FOREWORD

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Human beings are meaning-hungry creatures. We have the need to bring special significance to objects and events in order to become part of a narrative that is larger than ourselves. In the case of the atomic bomb, the object and the event defied our imaginative grasp. Small wonder that the meanings we have assigned to the weapon have been infused with a constellation of awe and mystery. That constellation has included tendencies to embrace the bomb, to become fiercely dependent upon it, indeed, to render it something close to a deity. For what other than a deity could be capable of destroying the world?

But a deity also must be capable of ruling and protecting the world, even of keeping the world going. Hence, the bizarre emphasis on the bomb's ostensible function of "saving lives" rather than destroying them, of rendering the world peaceful rather than bringing to it a specter of annihilation.

This worshipful embrace of the cruelest weapon ever created is the essence of what I call nuclearism, which is surely the most depraved spiritual malady of our era.

The remarkable achievement of Martin Sherwin's classic study is to reveal the beginnings of nuclearism at the moment of the appearance of the atomic bomb and, before that, in the excited anticipation of the revolutionary new object's potential.

We learn that even ethically sensitive leaders—statesmen, military leaders, and scientists—advocated the use of the bomb. Early on, both

Leo Szilard and Niels Bohr, distinguished scientists who were to become justifiably renowned for their opposition to nuclear weapons, took the position during World War II that only by witnessing its destructive effects would the people of the world become so appalled that future wars could be averted. And Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, a man sufficiently humane to have single-handedly prevented the targeting of Kyoto, Japan's magnificent ancient capital, argued that a successful atomic attack on a Japanese city would influence Stalin to be more cooperative in postwar negotiations. These two anticipatory attitudes toward nuclear weapons suggest that an idealistic aura of peacemaking was inseparable from the bomb's lure of ultimate technology and ultimate power—all of which became part of the transcendent ideology of nuclearism.

Versions of nuclearism have haunted the world ever since. The recent successful tests of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan were disturbing not only in their clear evidence of dangerous nuclear proliferation, but in the exuberance of leaders and citizens of both countries as they celebrated their entry into the omnipotent realm of potential world destroyers. And the weapons' attraction is not limited to nations. During the 1990s, the relatively small Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo succeeded in manufacturing biological and chemical weapons as a substitute for the nuclear weapons they most passionately (though, fortunately, unsuccessfully) coveted. This worldwide tendency to what can be called "trickle-down nuclearism" is made possible not only by the increasing availability of nuclear materials and information about their design, but by the transmission of the allure of these weapons to ever smaller groups.

The most egregious manifestations of nuclearism, however, come from our own political leaders. They are bound up with what can be called our superpower syndrome, our insistence that we remain unchallenged in our world military dominance. The superpower syndrome includes consistent unilateralism in international behavior, the self-bestowed right to determine who may pursue work on the weapons and who may not, and even the right to engage in preemptive—or preventive—war if we decide that a country is a danger to us. Predominant nuclear superiority is the basis for both the superpower's absolute military dominance and its dark mystique.

Beyond their insistence on nuclear dominance, American leaders have expressed a shockingly candid willingness to use the weapons.

Their emphasis has been not on eliminating the scourge of nuclear weapons but on seeking more innovative ways to make them effective, for instance, in destroying underground bunkers. There is the increasing danger of what Richard Falk calls the "Hiroshima temptation," of deciding to employ a small nuclear weapon against a country that cannot retaliate because it possesses no nuclear weapons. Since the mind engulfed by nuclearism never rests, we can expect ever more imaginative ideas about how generations of improved nuclear weapons can be employed.

In his riveting description of the end of our prenuclear world and the emergence of nuclearism, Martin Sherwin makes clear that this spiritual deformation need not be our fate. But if we are to find wiser psychological and political directions, we need to draw upon the insights he provides about the origins of our malady.