April 17, 2003

Friends,

Since the early days of Gulf II, a Peacenik group at UW has been meeting at 12:30 between the Allen Library and the Hub. We hold signs, listen briefly to a speaker-of-the-day, shake hands, and get back to work. Our numbers are dwindling, not unnaturally, and my talk today .. or the one following .. may very well be our last.

Cheers,
Halstead

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My name is Halstead Harrison. I'm a prof in our Atmospheric Sciences Department and .. together with several good friends there .. I'm an Old-Liberal Peacenik, mildly radicalized by the Vietnamese War. I volunteered about two weeks ago to speak here today, thinking to tell you about a remarkable man: Louis Fry Richardson.

He was late Victorian, born to a Quaker family at Tyneside, near the Scottish border. He went to Cambridge on scholarships, but was, as best I can guess, fairly isolated there. At any rate he seems not to have come away from it with lifetime friends, as I hope you will, here at UW.

In the First War .. that terribly punishing one of 1914-18 .. he served three years with a Friends volunteer ambulance unit supporting French troops. The public mood in Britain was then quite hostile to conscientious objectors, something in the same way that our present dissenters to the Iraq war are little appreciated in much of America today. Only much more so then, than now.

During that time, under really terrible front-line conditions, Richardson completed a remarkable book setting out the first clear recipe for weather predictions by numerical methods. All our fancy weather models now stem from this work. The book is charming. Clear. Lucid. Impeccably honest. And it's all over the map: my guess is that he expected not to survive, and was putting down as much as he could of a young life's work, to leave behind him.
Surviving anyway, he began in the 20's a decade of truly first-class work. He became, perhaps with G.I. Taylor, who was a bit older than he, the preeminent British meteorologist of his time. But with a twist: Taylor filled the only Chair in the subject at an Oxbridge University. Richardson spent his career at second-tier schools and institutes, working largely alone and with little support. This was in part because he twice resigned good jobs, owing to their redirection into military agencies and missions. His work on turbulence, for example, was taken up by specialists in poison-gas warfare. His work on upper-level winds was much appreciated by artillerists and the RAF's Bomber Command.

Then in the 30s, with War Two building, Richardson did a very interesting thing. He dropped meteorology and took up the study of war, applying to it in imaginative and original ways the disciplines of math and statistics. This was not just a mid-life crisis. He had planned it for some time, and in preparation for it had earned a second doctorate in psychology. His position was that if we, all of us, are one day to diminish wars, we should try to understand them.

And for the rest of his life, he died at my present age in 1953, that is what he did, publishing several dozen remarkably original papers in scientific journals, and writing two extraordinary books, "Arms and Security" and "The Statistics of Deadly Quarrels", which were published only posthumously.

As with his earlier work on numerical weather forecasting, these later studies were imaginative, novel, and groundbreaking. We now call his methods "Systems Analysis". And it is sad beyond words to me, as it must have been to Richardson, that the principal subsequent use of his approach has been to make wars not less common, but more efficient. Systems analyses are the bread-and-butter of our Rand Corporation, for example, and with many "think-tank" groups at Boeing, Raytheon, and what-all.

So. Was Richardson wrong? Is it a hopeless position that to diminish wars it is helpful to understand them?

I hope not. I think not. I hope not. But I'm not sure enough about it to tell you confidently, one way or another. But here we are together, you and I, at this Pretty Good University. Scholarship is what we do. It is the tool of our trade, and if we can contribute to bettering the world, it seems likely that
we can do it best with careful, honest use of the tools we know, and with new tools that we must devise for this good purpose.

Otherwise, the future is bleak indeed,

"... and we are here as on a darkling plain swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night."

Matthew Arnold
"Dover Beach", 1867

Sincerely,
Halstead Harrison

PS. This talk was never delivered, as our Peace Circles collapsed to zero a day earlier than I guessed they might.