



## Strategists, Philosophers, and the Nuclear Question

Marc Trachtenberg

*Ethics*, Vol. 95, No. 3, Special Issue: Symposium on Ethics and Nuclear Deterrence. (Apr., 1985), pp. 728-739.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0014-1704%28198504%2995%3A3%3C728%3ASPATNQ%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Q>

*Ethics* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Strategists, Philosophers, and the Nuclear Question

*Marc Trachtenberg*

What should a symposium on ethics and strategy attempt to do? Should the goal simply be to lay down judgments about which strategies are “morally permissible” and which are not? Such an approach to the problem does not seem particularly fruitful: for judgments of this sort always depend on an appeal to some principle, generally rooted in some ancient tradition; but if a policy we believe in is inconsistent with that principle, why are we morally compelled to sacrifice the former instead of the latter? The conclusions reached are binding only on those who share the premises on which they are based; those who are convinced that the policy in question is right can simply reject these premises as the obsolete products of the prenuclear age.

The “strategists,” of course, do not actually come out and say that the concerns of the moral philosophers are irrelevant. But they are aware that their basic assumptions about what makes for stability in the nuclear age contradict traditional principles about morality in warfare. The term “strategic stability” has referred, since the late 1950s, to a situation where neither superpower has any incentive to strike first with nuclear weapons; targeting strategic weapons might undermine an enemy’s confidence in his ability to ride out a first strike and thus give him an incentive to preempt. To those who look at things from this perspective, it follows that the “best of all possible nuclear worlds” would be one where only cities were targeted, for in that case there would be no incentive—in fact there would be a tremendous disincentive—for either side to strike first, and thus a nuclear holocaust would be virtually out of the question.

Most of the strategists at the conference subscribed to the stability doctrine in one form or another. Since this theory is not consistent with traditional views about the desirability of aiming at military as opposed to civilian targets, those principles themselves had to be sacrificed. Thus Robert Art, one of the political scientists at Aspen, said in this connection that he was “willing to live in sin.” What he meant, I think, was that in the context of the theory that he depended on, the principles of the philosophers had no real meaning, no moral salience, for him.

In fact, the strategists as a whole are not comfortable in the world of the moral philosophers. It strikes them as a strange place, where issues are painted in blacks and whites, where policies are either “permissible” or “impermissible.” The choices are stark, the judgments absolute. The issue that preoccupies the philosophers is whether nuclear deterrence is right or wrong—whether “it is wrong to intend, even conditionally, to do that which it would be wrong to do.”<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps not quite the right way to put the question: every circumstance is different, and no one can really see the future or tell for sure how he or she would react in extreme cases; intentions, therefore, are rarely rock solid; and deterrence consequently turns more on risk than on intent—the risk, for example, that we would be so carried away with rage following the destruction of our cities that we would pull the nuclear trigger ourselves. The question then would be whether it would be wrong to risk doing—if only because of the imperfect predictability of our own behavior—that which it would be wrong to do.

But however the question is defined, it is set up in such a way that it has a yes or no answer. The philosophers do not seem particularly concerned with questions of degree. They apply their yardstick and either the policy measures up or it does not. And if it falls short, as it does for many of them, it follows that deterrence has to be abandoned and replaced by a policy of no deterrence—that is, by what amounts in effect, and often quite explicitly, to a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

At Aspen, I gave a talk criticizing the philosophers for taking an absolutist approach to issues that, because of the inescapability of the nuclear problem, were inherently relative in nature—that is, making the same kind of argument that I will be making in this essay. The most interesting response was from Gerald Dworkin who told a parable about another conference, held in 1860, on the problem of slavery in America. Not everyone was an abolitionist; there were those who argued that one had to weigh costs and benefits, that maybe the slave system could be softened, that the issue had to be viewed as political and not just moral in nature. The implication was that there was clearly something wrong with that line: some questions are so clear-cut that the moral issues involved have to be viewed as absolute. Slavery was one such question, and nuclear war was another.

No one today would defend slavery, of course; but the more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed that before the Civil War one should have indeed tried to balance all the relevant considerations: that the institution of slavery was not so absolute an evil that it was morally imperative to do whatever was necessary to eradicate it immediately, without regard to any other consideration. In fact, if it was obvious that it would take a war—as it turned out, a long and gruesome war—to abolish slavery, the suffering and anguish that that war would produce should certainly have

1. Jeff McMahan, “Deterrence and Deontology,” in this issue, p. 519.

been taken into account. And one should have given some thought to what would happen to the ex-slaves, even in the event that the North were to win: if one could predict that there was a good chance that slavery would be replaced by another brutal and repressive system—by in fact the kind of system that took root in the South after Reconstruction—then this too should have been entered into the balance. And it also would have made sense to look at just how brutal the slave system was: there are different degrees of loathsomeness, and this could have made a difference in one's assessments. (Questions of degree are of course crucial if we are interested in striking a balance.) Finally, arguments about peaceful alternatives—the bidding up of the price of slaves by the federal government, for instance, to make the institution economically irrational in comparison with free labor—would certainly have had a place; historical experience—an analysis of the peaceful way slavery had in fact been ended in the British Empire is the most obvious case—might also have played a central role. Why shouldn't these things all be taken into account? Are we so convinced of the rightness of our personal moral values that we can turn a blind eye to the kinds of considerations that might moderate the force of our commitment? One wonders even whether it can ever be truly moral to simply refuse to weigh these sorts of factors seriously.

One can take the argument a step further by means of a hypothetical example. Suppose, in this case, that the Southerners had told the abolitionists that, if the North did come down to free the slaves, before they arrived the slaves would all be killed. Certainly at this point considerations other than the moral impermissibility of slavery would have to be taken into account. In such a case, an absolutist position—that the institution of slavery was so great an evil that it had to be rooted out without regard to consequence—reveals itself as inhuman and, indeed, as morally preposterous. There has to be some point where issues of balance become morally salient; and thus in general these basic moral issues have to be approached in nonabsolutist—and by that I mean more than just non-deontological—terms.

There are degrees of "moral unacceptability," and the process of judgment should be sensitive to this. In our everyday lives, we all take this for granted. I drive a car knowing there is a small but finite risk that I may kill some innocent pedestrian, due perhaps to some lapse of alertness on my part, and perhaps in some sense it is therefore wrong for me ever to drive. But doing this when the risk is low is not nearly as bad as doing it when, for some reason or other, the risk is high. It may be wrong to risk doing that which it would be wrong to do, but *how* wrong it is depends on the level of risk. Policies which are not tantamount to a ruling out of all nuclear options may be "impermissible" according to some moral standard or other; but they are hardly *as* "impermissible" by any reasonable standard as the actual pulling of the nuclear trigger, if that involved the slaughter of hundreds of millions of innocent people. To fail to recognize this simply strikes me as in itself a form of moral blindness.

We are condemned by circumstance, I think, to live in the moral twilight. If we try to escape, we risk doing more harm than good. If our hatred for nuclear war is so absolute that all other considerations are eclipsed, then we risk giving our adversaries a blank check, and this may draw them into the kinds of policies which we would view with great distaste. Suppose this led to a situation where, in desperation, we resorted to apocalyptic threats; but, having gone so far, our adversary may find it hard to pull back and might prefer to discount our threats on the basis of his prior appraisal of us. Major wars have come about in this way in the past. But this is just one of many ways in which the attempt to escape from the nuclear dilemma can be self-defeating. Such considerations are not morally compelling in themselves; but a sensitivity to such possibilities is essential if these issues are to be analyzed fairly—if the analysis, that is, is to be something more than a preaching to the converted, or a rationalization of one's own political biases.

If the issues of nuclear war are approached in absolutist terms, such considerations simply disappear from the analysis. But much of this has to do with the way the basic problem is structured. The odd thing here is that both philosophers and strategists define the central moral issue the same way: is deterrence right or wrong? It is just that their answers, by and large, happen to be different. According to the strategists, deterrence is right because it keeps the peace, and since peace, or at least nuclear peace, is the overriding goal, nuclear deterrence is fully justified.

But claims about deterrence being a pillar of peace, "an inextricable element of Europe's unprecedented stability,"<sup>2</sup> cannot be accepted uncritically. Why, in fact, would Europe be less stable if nuclear weapons had never existed? American power—in the sense of war-making potential, governed by a specific political intent, and not just forces-in-being—would still balance Soviet power, as it did in the immediate postwar period, before there were enough atomic bombs to be decisive militarily. Or to look at the issue from a somewhat different angle, if both Hitler and the British had had nuclear weapons before 1939, is it obvious that that would have made international politics in the 1930s appreciably more stable? Would Hitler have become more cautious, or would he have viewed the British fear of nuclear war as something that simply strengthened his hand and allowed him to proceed even more aggressively?

There is a certain tendency among some strategists to attribute too much to nuclear weapons. The argument, indeed, can be carried to the point where the strategist seems to be saying that we should be grateful that nuclear weapons exist. But claims of this sort tend, I think, to distort the terms of the debate. The real moral question is not whether nuclear weapons are good or bad. They exist and cannot be disinvented. The nuclear problem is therefore inescapable; the real moral issues have to

2. Josef Joffe, "Nuclear Weapons, No First Use, and European Order," in this issue, p. 608.

do with how we come to terms with this, with how we are to manage a problem that we can scarcely hope, in any ultimate sense, to resolve.

But does the notion of "deterrence" give us an adequate handle on all this? I want to argue, in fact, that the question of whether deterrence is good or bad does not capture the essence of the problem. For defining the issue in this way does not allow us to deal with what has to be our central concern—the problem of how to strike a balance between conflicting goals. Suppose, for example, we took the question seriously and answered it by saying simply that deterrence is good. But if some deterrence is good, more deterrence would be better; should we therefore try to make retaliation certain—should the use of nuclear weapons, in specific circumstances, be automatic? Or do we pay a rising price as we move along in this direction? If so—and most people would agree that at some point at least a certain price is exacted—how should costs be related to benefits? Where, in other words, should the balance be struck?

There is a need, therefore, to get away from a kind of analysis that directs our attention almost solely to the extremes of absolute deterrence or unilateral nuclear disarmament. Indeed, we need to make sure that we are asking the right questions—that we are framing the issues in such a way as to clarify and bring into focus the moral problems they involve. What are the trade-offs? What, if anything, do we lose when deterrence is made more absolute?

One of the basic problems here has to do with defining exactly what this price is. One should not assume too readily that it is simply an increase in the level of risk: risk in a particular crisis and overall risk are, of course, two different things for the obvious reason that crises are not purely random phenomena dealt out like hands in a game of cards. It is quite possible that a policy of increasing the level of risk if a crisis breaks out, by making escalation more automatic, would have the effect of making crises less likely to emerge in the first place. Thus the overall risk may go down. But even if this is the case, most people would still feel uneasy about too extreme a reliance on nuclear weapons. Therefore something other than the overall level of risk must be an operative consideration. What is it, and is it right to allow such factors to influence our policy in this area?

I was talking to a friend of mine, who happens to be an economist, about the doctrine of "strategic stability," or "mutual assured destruction," as it has bizarrely come to be called. Economists played a central role in the development of the idea, and one of the things that struck me as odd was that the use of analogues to everyday life, which was very characteristic of the analytical style of their strategic writings, was not in evidence in their discussion of "stability." And indeed such analogues would have been very strange. Should we design cars on purpose so that any serious collision would result in the death of both drivers, or structure our system of labor relations so that any strike would drive the company out of business and force the workers into prolonged unemployment?

If we did these things, people would probably drive more carefully and strikes would probably be much less frequent. Maybe even the overall number of highway fatalities would go down, or perhaps by some measure workers and employers would both be better off. But even if it could be shown that this kind of restructuring would have these kinds of effects, people would still be very reluctant to move in this direction.

To my surprise, he told me that there had been a study in one of the economics journals of the effect of seat belts on road safety that developed this kind of argument. Seat belts, the contention was, give a false sense of security, and thus lead to greater carelessness and more accidents than would otherwise be the case. It was not clear whether this was a tongue-in-cheek argument, designed to show just how pervasive the problem of trade-offs is. And it is right that we should be sensitized to the problem of unintended, indirect effects: given how complex human affairs are, such indirect effects are important in all areas of public policy. But the thing that interested me was that my visceral reaction to the argument about seat belts was independent of how well established its conclusions were—how valid the statistical analysis, how cogent the reasoning, and so on. No matter how solid the findings, I found it hard to imagine myself supporting a public policy of discouraging the use of seat belts.

In nuclear strategy as well, there is a similar visceral aversion to making retaliation too automatic that has nothing to do with any systematic calculation of the overall level of risk. It has to do instead, I think, with our distrust of our ability to plan in detail for future contingencies beforehand—that is, with our desire to maintain some kind of control even in extreme circumstances. Perhaps it was also rooted in some vague sense that we need to hedge against the possible inadequacy of our own theories. Indeed, this aversion was even shared by those strategists who were most sensitive to the strategic advantages of automaticity of response—who understood, in other words, how control and initiative could be handicaps.

The point here is simply that for these issues to be well defined, we have to give some thought to exactly what it is that we are trying to balance. At the very least, this means we should try to get away from the kind of analysis that is not sensitive to the problem of trade-off at all—that is, from an approach that tends to draw our attention away from the kinds of problems we should be concerned with. The very concept of deterrence almost invariably conjures up images of crude threat making; in dwelling on it, we tend to lose sight of the more subtle ways in which power can, and I think should, be used.

Consider, for example, the case of West Berlin. How should Berlin be defended in the event its status is once again challenged? We can explicitly threaten that if the Soviets seize Berlin we would launch a nuclear attack against the USSR. We might, to enhance the credibility of this threat, take measures that would make such retaliation virtually automatic. Or we could say that we are not quite sure how we would

react in such a case, but simply as a question of fact we recognize that a Soviet seizure of the city would unleash a semiuncontrollable chain of events that might well culminate in a nuclear holocaust. Or, at yet a further remove, we could say that a takeover would in no case be resisted militarily, but immediately West Germany would be armed with nuclear weapons, thus counting on basic Soviet anxieties about Germany to produce the desired dissuasive effect—this last option, of course, making sense only in a world where there is a finite risk that these nuclear weapons might eventually be used, for otherwise those Soviet anxieties would be nonexistent. Therefore, all of these alternatives depend on—indeed, consciously take advantage of—the risk of nuclear war. Are they thus all to be subsumed under the rubric of “deterrence”?

But there are important moral differences between these different policies, and these distinctions suggest issues which need to be explored. What is the moral difference, for example, between threat making and the conscious exploitation of nuclear risk, especially when that risk is viewed as inescapable? It is of basic moral importance that we define the issues in a way that allows us to *savor* such distinctions.

In the final analysis, this is because peace depends on the skill and subtlety with which power is handled. For in a world of sovereign states, where unresolved disputes can degenerate into armed conflict, the threat of war inevitably conditions political behavior—and thus power necessarily plays a central role in international politics. Peace therefore depends on a stable structure of power, and on the intelligent exercise of power. Peace, in other words, can depend on policies that accept a finite risk of war; and policies which try to rule out any such risk may disrupt the structure of power and thus lead to the very instability that their makers most fear.

This point of view implies that the exercise of power should be seen as normal and natural—that power is something to be exercised continuously and not just held in reserve for those occasions when moral issues are clear-cut. It follows, therefore, that the use of power should be subtle: not the kind of blatant threats, associated with the notion of deterrence, that are linked with the idea that the only function of power is to deal with “aggression” but, rather, the less risky measures which serve simply to condition an adversary’s behavior. In the nuclear age, it is too dangerous in most cases to try to dictate the behavior of one’s rival; but one should try to influence it by structuring the incentive system within which a rival operates.

In any event, our views on the general subject of war and peace—and thus our sense for what is wrong and what is right in the whole area of foreign and military policy—depend in a fundamental way on our theory of what makes for war or for international stability. The moral issues, that is, cannot be separated from the political ones, and issues of nuclear weapons policy cannot be treated in isolation from more general problems of international politics. Moreover, on those broader issues of



war and peace, we are not simply free to choose whatever theory we happen to like: there are certain insights which are intellectually compelling.

One of these is that wars are *not*, as a rule, to be attributed to aggression. They are to be understood, in general, as the outcome of a political process unfolding over time and governed by a dynamic in which the amoral logic of power plays a central role. Indeed, judgments about right and wrong in international affairs are rarely clear-cut. This is true, to one degree or another, of practically every international conflict that I know anything about. But for present purposes I would like to consider only the two great crises of the nuclear age—the confrontations that brought the world closest to thermonuclear holocaust.

The Berlin Crisis of 1958–62 and the Cuban Missile Crisis are both thought of by most Americans, when they think about them at all, in terms of Soviet aggressiveness. The Soviets, it was certainly assumed at the time, were always probing for weakness, and Western policy was purely defensive in character. And yet it is abundantly clear—obvious even from the terms of the November 1958 Soviet “ultimatum” on Berlin—that what set off the Berlin Crisis was Soviet fear of West German acquisition of nuclear weapons, and it was very evident to any careful reader of the *New York Times* that Western policy as a whole was moving in that direction. Was it “legitimate” to allow West Germany, presumably a sovereign power, to acquire nuclear weapons? Or were Soviet anxieties “legitimate”—given that the Bonn government viewed itself as the only legitimate government for Germany as a whole, that West Germany had still not reconciled itself to the status quo in Europe, that it proposed to change it, in a phrase that the Soviets were always quoting, by building “positions of strength,” that its army was led by veterans of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*, and so on? Was it therefore valid for the Soviets to apply pressure on Berlin as a way of giving point to their concerns?

Consider in comparison the American reaction in 1962 when the Soviet Union tried to place nuclear missiles in Cuba, condemned at the time as an unacceptable attempt to radically alter the status quo. But this was in many ways a less extreme provocation than what the Americans had intended to do with West Germany. Indeed, imagine what the American reaction would have been in 1962 if the Soviet Union had actually intended to turn control of their missiles over to Cuba; suppose also that the Cuban government still claimed large areas then under American control, and that only twenty years earlier a Cuban army had nearly conquered the United States and that veterans of that army occupied important positions within Cuba’s armed forces. But the United States was willing in 1962 to take the world to the brink of war over much less.

This is not, however, an argument about American aggressiveness. One can easily describe the crises in a way that would imply that Soviet behavior was morally questionable without doing any violence to the facts. I put it this way only because it shows how one-sided, and indeed simplistic, our traditional assumptions about international politics have

tended to be. The point, in other words, is merely that aggression is a difficult thing to define. There are other reasons for this as well. Judgments depend on values, and values are to a certain extent arbitrary. Nor are our values as a rule fully consistent with each other: we want other countries to be in charge of their own destinies, for example, but we also want them to be democracies just like us. Moreover, policy decisions are always made in the context of a particular structure of power; power has its own logic, and our judgments, whatever scheme of values we have, should be attuned to it.

If moral judgments, then, are difficult to make—if, as most professional historians believe, the allocation of blame is not an intelligent way of approaching the problem of war causation—then the whole concept of aggression, with all its moral overtones, is of limited utility. But if this is true, then the notion of deterrence is also of very limited value. For the two concepts are organically linked: it is aggression, and only aggression, that one seeks to deter.

If one approaches the problem of war and peace in less highly value-laden terms, then the exercise of power by an adversary is more likely to be treated as natural and not as “blackmail”; if moral judgments are viewed as relative, one is more likely to make the effort to see things from a rival’s point of view; if one is not ashamed to use one’s own power, one can exercise the kind of continuous influence that can conduce to mutual respect, to a real accommodation of interests, and thus to a stable international system. The real question, then, has to do not with whether, but rather with how, power is used; and I think it is clear that the more subtle the system is, the fewer rough edges it has, the more smoothly it is able to function. This means that a reliance on crude threats of war, held in reserve to deal with the most blatant acts of “aggression,” is more dangerous than a policy which involves the manipulation of anxieties in a more indirect way. The West could derive greater leverage over Soviet behavior from a nonnuclear than from a nuclear West Germany, for the *threat* of allowing the West Germans to arm themselves with atomic weapons would vanish as soon as they acquired them; a policy of this sort thus tends to lead to tacit accommodations secured by implicit sanctions. In the late 1950s, however, the opportunity to work out such arrangements was sacrificed by a policy that viewed matters in more narrowly military terms—that is, which viewed deterrence as the be-all and end-all of strategy.

The line of argument I am trying to develop here is one that many people find hard to accept. And it is not really to be expected that anyone would accept this kind of reasoning simply on the basis of the few arguments I have just sketched out. What I do insist on, though, is that what I have been dealing with here are the right *questions*. We are all interested above all in peace; therefore we must try to understand what makes for war, and this involves coming to terms with how the international system works. We want to know what makes for a stable international system,

and for a good foreign and military policy; and this means that we have to explore the relation between war and politics—that is, that we have to concern ourselves with such things as the political significance of the strategic balance and the role, if any, that arms races play in undermining stability.

But these, of course, are not the kinds of questions that can be handled by a purely abstract analysis. Our approach to the problem instead should be structured in such a way that the conclusions turn on the empirical evidence. A respect for hard evidence has to be at the core of serious thinking on the subject. Purely abstract reasoning, no matter how good it is in formal terms—and sometimes it is very good indeed—can only take us so far.

This sounds like it applies mainly to the moral philosophers, but actually I have the strategists in mind as well. In fact, I think the main criticism that can be directed against classic American strategic thought is that it was, at its core, excessively abstract in character. To Thomas Schelling, for example—in terms of pure intellectual power without any doubt the most impressive thinker in this school—history was like a great grab bag of facts that he could use to illustrate his theories. Approaching the problem on a highly abstract level, his analysis was not controlled and disciplined by the kind of sense for what is important and what is not that you develop when you have to think intensively about these issues in concrete contexts over a very long period of time. As a result he placed tremendous emphasis on the role of purely military factors in war causation. “The reciprocal fear of surprise attack” and “the dynamics of mutual alarm” are the kinds of phenomena he liked to talk about; but the effect of emphasizing such forms of interaction is that one tends to lose sight of the fact that international conflict is at its core a political and not a military phenomenon.

Today, however, strategists seem to be moving away from the old abstract approaches—after a brief period of astonishing productivity, the well had more or less run dry by the mid-1960s anyway—and toward a more empirically oriented style of analysis. But the philosophers, to judge from some of these essays, are still a little too cavalier, for my taste at least, about empirical matters. It certainly does not do any good simply to repeat old claims about how American military policy since 1945 “has been dominated by worst case reasoning,” how therefore “the sky is the limit now when it comes to resources that might be expended on military preparations,” and how all this has led to an arms race that has poisoned relations between the major powers.<sup>3</sup> The simple fact of the matter is that fiscal restraints are indeed still operative; it is clear, moreover, that we are devoting a much smaller share of our national income to military purposes than we are capable of doing, and indeed a smaller share than

3. Jan Narveson, “Getting on the Road to Peace: A Modest Proposal,” in this issue, p. 592; and Sissela Bok, “Distrust, Secrecy, and the Arms Race,” in this issue, p. 714.

was the case during other peacetime periods in the past; and if policy were truly dominated by worst case reasoning, we would be spending much more on the military than we now are, we would have a serious civil defense system on at least the Swiss scale, we would never have signed the ABM treaty, and we would have been constantly reaching for a disarming first strike capability.

As for the point about the arms race leading to the deterioration of political relations, is it totally without relevance to note that U.S.-Soviet relations now, as unsatisfactory as they still are, are nevertheless much better than they were when the nuclear arms competition began thirty-five years ago? Aren't we entitled to ask for some empirical proof for the proposition that the U.S.-Soviet nuclear rivalry has been destabilizing? In fact, I cannot think of any important claim, in any area of thought, where the gap between intensity of conviction and the adequacy of the evidence and reasoning supporting it is as great as it is here: the assumption about the terribly destabilizing effects of the arms race and its corollary about the transcendent importance of arms control are for many people simply articles of faith; and one often has the sense that to question these beliefs in any way, even to say anything that suggests that they be obliged to undergo the same kind of intellectual scrutiny we try to subject our other political beliefs to, is in itself viewed as mildly immoral, or as at best betraying an insensitivity to the great moral issues of the nuclear age.

The basic problem, though, with the kind of approach that views the arms race as the central problem is its assumption that international politics is not about anything real: distrust is rooted in distrust, not in substantive differences of interest; the Cold War is at heart just a gigantic misunderstanding, artificially propelled by the dynamics of mutual suspicion. I wish it were true, and I can understand why people want to believe it is true. But I know it just is not. There is a political conflict at the heart of U.S.-Soviet tension. This is not to be overdefined as a conflict between a threatening Evil Empire and a beleaguered Free World but is rather to be understood in more classic terms as a rivalry between two very great powers whose interests do not coincide.

The role that military factors have played in U.S.-Soviet relations is of course a central issue, if only because of the implications it has concerning how we should direct our efforts. The view that the basic problem has to do with the internal dynamics of the military competition leads to the conclusion that arms control is of preeminent importance as an end in itself—that is, that peace and arms control are virtually synonymous. On the other hand, the idea that the political conflict is fundamental leads to the conclusion that a political accommodation is the essential goal and that both arms control and arms buildups are to be conceived as instruments of a broader policy—as incentives and disincentives that can be used by a policy aiming at a political settlement.

These issues are basic, but they are not beyond our intellectual reach. So much depends on the kind of questions we ask, the kind of standards we hold up for ourselves—indeed, on the kind of intellectual effort we are willing to make. We are dealing with great issues of policy here, but we all have our personal moral responsibilities as well; and in this context it would be an evasion if we allowed our efforts to be wasted on fruitless, or even counterproductive, lines of inquiry. If we are serious about this whole enterprise, we have to make sure that we have thought through exactly what it is that we are trying to do and whether we are going about it in the right way. And these problems of definition can be terribly difficult: the problems of nuclear strategy are often very puzzling, but the hardest problem of all is to figure out what the right questions are.