound ideological transformation in its view of war. No longer seen as romantic, manly, or purifying, war has come to be seen as “repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized.” While noting that seventeen million people have died in war since 1945, Mueller, a University of Rochester political scientist, suggests that war will gradually fade from those regions where it vestigially survives, eventually to vanish entirely as a human social activity.

Regrettably, this appealing vision is based on selective and inadequately examined historical data. To blame World War II on one man, for example, is to neglect both the historical rootedness of Hitler’s obses-
sions and the way the German masses rallied behind him. In general, Mueller emphasizes the power of ideology while paying little attention to economic interests and other material factors.

Humanity's shifting perception of war is a significant topic, but Mueller's treatment is disappointing. He considers only a few writers, none deeply, and almost wholly neglects the realms of fiction, music, the visual arts, and the mass media. At a time when intellectual historians are seeking to grasp more fully the relationship of ideas to their social milieus, and to understand more deeply the complex process of ideological transformation, *Retreat from Armageddon* seems facile. The changed view of war so central to Mueller's argument is only casually sketched, with somewhat random quotes that emerge from a social vacuum. The actual process of ideological change remains opaque. Similarly, the end of slavery, which Mueller stresses heavily for his analogy, is ascribed to inexplicable shifts in moral sensibility, while the rise of industrial capitalism, with its profound implications for the organization of labor, is largely ignored.

No utopianist, Mueller distinguishes his future scenario from the millennial vision of global cooperation and harmony. He foresees no changes in the present structure of nation-states, or in the struggles among them. Given this Hobbesian view, is it plausible that war, over the long haul, will lose its appeal as an option of last resort?

Mueller emphasizes rational decision-making, downplaying the way the line between "rational" and "irrational" can blur as leaders act under stressful, emotionally charged conditions. His rationalistic, schematic approach allows relatively little scope to unforeseen concatenations of events or to the infinite human capacity for novelty—a capacity with negative as well as positive implications. For all its speculative boldness, *Retreat from Armageddon* betrays a deficiency of historical imagination.

Despite its occasional caveats, this is in general a hopeful book. War is not endemic to the human condition; it is a learned social activity that can be unlearned. This perspective (so different from Reinhold Niebuhr's, for example) echoes in secular form the Victorian belief in inexorable progress through a divinely guided evolution, or the pre-1914 social gospel vision of the Kingdom of God pressing in on human history. Such an approach invites passivity on issues of war and peace.
Thanks to a sweeping change of consciousness, war is fading through a kind of historical inevitability, independent of further human effort, at least according to Mueller. As the more backward or more ideologically driven societies absorb the new consciousness from the West, war will be no more.

Like all such metahistorical theorizing, Mueller’s conjectures are ultimately unprovable. As he himself cheerfully concedes, his book will be read in the future either as remarkably prescient, or as one more sorry example of wishful thinking about the human prospect.

But what of the other part of Retreat from Armageddon, its account of the Cold War? Here the book’s historical thinness becomes particularly evident. In Mueller’s drama, “international communism” dominates the stage. The role of the United States was entirely reactive, as it responded to the Communists’ lingering ideological infatuation with war. The role of liberal capitalist ideology, or indeed of any ideology, in shaping U.S. policy is ignored. The Vietnam War is presented as a “sober and realistic” U.S. response to China’s fomenting of wars of national liberation. Mueller argues that Washington’s Vietnam policies were correct strategically (at least up to the collapse of Chinese influence in Indonesia), and flawed tactically only in underrating North Vietnam’s will to resist. This version of recent history ignores a vast body of historical scholarship that over the past quarter century has offered a considerably more complex and nuanced understanding of the Cold War.

Mueller contends that nuclear weapons have played little role in postwar international relations. He presents President Truman’s 1945 atomic-bomb decision as motivated solely by the desire to defeat Japan (again ignoring many studies suggesting a more complex interpretation); gives extended and uncritical attention to Alexander de Seversky’s notorious 1946 argument that the atomic bomb’s destructive power was much overrated; and downplays the significance of what he dismissively calls “the nuclear arms ‘race.’” While treating rhetoric with great seriousness elsewhere in the book, he sees the history of nuclear threats and counterthreats during the worst of the Cold War as irrelevant “bluster,” of no significance. Nuclear proliferation receives some attention, but it does not loom large in Mueller’s optimistic scheme of things.

Since nuclear weapons are of little import, it follows that antinuclear
activists must be deluded and misguided. Mueller pokes fun at the sym­
bolic warning clock printed on the cover of each issue of the Bulletin of
the Atomic Scientists, its hands positioned ominously at a few minutes
before midnight. He dismisses the “antinuclear frenzy” of the early 1980s
and flippantly caricatures the Catholic bishops’ long and careful state­
ment on nuclear war, The Challenge of Peace (1983), as “an airy pastoral
letter declaring that it may be okay to threaten mass destruction but only
if you didn’t plan to do it.”

Mueller’s contempt for the antinuclear movement is understandable
in view of his larger theories about the origins of the revulsion against
war and his one-sided interpretation of the Cold War. Still, it is curious
that he ascribes such importance to antiwar sentiment at one point in
history and so little at another. Those who spoke out against conven­
tional war early in the century were shaping a new human consciousness,
but those who raised the alarm against nuclear war in recent years were
irrelevant, misguided, and foolish. As Vice President George Bush said
to his Democratic challenger, Michael Dukakis, in one of their televised
debates during the 1988 presidential campaign, it must be wonderful to
be so sure of oneself.