The Development of Nuclear Strategy

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The Development of Nuclear Strategy

That concept was put forward almost at once at the beginning of the nuclear age that is still the dominant concept of nuclear strategy—deterrence. It fell to me—few other civilians at the time were interested in military strategy—to publish the first analytical paper on the military implications of nuclear weapons. Entitled “The Atomic Bomb and American Security,” it appeared in the autumn of 1945 as No. 18 of the occasional papers of what was then the Yale Institute for International Studies. In expanded form it was included as two chapters in a book published in the following year under the title The Absolute Weapon, which contained also essays on political implications by four of my Yale colleagues.¹

I should like to cite one brief paragraph from that 1946 book, partly because it has recently been quoted by a number of other writers, usually with approval but in one conspicuous instance with strong disapproval:

Thus, the first and most vital step in any American security program for the age of atomic bombs is to take measures to guarantee to ourselves in case of attack the possibility of retaliation in kind. The writer in making that statement is not for the moment concerned about who will win the next war in which atomic bombs are used. Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.²

It was obvious then as now that this description of deterrence applied mostly to a war with the only other superpower, the Soviet Union, who did not yet have nuclear weapons but was confidently predicted in the same book to be able “to produce them in quantity within a period of five to ten years.”³

Let me mention a few more points in that 1946 essay in order to indicate what any reflective observer of the time would have found more or less self-evident. It stated that among the requirements for deterrence were extraordinary measures

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2. Ibid., p. 76. The Brodie chapters comprise pp. 21-110 incl.
3. Ibid., pp. 63-69.

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of protection for the retaliatory force so that it might survive a surprise attack, that margins of superiority in nuclear weapons or the means of delivering them might count for little or nothing in a crisis so long as each side had reason to fear the huge devastation of its peoples and territories by the other, that while it was possible that the world might see another major war in which the nuclear bomb is not used, the shadow of that bomb would nevertheless "so govern the strategic and tactical dispositions of either side as to create a wholly novel form of war,"\(^4\) and that this latter fact had particular implications for the uses of sea power, the classic functions of which depended on an intact home base and the passage of considerable time. It was also observed that while the idea of deterrence \textit{per se} was certainly nothing new, being as old as the use of physical force, what was distinctively new was the degree to which it was intolerable that it should fail. On the other hand, one could add that "\textit{in no case is the fear of the consequences of atomic bomb attack likely to be low,"}\(^5\) which made it radically different from a past in which governments could, often correctly, anticipate wars that would bring them considerable political benefits while exacting very little in the way of costs.

Since 1946 there has been much useful rumination and writing on nuclear strategy and especially on the nature of deterrence, but the national debates on the subject have revolved mostly around three questions, all relating directly to the issue of expenditures. These three questions are: 1) What are the changing physical requirements for the continuing success of deterrence? 2) Just what kinds of wars does nuclear deterrence really deter? and 3) What is the role, if any, for tactical nuclear weapons? Far down the course in terms of the public attention accorded it is a fourth question: If deterrence fails, how do we fight a nuclear war and for what objectives? The latter question has been almost totally neglected by civilian scholars, though lately some old ideas have been revived having to do with what are called limited nuclear options. Otherwise most questions about the actual use of nuclear weapons in war, whether strategic or tactical, have been largely left to the military, who had to shoulder responsibility for picking specific targets, especially in the strategic category, and who were expected to give guidance about the kinds and numbers of nuclear weapons required.

In that connection, one must stress a point which certain young historians

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who are new to the field have found it difficult to grasp. Virtually all the basic ideas and philosophies about nuclear weapons and their use have been generated by civilians working quite independently of the military, even though some resided in institutions like Rand which were largely supported by one or another of the services. In these matters the military have been, with no significant exceptions, strictly consumers, naturally showing preference for some ideas over others but hardly otherwise affecting the flow of those ideas. Whatever the reasons, they must include prominently the fact that to the military man deterrence comes as the by-product, not the central theme, of his strategic structure. Any philosophy which puts it at the heart of the matter must be uncongenial to him. One military writer significantly speaks of the deterrence-oriented “modernist” as dwelling “in the realm of achieving non-events in a condition where the flow of events is guided, not by his initiatives, but by other minds.” And further: “The obvious difficulty with deterrent theory . . . is the yielding of the initiative to the adversary.” In the preceding sentence initiative has already been called the *sine qua non* of success.\(^6\)

*The Requirements for Deterrence*

How does one preserve against surprise attack enough of one’s retaliatory force so that the opponent, in anticipation thereof, is deterred? Obviously there is a political dimension to this question, because the need for precautionary measures does vary according to whether or not we think the opponent is straining at the leash to destroy us. There used to be current a notion that if the opponent saw his way clear to destroy us without suffering too much damage in return, that fact alone must impel him to do it. But whether or not that view was ever correct, which I doubt, it is not likely ever to be a feasible option for him. Still, to prepare against all possible crises in the future, it is desirable to minimize that proportion of our retaliatory forces which the opponent can have *high confidence* of destroying by a surprise blow and to help keep alive in his mind full awareness of the penalties for miscalculation.

At the beginning, the United States had a period of grace when it did not have to worry about enemy nuclear attack. However, conditions changed with the passing years, but the first sharp public reminder that we had an important

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vulnerability problem came only with the publication early in 1959 of Albert Wohlstetter’s well-known article, “The Delicate Balance of Terror.” What is not generally known is that this article was precipitated by Wohlstetter’s frustration with the Air Force. He had been leading for over a year a large research project at Rand which had been trying to find the best means of protecting our bomber aircraft against surprise attack. After considering various alternatives, including the “airborne alert” favored by the Air Force (which was itself second choice for them to the Dohuetian idea of striking at the enemy before he gets off the ground), the project group decided that the most cost-effective defense of bombers against surprise attack was a slightly-below-ground concrete shelter for each aircraft. This solution the Air Force vehemently rejected, invoking slogans which identified concrete with the Maginot Line and with excessive defense-mindedness. Wohlstetter’s article was thus an appeal to the public, which by its response showed itself both surprised and alarmed at the situation he depicted—the more so as his elegant use of the facts and figures at his fingertips lent persuasiveness to his message.

However, that problem too passed without ever being resolved, because the article appeared on the eve of the coming of the ICBM, which lent itself to being put underground without controversy, and not far behind was the Polaris submarine. Wohlstetter had been concerned with defending bombers, mostly against bomber attack. We still have bombers as one of the legs of our so-called triad, and now these have to fear enemy missile attack. The Air Force still has no shelters for these bombers and does not contemplate any. Obviously, it still relies on their being in the air when the enemy attack arrives. In fact, on the often-mentioned grounds that they can be sent off early because they are recallable, our bombers are frequently projected as virtually a non-vulnerable retaliatory force. Well, perhaps they are, if one knows just how to read and respond to various types of ambiguous warning. The problem is not only not to send them off so late but also not to send them off too early.

However, I do support fully the belief implicit in the Air Force position that some kind of political warning will always be available. Attack out of the blue, which is to say without a condition of crisis, is one of those worst-case fantasies that we have to cope with as a starting point for our security planning, but there are very good reasons why it has never happened historically, at least in mod-

ern times, and for comparable reasons I regard it as so improbable for a nuclear age as to approach virtual certainty that it will not happen, which is to say it is not a possibility worth spending much money on.

For similar reasons, I must add before leaving the Wohlstetter article that I could never accept the implications of his title—that the balance of terror between the Soviet Union and the United States ever has been or ever could be “delicate.” My reasons have to do mostly with human inhibitions against taking monumental risks or doing things which are universally detested, except under motivations far more compelling than those suggested by Wohlstetter in his article. This point is more relevant today than ever before because of the numbers and variety of the American forces that an enemy would need to have a high certitude of destroying in one fell swoop.

The numbers of those forces, incidentally, grew during the nineteen sixties like the British Empire was said to have grown—in a series of fits of absent-mindedness. There are reasons why the number 1000 was chosen rather than a lesser number for our Minuteman missiles, in addition to our 54 Titans, and also why we chose to build 41 Polaris-Poseidon submarines capable of firing 16 missiles each, in addition to the 400 plus B-52s we had at the time, not to mention the quick reaction alert forces we have long had in Europe. But whatever those reasons were, they were not a response to Soviet figures. They in fact gave us, or rather continued, an overwhelming superiority, later increased by the application of the MIRV system to over half our Minuteman missiles and three-quarters of our submarines. We are still today far superior in numbers of strategic warheads, and we also have a marked advantage in the important factor of accuracy.

In the mid-sixties the United States defense community could look with satisfaction on our immense superiority in retaliatory forces which appeared also utterly secure by virtue of being for the most part either underground or underwater. However, our restless research efforts were already tending to undermine that stable and comfortable situation by pushing to fruition the most incredible advances in ballistic missile accuracy, even without terminal guidance. Those advances resulted partly from developments in micro-electronics circuitry, which made it feasible to put complex computers aboard missiles and to integrate them with hypersensitive inertial-guidance gyros. Reliable unclassified estimates put the Circular Error Probabilities of today’s American ICBMs at well under 300 yards, which is utterly fantastic for an object being hurled some 4000 miles. When that kind of accuracy is combined with MIRV, the silo-emplaced
ICBM begins to be at risk. To be sure, the United States has continued to lead in these developments by a wide margin, and our accuracy does not imperil our silos, but the long lead times that some systems require make it appear provident, usually, to anticipate the opponent’s canceling out some specific technological advantage of ours.

Meanwhile, new discoveries on the effects of X-rays above the atmosphere had rekindled interest in the development of an ABM system. Progress was proceeding towards the system originally called "Sentinel," which President Nixon was to rename "Safeguard," when the developments in missile accuracy seemed suddenly to give it an important purpose. Up to then it had been a system in search of a mission. Inasmuch as most of its advocates admitted that the ABM could not reliably defend cities, interest focused on its use in defending hard-point targets, which is to say missile silos. Then there arose the great ABM controversy, an amazing chapter in our story because of the intense passions engendered among the adversaries. Moreover, unlike certain other controversies, it was not a debate between the informed and the ignorant. There was plenty of technological sophistication on both sides.

My objectivity in this article will not, I hope, be utterly compromised if I admit that I could never fully understand the pro-ABM position. It always seemed to me that in the expensive and fixed "Safeguard" mode readied for adoption—and later actually deployed at one site in North Dakota—the ABM could in principle be defeated in a number of ways that were already on the horizon, including hardening the reentry vehicle against the X-rays of the Spartan missile warhead, cheaply multiplying the number of reentry vehicles as is done with MIRV, adopting terminal avoidance maneuvering in the RV, or even, if all else failed, abandoning the long-range ballistic missile in favor of the cruise missile, against which the radar of "Safeguard" would be ineffective.

Now, in retrospect, we can add that it is most questionable whether American ICBMs needed any such protection at the time that "Safeguard" with its complex but fixed technology was being readied for deployment, or whether they will need it for a long time to come, if ever. Only about 23 percent of U.S. strategic nuclear warheads are carried in ICBMs as compared with about two-thirds for the Soviet Union. Our silos have already been super-hardened. An attack on our ICBMs would involve enormous timing problems for the Soviet Union, especially with most of their ICBMs still of the liquid-fuel variety. No one yet knows what kinds of fratricidal problems will arise among RVs detonating near each other within a short space of time. It would be an optimistic Soviet planner
who did not count on some two or three hundred of our ICBMs surviving even a well-concerted attack from much more accurate Soviet missiles than they have today, and that says nothing about the 7 to 8 thousand warheads in the other two legs of our triad. Surely no sensible opponent would try to eliminate our ICBMs in an initial attack unless he believed that he could at the same time with high confidence eliminate by far the major portions of our other retaliatory forces. One important meaning of the triad, in other words, is that each of the legs helps protect the other two. Besides, how would the Russians know that we would not launch our ICBMs on tactical warning, or at least during an attack which could hardly be simultaneous? In short, the utility of the ABM over the long term was at best dubious, but surely it was desirable to avoid deploying a technologically-fixed system well before it was really needed.

Anyway, our Safeguard ABM was effectively cancelled by the agreements of SALT I, incidentally demonstrating that the greater utility of arms control agreements lies not in enhancing our security, which is usually beyond their power, but in helping to save both sides from wasteful expenditures.

That brings us to where we are now. The B-1 bomber has effectively been dispatched, but looming over the horizon is the monumentally costly MX missile. Each would be well over twice the weight of the Minuteman III and would carry up to 14 large nuclear warheads. The cost per missile in a 200 to 250 missile program would be some $100 million. Although the Air Force is not advocating the MX because of the alleged vulnerability of Minuteman, it seems reasonable that so costly a missile in which so much power is concentrated be put into a mobile configuration, though that nearly doubles the cost of the system. Whether we need it in addition to Trident, which expands the operating area of our strategic submarines from about 2.5 million square miles to about 40 million square miles, and in addition also to the cruise missile, is not going to be determined on any realistic consideration of vulnerability. Protagonists and opponents will take their positions rather on political grounds, that is, depending on whether they harbor such views as incline them towards the Committee on the Present Danger or whether they live on lower levels of anxiety.

**How much power is enough to deter?**

This question has always been with us in one form or another, but it is amazing to find it raised anew with intensified vigor just now when the number of strategic nuclear warheads in the American arsenal must be on the order of at least 9 to 10 thousand. Nevertheless, we have anguished statements like that
of Richard Pipes. Mr. Pipes, Professor of Russian History at Harvard University, compels our attention because he was the chairman of that Team B selected last year at the prodding of Major General George Keegan to straighten out the relevant groups at the CIA, whose interpretation of Soviet intentions had apparently been too relaxed for some tastes. His recent Commentary article, which bears the title “Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War,” was circulated in reprint form by the Committee on the Present Danger, of which Professor Pipes is a charter member, and also by the like-minded National Strategy Information Center.

The “why” in the title of Mr. Pipes’ article preempts the prior question whether some entity called the Soviet Union thinks as he says it does. The appropriate question is: who in the Soviet Union thinks they can fight and win a nuclear war? The article tells us that it is some Soviet generals who think so, not a single political leader being mentioned. One could at this point dismiss the issue by remarking that there are also plenty of U.S. generals who think that the United States could fight and win a nuclear war and are even willing to give a definition for the word “win,” though few of us would be comfortable with that definition. Still, it is interesting to notice what kind of evidence Mr. Pipes adduces for his thesis.

A prime piece of evidence for him is that Russian generals believe that “the basic function of warfare, as defined by Clausewitz, remains permanently valid,” and he quotes the late Marshal Sokolovskii to that effect, with his own added emphasis: “It is well known that the essential nature of war as a continuation of politics does not change with changing technology and armament.”

It is obvious that Professor Pipes reads into that famous dictum of Clausewitz he is alluding to a meaning quite different from that which Clausewitz intended. That might leave open the question what Marshal Sokolovskii intended, except that we know from other portions of his work that Sokolovskii did study Clausewitz, perhaps even with some care. Clausewitz’s meaning, which is in fact basic to everything that one thinks about nuclear deterrence, is developed at length in Books I and VIII of On War. In essence it amounts to the idea that war would be only senseless destruction if it were not in pursuit of some valid political

8. Commentary, Vol. 64, No. 1, July 1977, 21-34. See also the several “letters to the editor” provoked by this article in the second issue following: Commentary, Vol. 64, No. 3, Sept. 1977, pp. 4-26.

objective. It is precisely the fact that one finds it difficult if not impossible to find a valid political objective that would justify the destruction inevitable in a strategic nuclear exchange that makes the whole concept of nuclear deterrence credible. In short, far from finding Marshal Sokolovskii’s quoted statement ominously, we should all be able to agree with it with a fervent “amen.”

Mr. Pipes takes exception to my thirty-year-old statement on the importance of deterring nuclear wars rather than winning them. He does so on the grounds that it has had a generally bad effect on American strategic thinking. I wonder how he would change it? Pipes and his many like-minded associates imply, or some may even state, that the Soviet Union has interests conflicting with ours which its leaders are so unwilling to inhibit or moderate that they are capable of coldly contemplating waging aggressive war against us. However, they fall short of telling us what those inexorable interests might be, usually falling back on the old standby, “miscalculation.” Miscalculation in a crisis is indeed something to be concerned about, but surely not for the sake of circumventing deterrence but for making it work.

General Keegan appears to think that the Soviet leaders simply want to eliminate the United States as a superpower rival, and he has some absurd notions about how their allegedly heroic efforts in civil defense have reduced to a remarkably low level the human casualties they would suffer, though it is still reckoned in millions. However, even he has to admit they would sacrifice virtually all their capital investment above ground, not to mention the amount of fallout they would have to cope with in the environment. Others, including Mr. Pipes, point to the 20 to 30 million Russian lives lost during World War II, as though that had been a matter of choice among the Soviet leaders at the time—a sacrifice willingly offered up as a maneuver to entice the Nazis to their destruction.

Mr. Paul Nitze, another charter member of the Committee on the Present Danger, offers us a scenario in which the Soviet Union delivers a surprise attack which does not, to be sure, eliminate more than a portion of our retaliatory forces but which leaves us so inferior that the President, whoever he is at the time, elects to quit the fight before making any reply in kind.¹⁰ Thus, the Soviet Union succeeds in making that otherwise elusive first-strike-with-impunity! An interesting thought, but it would take an exceedingly venturesome and also

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foolish Soviet leader to *bank* on the President's not retaliating. Even Mr. Nitze is not really sure; he says only that he *believes* the president would not.

But one must ask: even if all their evaluations were correct, what would these people have us *do*? Start a preventive war? Of course not. In the few instances where an attempt at an answer is offered, it seems to run as follows: abandon deterrence strategies in favor of war-winning strategies. But what does that mean? So long as we would not initiate or welcome the outbreak of a war, our basic peacetime strategy would still be that of deterrence. However, a difference is intended. The military have long been fond of saying that the best deterrence force is a war-winning force. Such a statement has certainly not been without meaning in the past, and even in the nuclear age it has some meaning in terms of tactical or theater forces. But when we speak of strategic nuclear *exchanges*, it is virtually impossible to find a reasonable meaning except in negative terms. That is, we can say what a war-winning force is not, or, to be more precise, what the people who use these phrases seem to mean by them. They mean a force which is definitely not inferior *in any one of* the several meaningful, or allegedly meaningful, attributes by which rival forces are usually compared.

The United States has about two-thirds the number of ICBMs deployed by the Soviet Union and is substantially inferior in terms of throw-weight. Actually, since 1970 the United States has built and deployed more ICBMs than the Soviet Union (550 versus 330), the difference being that our newer ones replaced older types which were retired, while the Soviet Union has kept active nearly all the ICBMs it has ever built—which incidentally tells us something about the difference in quality between the two forces. And so far as concerns throw-weight, about which so much is heard in some quarters, let us remember that it was a deliberate choice on the part of the U.S. military some two decades ago to go for smaller ICBMs than the Soviets fancied, for at least three good reasons: first, our people favored the increased readiness that would go with a solid-fuel propellant; second, we knew that our accuracy was much superior to that of the Russians, and likely to remain so for some time; and third, our smaller warheads were really not so very small. We keep forgetting that it was only a 14 KT weapon that devastated Hiroshima.

Whether against hard-point targets or any other kind, our retaliatory force with its far greater number of warheads and its much better accuracy and readiness remains today a clearly superior force to that of the Soviet Union—a "war-winning force" if one insists upon it. And if it remains that today, how about the recent past? Where the Committee on the Present Danger in one of its bro-
chures speaks of "the brutal momentum of the massive Soviet strategic arms build-up—a build-up without precedent in history," it is speaking of something which no student of the American strategic arms build-up in the sixties could possibly consider unprecedented. Since we are looking so hard for the reasons for the Soviet build-up, one possibility that ought to be considered is that it was simply triggered by ours, and that it continues to be stimulated by a desire to catch up.

Against What Do Nuclear Weapons Deter?

This question hardly arose at all in the early years of the nuclear age. The dogma of the time was that every modern war is total war, and the only war one seriously thought about was that between the United States and the Soviet Union. This view survived into the first part of the Korean War, which was regarded by the Pentagon as a Soviet ruse to draw us into the western Pacific while they prepared to launch an attack on Europe. Then came the thermonuclear weapon, which caused some people to think about the necessity of separating general war from limited or theater war, and following that came the Eisenhower Administration with its somewhat atavistic commitment to massive retaliation. The famous Dulles speech of January 1954 caused a strong reaction, which finally came into full bloom at the advent of the Kennedy Administration in 1961 with its remarkable Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara.

The idea developed that strategic nuclear power deterred only the use of strategic nuclear power and hardly any other form of violence. On the contrary, some argued that the existence of strategic nuclear weapons made lesser wars without nuclear weapons more rather than less likely, as though the pressure for war was more or less constant and the blockage of it in one direction made it only more insistent to break out in another. Then we began to hear of nuclear weapons being "decoupled" from diplomacy, for obviously they were not going to be used anyway. The next step was to argue that nuclear weapons must not be used in theater warfare even in Europe, and that the way to avoid their use was so to build up our conventional forces—together with our allies—that the threshold for use of tactical nuclear weapons would be raised too high to be breached. Such strong conventional forces, proponents held, made a far better theater de-

terrence than could any reliance upon tactical nuclear weapons. These ideas were fervently adopted by President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara, and, after some hesitation, by the armed forces, especially the Army and Navy. After all, large conventional forces meant more of everything, and it also meant the kind of war that the military leaders felt they knew how to fight.

Thus, what some sixteen years ago was a novel and even radical idea has long since become the conventional wisdom, especially in the United States. And, whether a good idea or not, it has cost this country a great deal of money. The massive retaliation idea was after all justified by its advocates mostly on grounds of economy, and the more we departed from it the higher the costs were likely to go.

Because the alleged advantages of the conventional build-up policy have had a good press and are well known, I shall confine myself to expressing a few opposing arguments.

THE ROLE FOR TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS
First, one of the strongest reasons consistently advanced by people like Alain Enthoven for doing away with tactical nuclear weapons is their alleged escalatory effect.12 According to this view, to use one nuclear weapon in the field, however small, is simply to pull the plug on the use of any and all nuclear weapons. One use thus leads quickly and directly to holocaust. It is interesting that our European partners favor the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons because they entertain the same belief, which means they favor it for the same reason that so many of our people oppose it. In my opinion, both are wrong. There was no problem in distinguishing between tactical and strategic bombing in World War II, and in avoiding the latter where it seemed politically desirable to do so. It is hardly self-evident that the distinction would be more difficult where nuclear weapons are involved, especially if we shift to much smaller tactical nuclear weapons than many that presently exist—which we should want to do anyway.

Second, the strategic nuclear forces of each of the superpowers do inhibit the other from any kind of warlike action against it. This was proved abundantly during the Cuban missile crisis, where our side we know, and the other side we

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12. Alain C. Enthoven has for some fifteen years been the outstanding spokesman for this school of thought, which has, however, included such prominent thinkers as Albert Wohlstetter and Thomas C. Schelling. One of Enthoven's most recent articles on the subject was his "U.S. Forces in Europe: How Many? Doing What?," *Foreign Affairs* (April 1975), pp. 512-532.
have good reason to guess, each thought it was looking down the barrel of a strategic nuclear war. It is also noteworthy that our people seemed to derive little comfort from the knowledge of having an overwhelming superiority in nuclear arms. It is indeed the fear that escalation is possible, some think probable, that causes the ultimate sanction to have this general deterrent effect, at least between the two superpowers. Granted that we need some military power in the theater so that the opponent knows he could not make a truly aggressive move there without provoking a war, it is nevertheless an area where we can afford to be interested in economies.

Actually, our allies have left us no choice in the matter, and it was predictable that they would not. They simply do not see the Soviet Union as threatening to attack. They have therefore firmly and consistently refused, despite long and continued prodding by our government, to build up to anything like the levels demanded by the conventional war thesis. Thus, we do not presently have and are not likely to get a real conventional capability in Europe, that is, one capable of dealing with a deliberate conventional Soviet attack against the West. For that matter, neither do we have a good tactical nuclear capability, but the latter is much more easily attainable. It would mean mostly changes in doctrine, in training, and in types of weapons, but not large net increases in men or equipment.

Third and most important, we should recognize that inasmuch as all our war plans are predicated upon an act of major Soviet aggression, the choice would not be really ours to make. The Soviets are hardly likely to enter a duel where they leave so critical a choice of weapons up to us. At any rate, we could not assume in advance that they would leave the choice to us. We are presently committed to using tactical nuclear weapons if the Russians use them first or if we find ourselves losing without them. The Russians, if they were making a deliberate attack, would refrain from using them, if they refrained at all, only if they were confident they could quickly overwhelm us without them. It is folly to think we could wait to see. Major adjustments in posture and tactics during a fast moving battle are not so easily made, especially if one is in the process of being overwhelmed. Finally, there is virtually nothing in the voluminous open Soviet

13. See especially Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969). It is interesting that at no time in his gripping narrative does Kennedy bring up or mention anyone else’s bringing up the very clear American superiority in nuclear arms, from which they might have been expected to derive additional hope of deterring Soviet resort to war. That, of course, does not mean that nobody thought about it.
tactical doctrine to support the notion that they make the sharp and important distinctions we do between use and non-use of tactical nuclear weapons. Far from embracing our favored doctrines, they have quite explicitly rejected them.

The Russians do not appear to be straining at the leash to pounce upon us in Europe. Quite the contrary. It is therefore an area where our investment need be only relatively modest; yet if we have any substantial force at all it ought to be one that is truly effective as a fighting force and certainly as a deterrent. It is nonsense to hold that a force trained and equipped to fight conventionally—even though it has some essentially unusable nuclear weapons behind it—makes a better deterrent than one of comparable size trained and equipped to fight from the beginning with nuclear weapons designed exclusively for tactical use. By the latter I mean something like the enhanced radiation bomb (the so-called neutron bomb), which should have been presented to the public for what it is—a means of making bombs smaller while retaining optimum effectiveness—and which makes an ideal anti-tank weapon.

The Wartime Use of Strategic Nuclear Weapons

I shall confine myself to commenting briefly on the special views identified with James R. Schlesinger as former Secretary of Defense, though they are more accurately described as a revival of some old ideas.14 In the form offered by Schlesinger, they have been best described and advanced by an enthusiastic advocate, Benjamin Lambeth.15 The general idea is to find some options outside what is regarded as the straight-jacketed posture of deterrence, which is viewed as waiting supinely to be struck and then attempting to expend our whole nuclear stockpile as rapidly as possible. The alternative suggested by the Schlesinger school is that we should be prepared during a crisis to initiate the use of strategic nuclear weapons, but only a few at a time, perhaps only one or two, the purpose usually mentioned being to show our “determination” or “resolve.” In some-

15. Benjamin S. Lambeth, Selective Nuclear Options in American and Soviet Strategic Policy, RAND Report R-2034-DDRE, December 1976. Despite my criticisms in the text, I should point out here that Lambeth explicitly disavows belief that circumstances of the future are ever likely to favor American limited first use. He simply wants it adopted as a “standing contingency capability,” though his argument endorsing that capability does wax exceedingly enthusiastic. His Report incidentally also includes a brilliant analysis of recent Soviet tactical and strategic thinking.
what more hushed tones, another purpose is sometimes whispered, one that immediately calls up references to the "surgical scalpel," that is, to get the enemy's top command and control apparatus before the few persons who are the key to it have a chance to go underground.

Various people have long questioned the wisdom or even the purpose of planning to deliver all our nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible in replying to an attack, for many targets are not time-urgent and most of our own weapons are not directly threatened. The main war goal upon the beginning of a strategic nuclear exchange should surely be to terminate it as quickly as possible and with the least amount of damage possible—on both sides. The U.S. military have indeed told us that they take a different view. According to General George Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "What we are doing now is targeting a war recovery capability." Their object, in plainer words, is to see to it that in a strategic nuclear exchange the Soviet Union will suffer so much greater damage to its industrial plants and population than we do, that its recovery is much more prolonged. Whatever else may be said about this idea, one would have to go back almost to the fate of Carthage to find an historical precedent. In more recent times the United States has usually put itself to considerable effort and expense to help a defeated enemy recover, normally with the expectation that a vastly changed government in the defeated power will make it adopt an attitude towards the world that is much more congenial with ours. It is incidentally curious, and totally opposed to all the Clausewitzian canons, that so far-reaching a military decision should escape any political input, a situation which no doubt reflects the very low priority which our top political leaders automatically put on war fighting as opposed to deterrence concerns. Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that targeting "recovery capability" may put some premium on rapid expenditure of one's stockpile.

However, the proposal of the Schlesinger-Lambeth school is not concerned really with the issue of possibly excessive or excessively speedy retaliation to an attack upon us. Its central concern is with getting out of the retaliatory bind, with opening American considerations to the possibility of striking first in the hope of winning advantages hitherto disregarded or at least insufficiently considered. The idea of keeping to a low level the number of weapons used does sometimes seem like a mere palliative to the central notion that we should be

prepared to initiate the exchange, though of course the idea that weapons be used for mere warning does require that their numbers be kept low. Otherwise the opponent is sure to do what he is all too likely to do anyway, which is to misapprehend our moderately benign intentions.

The Schlesinger-Lambeth school makes much of the advantage of expanding the options of any president during a crisis, a theme which had an especially high rating with Mr. McNamara when he was Secretary of Defense. The notion that it is incontestably good to expand the chief executive’s options is rather peculiar. For one thing, it runs directly counter to the basic tenets of constitutional government. The long conflict between the Congress and President Nixon during the Vietnam War concerning what seemed to be the limitations laid down by the Constitution upon presidential prerogatives and war-making powers is a case in point. From both the legal and the pragmatic view, it was not then and it certainly is not now clear that the national interest lay in expanding the President’s options. More recently we saw President Ford denied by Congress the right to send a large quantity of munitions to an obviously collapsing South Vietnamese government, and later denied the option of intervening in Angola with munitions if not with troops. In both instances President Ford and his Secretary of State complained most bitterly and offered up dire warnings of the evils that would befall American interests from such unseemly opposition to their wills. In both instances enough time has passed to suggest that the fears conjured up in those warnings were exaggerated, if not wholly imaginary. In short, the President does not always know best.

The above examples refer to legal limitations upon the power of the executive. However they may affect the national interest in any specific instance, the idea that such limitations should exist is considered absolutely basic to democracy as opposed to dictatorship. Of another character, however, are limitations imposed by the lack of specific physical capabilities such as might have been provided in good time if a different outlook had prevailed. In recent times it has generally been taken for granted that the wider the President’s range of options in physical means, the better. But why this should be so is also not altogether clear.

Actually, one notices that the thesis has usually been defended in terms of extending the range of options downward, as in the arguments referred to above that to increase conventional forces is to reduce or remove the pressure upon the President in particular circumstances to use the nuclear option. Unfortunately, when President Kennedy did expand the conventional ground forces
for that reason, his successor found himself with the means early in 1965 of sending combat forces to Vietnam without calling up the reserves! His options had been expanded in a way that particularly suited his own nature and outlook, but it is not obvious that the national interest benefited from the result. Naturally, one should not hinge too much on single cases. President Johnson’s conduct does not make a case against having a sufficiency of ground forces. It should, however, be enough to cast doubt on the notion that expanding the President’s military options is always a good thing. It may be a good thing if we can always be sure of having wise presidents, but it also throws a heavier burden upon that wisdom, so that any lack of it becomes the more telling. It is an old story that one way of keeping people out of trouble is to deny them the means for getting into it. We have put in the President’s hands a huge military power because we believe that the country’s security demands that we do so, and we are obliged to trust that he will use it wisely. But to expand that power simply for the sake of expanding his options is to push hard that obligatory trust.

Anyway, if the President did not already have the power to make the kinds of first strikes envisioned in the Schlesinger proposals, which inevitably he does, it would seem a very dubious proposition indeed that we should bestir ourselves to provide it. Certain kinds of weapons, like the cruise missile, may because of their extreme accuracy lend themselves particularly well to the kind of “surgical strikes” which in some people’s fantasies bring victory without cost or even danger, but there had better be other reasons for calling for them than the desire to free the President for conducting such experiments.

In fact, the overwhelming odds are that when and if the crisis comes, the man occupying the seat of power in the United States will exercise at least the caution of a John F. Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis, who by his brother’s intimate account was appalled by the possibility that any precipitous use of physical power by the United States might unleash the nuclear holocaust. He had firmly determined upon a confrontation and had made his requirements plain to the adversary. There is no reason to suppose that President Kennedy was anything but well above the mean level of courage we might expect in any president finding himself in a comparable situation. Yet we know from his conduct that the last thing he was interested in experimenting with during the crisis was some violent means of proving his resolve.

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17. See above, *Thirteen Days.*
There may indeed be worse crises than that of October 1962, but during such crises the man who must make the ultimate decisions for the United States will likely be searching desperately for the resolve he is supposed to show, and may well be the wiser man for having difficulties in finding it. In short, the notion that in an extremely tense crisis, which may include an ongoing theater war, any useful purpose is likely to be served by firing off strategic nuclear weapons, however limited in number, seems vastly to underestimate both the risks to the nation in such a course and the burden upon the person who must make the decision. Divorced from consideration of how human beings actually behave in a crisis, it fits Raymond Aron's definition of "strategic fiction," analogous to "science fiction." 18

Where Lambeth argues that the Schlesinger proposals introduce flexibility into an area of thinking hitherto marked by extreme rigidity, and that it introduces also strategy (in the form of choice) where no possibility of strategy existed before, he is simply playing with words. The rigidity lies in the situation, not in the thinking. The difference between war and no war is great enough, but that between strategic thermonuclear war and war as we have known it in the past is certain to be greater still. Any rigidity which keeps us from entering the new horrors or from nibbling at it in the hopes that a nibble will clearly be seen as such by the other side, is a salutary rigidity. And we need not worry whether the choices the President is obliged to make during extremely tense situations fill out anyone's definition of strategy. The important thing is that they be wise choices under the circumstances.

It is especially curious that the notions discussed above should be advanced by many who continue to oppose the use of tactical nuclear weapons because of their alleged escalatory danger! That danger must be by orders of magnitude greater when the weapon or weapons detonated are by type and by choice of target clearly of the strategic variety. Though it would indeed be desirable to condition the people who control our own retaliatory forces not to regard the arrival of one or a few enemy warheads as necessarily the onset of an all-out attack, that kind of conditioning would hardly be dependable even for our own side, and we should certainly not seek to depend upon its existing with suitable firmness on the other.

Finally, a word about what one puts on the line for such proposals. The de-

fense community of the United States is inhabited by peoples of a wide range of
skills and sometimes of considerable imagination. All sorts of notions and pro-
positions are churned out, and often presented for consideration with the prefatory
words: "It is conceivable that . . ." Such words establish their own truth, for the
fact that someone has conceived of whatever proposition follows is enough to
establish that it is conceivable. Whether it is worth a second thought, however,
is another matter. It should undergo a good deal of thought before one begins to
spend much money on it. In defense matters sums spent on particular proposals
can easily become huge.

Schlesinger's original proposal for "limited nuclear options" seems to have
been loosely connected to the then new cruise missile, which fortunately has
other factors to recommend it. Last year, however, Mr. Colin S. Gray, in a
"Letter to the Editor" of The New York Times,19 opined that inasmuch as it is
now established that the United States will initiate the coming strategic nu-
clear exchange, concerning which he seems to have no doubt, we should proceed
at once to buy the MX missile system. Fortunately, Mr. Gray is not a senior
official in the Defense Department or the military establishment, but his con-
siderable writings have brought him attention within the defense community.
Just why he considers the MX especially suited for initiating strikes is not clear—
the cruise missile has at least the advantage of extreme accuracy—but his readi-
ness to spend billions of dollars to cover a contingency that most of his peers
would regard as extremely dubious is a little breath-taking. Surely the chances
of his prediction being realized, even if more than infinitesimal, are not so great
that we could not make-do, if and when the time came, with vehicles deployed
for retaliatory purposes.

In these matters, to be sure, we are dealing fundamentally with conflicting in-
tuitions. There is no doubt that some people's intuitions are better than others,
but the superiority of the former, though sometimes definable and explicable,
may be difficult to prove. Still, the thinking up of ingenious new possibilities is
deceptively cheap and easy, and the burden of proof must be on those who urge
the payment of huge additional premiums for putting their particular notions in-
to practice.