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CATHOLIC BISHOPS ON WAR AND PEACE

The Catholic Bishops have plunged themselves into the national debate about weapons and defense. An ad hoc War and Peace Committee of five Bishops has prepared a proposed 110-page Statement which has produced more political heat than moral light.

The first thing that strikes the reader is that the Committee is very defensive about its handiwork. The proposed Statement is copyrighted with the stern admonition that no one may copy or reproduce it "by any means" without the Bishops' consent. One would think that the Bishops would be happy for anyone to circulate their findings.

Probably cognizant of the Norman Lear crowd's criticisms of preachers in politics, the Statement contains an explicit rejection of the notion that the church should not become involved in politics. On the contrary, says the W&P Committee, "religous groups are as entitled as others to their opinion."

They are correct. A preacher has the same rights as any other American citizen to be involved in politics, legislation, and candidates. There is just one caveat.

When a preacher is involved in politics, he must be willing to accept the criticism and face the confrontations that are indigenous to the political process. He cannot expect his political opinions to be shielded by clerical robes and accepted as though he had just brought them on stone tablets down from the mountain.

The authors of the W&P Statement appear to have confused the religious and the political realms. They say, "We believe religous leaders have a task in concert with public officials, analysts, private organizations and the media to set the limits beyond which our military policy should not move in word or action." On the contrary, religious leaders do not have that "task," nor do the media or other private groups.

The "task" of making our military policy is assigned by our Constitution to the Congress and the President, one of the principal purposes for which they were elected. Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 after telling the voters what he planned to do about our military policy, and he has a mandate to fulfill those promises.

The Bishops and all other American citizens have a perfect right to try to influence public opinion and to lobby for their goals; but if they believe they have the "task in

concert with public officials" to "set the limits" of our military policy, they don't understand the American legislative process.

The W&P Committee seems to be similarly confused about the constitutional function of our Armed Services. Speaking directly to the men and women in the military, the W&P Committee says, "We urge you to do everything you can to assure that every peaceful alternative is exhausted before war is even remotely considered."

What kind of a "Seven Days in May" fictional world is the W&P Committee living in? American military men do not have the decision-making power about whether to choose war or peaceful alternatives. Those decisions are made by the Commander-in-Chief and by Congress, and the military carry out their orders.

The W&P Committee also seems to be confused about God's role. The Statement says: "The destructive potential of the nuclear powers threatens the sovereignty of God over the world he has brought into being."

Most of those who believe in God believe that He is all-powerful and that no man-made weapon could ever "threaten" His sovereignty. Does the W&P Committee really believe that nuclear weapons have made man as powerful as God and threaten His sovereignty?

Much of the W&P Statement is taken up with pious words about peace, how beautiful it is, and how peace comes only from God. But when the W&P Committee gets into the nitty-gritty of presuming to tell our Congress and President what weapons to build, to possess, or to use, they are speaking on a subject in which they have no expertise. So they brush off the most crucial issues in a part-sentence each.

For example, the W&P Committee tells us that "Defence [sic -- the British spelling] against a nuclear attack is not feasible." The fact is that at least two sophisticated systems are available for production, the ABM system (for which the most difficult component has been tested and ready to go since the mid-1960s) and the High Frontier non-nuclear system developed recently.

The W&P Committee tells us that "there should be a clear public resistence to the rhetoric of ... surviving nuclear exchanges..." Who does the W&P Committee think it is that it presumes to forbid us to talk about surviving a nuclear exchange? Those of us who want to make sure that our children do not live under Communism certainly have a right to devise a way to survive in freedom if the W&P Committee's faith in the United Nations and disarmament turns out to be misplaced.