



Jon Garvey chews the cud

Child's play

There is an influential undercurrent of opinion which seeks to ban the marketing of war-toys for children, on the grounds that he who plays by the sword shall live by the sword. I have never been persuaded that this is true but, agreeing that toddlers in battle-fatigues are a disturbing sight, sought, when the children were very



young, to provide farms, trains and junior property speculator kits rather than actively encouraging them to ruin before they could walk.

I needn't have bothered. As soon as they were old enough to socialise, guns, helmets and hand-grenades started to infiltrate the house by osmosis, and toy guitars became machine carbines for much of their working day. Eventually we capitulated, and the playroom now houses an arsenal fit for an insurrection, if not a world war.

Observing how small children engage in their warfare, one is struck by how misconceived the "Ban the Toys" lobby is. The swords and space-lasers are not used in learning to solve differences by violence, On the contrary, children seldom fight each other when they are playing soldiers, though I await with trepidation the confrontation between my son's Action Man tactical nuclear weapons outfit and my daughters' *Sindy Doll Greenham Common* play tent.

All their venom is instead directed at baddies—concentrations of evil, the badder the better—against which they play the part of truth and virtue. In effect, they are learning to conquer their own fears about the hostile world by putting nasty things in their rightful place. This accounts for the familiar sight

of the small child fleeing from the most evil creature on television, only to peer through the crack in the door to make sure he gets his inevitable come-uppance.

In reality, it is not the children but the adults we have to worry about. As one wise child said recently, it's not the children's toys which should be banned, but those of the grown-ups, which really hurt people.

I don't know why it is, but even today we still look at our potential enemies with the same xenophobia which caused earlier generations to arrest monkeys as French spies, or accuse the Kaiser's troops of eating babies. If you don't believe me, consider the way that, in our recent history, the Argentinians were transformed in the public mind from purveyors of corned beef and romantic political heroines to the embodiment of every national vice. They were dishonest, incompetent and cowardly.

Right-minded politicians over here were scandalised that any-one calling himself an English-man could spare any pity for the Argentinian widows—they were, after all, the enemy; like Hitler or the Mekon, and to consider them human would be an affront to decency and the memory of those who gave their lives.

Many people, medical men prominently among them, are putting a great deal of effort into banning nuclear weapons. This is clearly a worthy aim, but like so many idealist causes runs the risk of losing sight of the real issues. People speak as if, without nuclear weapons, the world would be a place of peace and plenty, whereas of course there would be as many, or more, wars, with just a few less casualties each time.



"It is time," said the television speaker before she was able to check herself, "that these abominable weapons were scrapped, and defence left to ordinary decent soldiers armed with ordinary... "Ordinary, decent weapons, she was going to say. And yet the most terrible war in history was not that which resulted in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the

First World War, with ne'er a neutron bomb in sight. My grandfather still has nightmares about the artillery bombardment in the trenches, 65 years after the Armistice. In what way is that carnage preferable to a nuclear war, except numerically?



We could in any case be sure that a "conventional" Third World War would use vastly more weaponry than any pre-vious conflict. It is of no concern to me whether I am vapourised by an ICBM or blown apart by some Russian tank shell. Neither end appeals to me. Indeed, a total nuclear war might be less of a tragedy, as there would be no-body left to regret it. Third World countries might even welcome the increased cancer rate in return for the loosening of the Northern stranglehold on the world economy.

The World Peace Movement is futile if it seeks only to remove the worst of the nation's armoury of destruction, without making some contribution to understanding and removing the causes of conflict. Indeed, the worrying tendency to self-righteous bigotry in the movement, and the temptation to classify anybody not a wholehearted supporter as a baddy, simply creates more of the small conflicts from which wars develop.

Doctors are in a particularly good position to see world issues in human terms. We understand better than most that the buttons are pressed by men with ingrowing toenails, that heroism is usually a sign of weakness as well as strength, and that evil people are simply ordinary people taught by circumstances to be evil in different ways from ourselves. Would our profession not be better occupied in trying to promote this understanding of the universality of our human problems, rather than in joining the general clamour to blame everything on the Russians, the scientists, or the politicians?*