FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

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HOPE AND DESPAIR

When the American POWs coming home after the Korean War were debriefed by the Army, the doctors discovered that some GIs had become victims of a strange new disease which they labeled "giveupitis." Major William E. Mayer, the chief Army psychiatrist on the case, said that some American POWs lost their will to live, crawled into a corner, and without any other disease simply covered their own faces and died.

Fortunately, our American POWs in the Vietnam War did not suffer from that disease. We even developed some authentic heroes such as Jeremiah Denton, now U.S. Senator from Alabama, who had the moral and mental stamina to endure the rigors of prison camp.

I was reminded of the "giveupitis" malady when I read a spate of recent news articles describing the current epidemic of despair which is sweeping our country. The news stories sound like press releases from Dr. Helen Caldicott, president of a freezenik front called Physicians for Social Responsibility; indeed, her name figured in most of the stories.

Dr. Caldicott claims that she "encounters despair everywhere" she goes. That's not surprising since her speeches reveal that she is a Typhoid Mary carrying the germ of despair. After she spreads the germ, she then diagnoses the infection.

Dr. Caldicott claims that most children "don't believe they are going to grow up; they believe they are going to be killed in a nuclear war." She quotes this conclusion of an American Psychiatric Association study of 1,000 children in Boston.

It is difficult to see how it could be "socially responsible" to frighten little children about nuclear war. Dr. Caldicott has developed a space-age version of the old line used long ago to control children's behavior: "The boogeyman will get you if you don't watch out."

On a recent nationally syndicated television program, Dr. Caldicott did a good job of convincing the audience that nuclear war is bad. Of course, that is about like trying to

*prove it is light in the daytime and dark at night; nobody was arguing on the other side. But she certainly didn't convince people that nuclear freeze can prevent war; in fact, she admitted that her nuclear freeze proposal is "unrealistic," that the freeze concept has "never worked" in the past, and that it won't work "if man doesn't change."*

*Jim Siemer, another freezenik who is director of the Catholic high school peace group called Pax Christi, says that he often asks youngsters how many think they will die in a nuclear war; and "99 percent of the hands would go up." Since normal youngsters are thinking about football or baseball or even studies, his statistic proves only that he gave them a scare talk before he asked for a show of hands.*

*Unfortunately, many textbooks and assigned reading in our nation's schools have a morbid preoccupation with such depressing subjects as suicide, murder, euthanasia, abortion, and the false notion that the American system is evil and oppressive. It's no wonder that suicide has become a principal cause of teenage death.*

*It is so wrong to lead young people, and especially children who can do nothing about adult problems, down the primrose path to disillusionment, defeatism, and despair. They should be told that America has provided more political and economic freedom to more people than any nation in the history of the world, and that we have ample resources to solve any problem we undertake.*

*The despair syndrome has even persuaded a ski instructor in Colorado to leave his job and take his wife and two small children on extended travel to Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti and Hawaii in order to see the world before it blows up. Maybe that attitude toward work was why Thomas Aquinas linked despair with the sin of sloth (another word for laziness). The expectation of impending disaster is a good excuse to avoid work.*

*Despair is the sin of believing that all is lost, that neither God nor your own actions can save you from disaster. In religious terms, despair is a sin; in practical terms, despair is self-defeating; in American terms, despair is historically false -- we have proved that we are the great "can-do" nation.*

*The poet tells us that "hope springs eternal in the human breast"; but that maxim is being put to the test today. Our religious and political leaders should meet the challenge of helping Americans to nurture the virtue of hope so that we can face the future with confidence.*