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THE QUESTION OF NO-FIRST-USE

by Marc Trachtenberg

The idea that the United States should promise not to use nuclear weapons unless an adversary used them first is by no means new. Proposals of this sort have been aired periodically for the past thirty-five years.¹ But it was only in 1982, with the appearance of an important article by McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara, and Gerard Smith, that no-first-use became a live political issue.² By now, the debate has come and gone; the issue, like so many others, simply faded away. But because what was at stake was not just some minor change in declaratory policy — because what was really being raised was the basic question of just how dependent we should be on nuclear weapons — the issue is still worth examining: an analysis of the argument for no-first-use might shed some light on the larger problem of the role that nuclear weapons should play in our military policy.

Traditionally, the argument for no-first-use, like the argument for decreasing our reliance on nuclear weapons more generally, has rested on the assumption that a reduced risk that the West would initiate a nuclear exchange would more or less automatically reduce the risk of nuclear war. But in the current discussion, the argument for such a general reorientation of defense policy is rooted in more fundamental claims about the “non-utility” of nuclear weapons. Thus, Kennan characterized the “nuclear bomb” as “the most useless weapon ever invented,” and former Secretary of Defense McNamara stressed the point that “nuclear weapons serve no military purpose whatsoever. They are totally useless — except only to deter one’s opponent from using them.”³

¹ N. F. Mott, “Can Atomic Weapons Keep the Peace?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 1949, p. 11; S. K. Allison et al, “Let Us Pledge Not to Use H-Bomb First,” *ibid.*, March 1950, p. 75. See also Lawrence Weiler, “No First Use: A History,” *ibid.*, February 1983, pp. 28-34, essentially a survey of American and foreign government activity in this area since 1945; Robert Tucker, Klaus Knorr et al, “Proposal for No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Pros and Cons,” Princeton Center of International Affairs, Policy Memorandum No. 28 (September 1963); and especially Richard Ullman, “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1972. Congressional hearings on the subject were conducted in 1976: “First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Preserving Responsible Control,” Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Security and Scientific Affairs of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, 1976).

² McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara and Gerard Smith, “Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1982.

³ George Kennan, “A Modest Proposal,” *New York Review of Books*, July 16, 1981, p. 14; Robert McNamara, “The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1983, p. 79.

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What does it mean to say that nuclear weapons are "useless"? Is this contention tantamount to a claim that nuclear weapons simply cancel each other out and have no other political effect — i.e., that world politics proceeds as though they did not exist? The assumption clearly is not that nuclear arsenals simply neutralize each other, that they could never actually be used, and that they are therefore politically irrelevant. For if there were no possibility of nuclear war, it would make little sense for people to concern themselves with issues of nuclear weapons policy. The problem is that there is a certain chance that these "unusable weapons" might some day be used, and, consequently, the risk that a conflict might escalate beyond the nuclear threshold endows these forces with political meaning. A nuclear world will be different — radically different, I think — from a nonnuclear world. In other words, a nuclear strategy — not just the weapons, but also the way we think about them and the way we deploy them — will certainly have effects which go beyond the mutual deterrence of nuclear attack. Whether these effects are to be judged useful or pernicious is a matter for analysis. What is wrong is to blandly assume that positive effects just cannot exist.

When we talk about reducing our reliance on nuclear weapons, we have to consider systematically the effects of such a shift. A nuclear orientation may have some unsuspected advantages, and a move away from it might therefore have some unpleasant consequences. Before making a judgment, it is important to know what these effects are. We may be willing to pay a price for moving away from nuclear weapons, but we should first try to get a clear sense of what it is.

In this context, historical work can be particularly valuable; not only the history of international politics in the nuclear age, but the history of military policy and the history of strategic thought as well.

Some Lessons From History

Are nuclear weapons good for anything other than the deterrence of their use by others? Does the physical placement of such weapons, for example, have a distinct political effect? Does the deployment of intermediate-range missiles in West Germany, to take a case in point, tend to deter a Soviet conventional invasion of the Federal Republic? It is frequently claimed that it would not: why should the Soviets care if the American missiles that strike them are launched from bases in West Germany or from submarines off the coast of Holland?⁴

⁴ See for example Lord Zuckerman, "Nuclear Fantasies," *New York Review of Books*, June 14, 1984, which approvingly invokes McNamara's making of this argument; note also G. Trevorton, "Nuclear Weapons and the 'Grey Area,'" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1979, p. 1079.

However, the evidence of the Cuban Missile Crisis makes it clear that it does matter to the invader whether nuclear-tipped missiles are located in territory about to be attacked. In 1962 it was taken for granted that the effective deployment of such missiles in Cuba would make an invasion of the island a very risky business. It was for this reason that the resolution of the affair became a matter of such great urgency for the Kennedy administration: the assumption was that if the United States had to attack, it was much safer to do so before work on the sites had been completed and the missiles on the island had been armed with their nuclear warheads.⁵ For whatever reason, the administration thought it more likely, in the event of an attack, that the Soviets would fire their missiles in Cuba rather than launch their ICBMs — i.e., that the Russians might think that triggering the Cuban missiles might not be tantamount to plunging into all-out war. Hence the famous warning in President Kennedy's October 22 speech which was clearly designed to disabuse them of any such notion: the launch of any of the nuclear missiles from Cuba, he said, would be regarded "as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union."

The fact that such anxieties existed and had to be dealt with in these ways shows that a successful Soviet deployment in Cuba would have tended to deter an American invasion. By the same token, however, the deployment of American missiles in Western Europe can be presumed to have a certain deterrent effect. Whether this consideration provides a sufficient justification for such deployment is another matter. The example is only meant to show, first, how nuclear weapons can have positive effects beyond the deterrence of their use by others, and, second, how we can learn about the likely effects of our actions by studying how we have in fact reacted to analogous behavior on the part of others in the past.

A second example, this time from the history of defense policy, relates more directly to the no-first-use proposal. No-first-use, like the general idea of a shift away from a predominantly nuclear orientation, is commonly predicated on the assumption that a nonnuclear defense of Western Europe is possible — that is, that conventional parity can be achieved through unilateral action. But what brought conventional parity in Europe within reach by the early 1960s? To the extent that military manpower can be taken as a rough indicator of conventional military power, it was Soviet policy that played the key role. There were massive

⁵ See the analysis in Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security*, Summer 1985, 153-55; and in id., Introduction to Documents, in "White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *ibid.*, pp. 168-69.

cutbacks in Soviet military manpower during the late 1950s; and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, in January 1960, announced plans for a further sharp reduction to only 2,423,000 men, which was approximately the American level at the time.⁶ It seems clear enough that Soviet policy was deeply influenced by prevailing American ideas: if the Eisenhower New Look doctrine and the postures it rationalized effectively ruled out a massive conventional war, what was the point of preparing for one? The Americans would escalate in any event; as a result of American policy, a major U.S.-Soviet limited war was virtually impossible. Certainly there are many indications that Soviet leaders took the American doctrines of the 1950s seriously, and it seems reasonable to assume that American policy was one of the most basic forces shaping Soviet strategic thinking in this period.⁷

Indeed it is amazing how close Khrushchev's views were to Eisenhower's by early 1960. Just a few days after the Soviet chairman announced in his famous January 1960 speech that his regular air force was being phased out, that bombers were obsolete, and that they would be entirely replaced by rockets, Eisenhower was telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the proposed B-70 bomber (the forerunner of the current B-1) "left him cold in terms of making military sense." The Air Force Chief of Staff's arguments about bomber recallability, "the psychological effect of manning static weapons" and so on, had no effect on him. Eisenhower was convinced that "the age of aircraft for actual use over enemy territory [was] fast coming to a close." Missiles were "cheaper" and "more effective." Given "the kind of destructive power we had," he doubted whether there was still a place for the bomber: "he saw no need for it."⁸ Both the Khrushchev and Eisenhower positions were far too extreme to be explained simply as products of the technological environment, and it is obvious that they were closely linked.

What all this suggests is that the Eisenhower New Look, with its heavy nuclear orientation, may have actually improved the balance of conventional forces. Indeed, by the end of the Eisenhower period, when members of the incoming Kennedy administration were briefed by

⁶ For the figures, see Jeffrey Record, *Sizing Up the Soviet Army* (Washington: Brookings, 1975), Table 2-1, p. 5. For the text of the speech, see *New York Times*, January 15, 1960. The American level was given in another article the *Times* published that day as approximately 2,500,000 ("Capital Thinks Russians Seek to Apply Pressure.")

⁷ See David Holloway, *The Soviet Union and the Arms Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 35-36, 41; Arnold Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategic Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 30; and the (then secret) Suslov speech of October 8, 1960, quoted in "The Sino-Soviet Dispute and its Significance," a CIA memorandum of April 1, 1961, p. 27, in National Security Files, Box 21, JFK Library, Boston.

⁸ Memorandum of Conference, January 20, 1960, by General Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower Papers as President of the United States, 1953-61 (Ann Whitman File), Dwight David Eisenhower Diaries, Box 29: Staff Notes, November 1959; also in Declassified Documents Collections, 1978:119E.

their predecessors about military and foreign policy matters, they were especially surprised by Secretary of Defense Gates's confidence about America's ability to fight a limited war. As Clark Clifford wrote in one of the memoranda recording these briefings, "Secretary Gates was exceedingly sanguine about the state of our forces insofar as limited war capabilities were concerned. He said that the United States forces are in excellent shape and fully adequate to any foreseeable test." This referred specifically to conflicts that might arise over Korea, Formosa, Iran, Berlin, and Laos.⁹ And although the documents are not explicit on this point, it seems that by this time the term "limited war" had come to have a distinct nonnuclear connotation.

Few would have predicted in 1953 that the New Look, with its strong distaste for a massive limited-war-fighting capability, would actually lead to the situation Secretary Gates described. But in retrospect the logic of the process seems clear enough: a nuclear orientation, through its effect on an adversary's policy, can actually improve the conventional balance. What this implies for us today is that any attempt to dilute the nuclear orientation of American policy might by the same logic weaken the rationale for limited Soviet conventional forces; placing greater emphasis on conventional forces could thus lead to a worsening of the conventional balance from the West's point of view — at least if one accepts the usual assumptions about the structure of comparative advantage in the area of conventional force-raising potential.¹⁰ In other words, the indirect effects might well overwhelm the direct ones, and an attempt to reduce our dependence on nuclear weapons might ultimately have the effect of increasing it.

In the 1950s, when the issues of limited war and tactical nuclear weapons were first seriously discussed, one of the more impressive insights was that nuclear weapons could have a profound effect on a military conflict even if they were not actually used. What would be the nature of a conventional war in Europe (in James King's phrase) "fought in the shadow of nuclear power"?¹¹ Political ambitions would have to be limited, and there were important military effects as well. A commanding general would be reluctant to concentrate his forces if he were afraid that this would tip the scales and lead to nuclear strikes against his armies; thus, to the extent that some massing of forces was necessary for

⁹ Clifford to JFK, January 24, 1961, President's Office Files, Box 29a, folder "Eisenhower, D. D. 1/17/61-10/9/61," JFK Library, and the McNamara (January 24, 1961) and JFK (January 19, 1961) memos of the same meeting in the same file.

¹⁰ See John Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security*, Winter 1984-85.

¹¹ James E. King, Jr., "Nuclear Plenty and Limited War," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1957, p. 244. Actually Bernard Brodie had used the term in this context even earlier: see Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Arno, 1946), p. 83.

offensive action, a risk of nuclear war tended to load the dice in favor of defense.

What this implies, first of all, is that nuclear weapons can have important effects — military effects — beyond deterring their use by others. Those effects may be positive, and they may be sacrificed by a policy which seeks to rule out any prospect, under any circumstances, of the West initiating a nuclear exchange.

But is it possible that the effect could be negative? In an extraordinary passage, former Secretary of Defense McNamara accepted the point about the “nuclear shadow” effect, but argued that since this makes it more probable that a nonnuclear attack would fail, it must therefore increase the risk of a Soviet nuclear strike. From the Soviet point of view, he wrote, “preparing themselves for the possibility of NATO nuclear attacks means that they must avoid massing their offensive units. This would make it more difficult to mount a successful conventional attack, raising the incentives to initiate the war with a nuclear offensive.”¹²

This passage is of interest for two reasons. First, it is an implicit admission that nuclear weapons might be militarily “usable” — for the Soviets at least — and if use can be militarily rational for them, why is it out of the question that use in some circumstances might make sense for us as well? But the more important point is that, at its core, this is an argument against any strong conventional defense. In fact, this line of reasoning implies that we should make conventional offensive action easier for our adversaries, lest they in their frustration opt for a nuclear attack.

It is important to be sensitive to the effect our views might have on other countries. We seem to assume that our adversaries pay no attention to our internal discussion of these issues. And yet, Soviet officials have long been aware of the possibility of exploiting bourgeois pacifism for their own political ends. As Lenin wrote Chicherin, the foreign affairs commissar, in February 1922: “You and I have both fought against pacifism as a programme for the revolutionary proletarian party. That much is clear. But who has ever denied the use of pacifists by that party to soften up the enemy, the bourgeoisie?”¹³ Such attitudes are by no means dead. It is therefore important to be concerned with the effect our writings have on Soviet perceptions.

Lest this point be misunderstood, it is important to stress that Soviet sensitivity to our attitudes is in itself very desirable. It is a touchstone of stability that rivals be able to assess each other and orient their policies

accordingly — that they press ahead only when this assessment indicates that the risks are minimal, and that they are cautious when the risks are great. Indeed, an ability to attune one’s policy to the logic of power — or to the correlation of forces, as the Soviets say — is a chief characteristic of a competent and effective foreign policy. Policies oblivious to the structure of power, which plunge ahead without regard to any calculus of risk, driven primarily by some moral principle or some strong emotion, simply do not promote a stable international system. Moreover, our adversaries’ sensitivity to our attitudes need not have purely negative effects. Indeed, their sensitivity provides us with important leverage: by framing our attitudes with an eye to their likely response, we can exert some control over their policies.

It follows, therefore, that we should pay particular attention to what might be inferred about our basic attitudes from what we say. Take for example the argument that first use of nuclear weapons would be “militarily irrational.” But if it is irrational (because of the great risk of escalation) to use nuclear weapons first in the case of a major conventional war, why would it be any less irrational to use them in the event an enemy is the first to breach the nuclear barrier by, say, setting off a few low-yield weapons “as a demonstration of resolve”? Certainly the threat of escalation would not be any less great at that point. Why would it make sense to run the terrible risks of escalation with a nuclear response no matter what the provocation — massive tactical nuclear attacks, large-scale city-avoiding counterforce strikes, or whatever? Or, to take the argument to its logical conclusion, how could it be “militarily rational” to respond in kind even if we were the victims of an all-out Soviet nuclear attack?

If one believes that one should never use nuclear weapons first, but that it is permissible to consider their use if an enemy introduces them, then one must rely on some criterion other than “military rationality.” But unless one makes it clear what that additional criterion is, the impression might remain that “military rationality” must be our overriding concern; that is, we would appear to be relying on a test that in the final analysis would rule out not just *first* use but *any* use of nuclear weapons. Given that accepting a policy also implies an acceptance, to some degree, of the logic on which it was based, we need to be concerned with what arguments of this sort might suggest to an adversary.

This is not to argue that the use of nuclear weapons in warfare is necessarily “rational.” It is not even clear what “rationality” means in this context. The real problem concerns the effect of adopting this anti-nuclear attitude. It is not at all obvious that it would reduce the risk of nuclear war. For the acceptance of this point of view might well have

¹² McNamara, “Military Role,” p. 75.

¹³ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 45 (Moscow, 1970), pp. 474-75. There are many other documents from this period which reflect a similar point of view.

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the effect of making not just a Soviet conventional attack, but even a Soviet nuclear attack, more likely: we might end up giving the impression that our fear of escalation is so deep that we would not respond with nuclear weapons no matter what the Soviets did.

Thus, proponents of no-first-use assume that adoption of this policy would lead, in Kennan's words, to a "far-reaching restructuring of our armed forces."¹⁴ The central question here is whether the goal is to rule out *any* use of nuclear weapons or simply to rule out *initial* use. Thus Kennan writes that "the training and equipment," "the strategy and the tactics" of America's forces currently "have been affected by the assumption that we might have to fight — indeed, might wish to fight — with nuclear weapons, and that we might well be the ones to inaugurate their use."¹⁵ This is the situation that Kennan would like by and large to reverse. But if the assumption to be abandoned is that we *might* have to fight with nuclear weapons, this can only mean that we should not seriously prepare ourselves to fight with them. We would then be unprepared to respond even if an adversary used them first. A policy of maintaining an option to use nuclear weapons first without committing ourselves to their automatic use might produce a military establishment very much like one prepared to use nuclear weapons only after an enemy had done so first — that is, armed forces with a true dual capability. But Kennan, for example, implies that we need more far-reaching changes, and that we should only prepare seriously to fight conventional war.

McNamara argues along similar lines that "NATO's threat of 'first use' " has its costs:

Preparing for tactical nuclear war limits NATO's ability to defend itself conventionally in several ways. Nuclear weapons are indeed "special" munitions. They require special command, control and communications arrangements. They require special security precautions. They limit the flexibility with which units can be deployed and military plans altered. Operations on a nuclear battlefield would be very different from those in a conventional conflict; NATO planning must take these differences into account.

Moreover, since most of the systems that would deliver NATO's nuclear munitions are dual-purpose, some number of aircraft and artillery must be reserved to be available for nuclear attacks early in a battle, if that became necessary, and are thus not available for delivering conventional munitions.¹⁶

But again, these are arguments against having a tactical nuclear capability in the first place. If no-first-use is to be kept distinct analytically from a policy of ruling out any use no matter what an enemy does, then it should be taken as implying that an efficient "second use capability" should be

maintained. This may indeed require more elaborate "command, control and communications arrangements" than would be necessary under a 1950s-style first-use policy. Similarly, it is difficult to see why it is less important to maintain reserves of nuclear-capable aircraft and artillery under no-first-use than under the present system, unless one really wants to deprive one's own side of the ability to retaliate effectively in the event an enemy is the first to breach the nuclear threshold.

Suppose, however, that policy was in fact built on the assumption that nuclear weapon use is never rational. There would be little point then to preparing ourselves seriously to fight a nuclear war, even one begun by the other side. We would, therefore, be reducing an enemy's risk should he decide to use nuclear weapons against us. And if our nuclear capabilities were allowed to deteriorate — for example, by becoming increasingly vulnerable to the improved weapons of the other side — this might in itself (in the way commonly argued for strategic weapons) be a "destabilizing" influence.

The Balance of Anxiety

But the political effects would probably outweigh the military ones. When we talk about these issues, we are among other things signaling our adversaries about how we would behave if certain extreme contingencies arose. If we give the impression that a large and growing segment of American opinion views nuclear deterrence as a gigantic bluff — that we have no real intention of ever using nuclear weapons no matter what happens — this is sure to have an effect. The danger again is that in allowing our attitudes to shift in this direction, we increase the risk that an adversary would actually launch a nuclear attack.

The argument about the irrationality of nuclear options is commonly based on a belief in the uncontrollability of nuclear war, and in the virtual inevitability of escalation. And yet, the more firmly we hold these notions, the less likely it is that we would in fact retaliate with nuclear weapons even if an enemy were to use them first: there is a good chance that we could be terrorized by our fear of escalation into not responding in kind. Paradoxically, a powerful belief on our part in the inevitability of escalation would reduce an enemy's assessment of the actual risk of launching a nuclear attack: we might even convince an opponent that, after absorbing a limited nuclear attack, we would capitulate rather than risk thermonuclear holocaust. Thus, the more convinced either side is of the inevitability of escalation, the less likely it is that a limited nuclear attack would actually escalate. The stronger either side's belief in the uncontrollability of nuclear war, the more likely it is that a

¹⁴ Kennan, "On Nuclear War," *New York Review of Books*, January 21, 1982, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ McNamara, "Military Role," pp. 74-75.

nuclear war would be brought to a swift end — that is, that it would actually be controlled. A nuclear strike might then become rational simply as a consequence of one's adversary viewing it as irrational.

The point is that the fear of escalation can be exploited. The prospect of nuclear war scares us as well as them and may make us more cautious in a dispute than we might otherwise be. Realizing this, they might decide to play on our fears and take a more aggressive position as a direct result of the increased level of risk. The threat of uncontrollable devastation, therefore, does not necessarily lead to caution. One's fears can be balanced by the knowledge that a rival is also afraid — indeed, they may be more than balanced by the perceived advantages of playing on an adversary's anxieties.

When people first began to think seriously about the political consequences of the atomic bomb, one of the most controversial issues was whether it was a "weapon of aggression." Those who denied this assumed that the means for retaliation in kind could be made secure, and that something we would now call "mutual deterrence" would be the likely consequence. But a condition of this sort would not necessarily lead to prudent behavior on the part of great powers. "Hitler made a good many bloodless gains by mere blackmail, in which he relied heavily on the too obvious horror of modern war among the great nations which might have opposed him earlier," Bernard Brodie wrote in 1946. As historical interpretation, this clearly left much to be desired: the fear of war was not the only basis for the German triumphs of the 1930s. But the point Brodie drew from his comment about Hitler is nevertheless worth pondering: "A comparable kind of blackmail in the future may actually find its encouragement in the existence of the atomic bomb."¹⁷

So far, things have not quite worked out that way. Attempts to secure unilateral advantages by playing on a nuclear-armed adversary's fear of a holocaust have on the whole been unsuccessful. The fear of nuclear war has weighed more heavily as a restraint than as something to be exploited. Why this has been the case is not clear: Is it the basic satisfaction of both America and Russia with the status quo? Is it the risk-averse character of large bureaucratic states? Or is it the relatively even distribution of fear? Whatever its causes, the situation has had certain advantages. It is therefore important, as we consider how to restructure the system, to be aware of what those advantages are — to be sensitive, that is, to what we might risk losing.

There is first of all what might be called the defensive bias of nuclear weapons. Back in the 1950s, many of the people who wrote on strategic issues were concerned with creating "usable" power. The prob-

¹⁷ In Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon*, p. 85.

lem with too great a reliance on thermonuclear weapons was that this prevented the United States from using its power for political ends; the strategy of massive retaliation had, except for the most blatant and extreme cases of aggression, effectively disarmed the country. The problem, these theorists argued, was that under Eisenhower, American policy was too exclusively defensive in orientation. A limited-war capability was therefore necessary — this was Henry Kissinger's line at the time — if the country were to pursue such "positive goals" as the reunification of Germany or the easing of the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe.¹⁸ By the beginning of the 1960s, "limited war" had increasingly come to mean "conventional war"; conventional power was "usable" in a way that nuclear power simply was not. Thus, a conventional buildup was linked to goals that went beyond mere maintenance of the status quo. This assumption was evident in Dean Acheson's writings and utterances at the time.¹⁹ Even Thomas Schelling argued for nonnuclear forces as the only way of supporting an interventionist policy in Eastern Europe.²⁰

These particular policies might have been dangerous, but the theoretical insight they rested on was sound: it is hard to use nuclear weapons for aggressive purposes — and, hard as it was then, it is certainly harder now. But was the nuclear straitjacketing of American foreign policy to be regretted? Carl Kaysen almost grudgingly pointed out (while working in the Kennedy White House in 1961) that this might have been a fortunate thing: the weakness of Eisenhower's military policy effectively neutralized what Kaysen viewed as Eisenhower's over-militarized foreign policy.²¹

What then does this argument about the conservative bias — i.e., the primarily defensive character — of nuclear weapons imply? A certain reliance on nuclear weapons on our part may also lead our adversaries to stress a nuclear strategy; but if dependence on nuclear forces constrains us, it should constrain them as well. Both sides will be more cautious, and the risk of war will be reduced.

This argument about the defensive, and therefore stabilizing, implications of nuclear-based strategy depends, however, on the persistence of the situation that has prevailed so far: where the fears of each side have outweighed the possible attraction of exploiting the corresponding fears of a rival. The rise of "nuclear pacifism" in the West is the one

¹⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Norton, 1957), esp. pp. 13, 37, 39, 42.

¹⁹ See his article "The Practice of Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1963, esp. pp. 254-55, and his speech to the Institute for Strategic Studies of September 1963 published in *Adelphi Paper No. 5*. Note also Brodie's comments on this in *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 402.

²⁰ In David M. Abshire and Richard V. Allen, eds., *National Security: Political, Military, and Economic Strategies in the Decade Ahead* (New York: Hoover, 1963), pp. 626-27; see also p. 735.

²¹ Carl Kaysen, "Thoughts on Berlin," August 22, 1961, p. 8, in National Security Files, Box 82, JFK Library.

thing that might disrupt this situation. If the Soviet leadership, for example, were to become convinced that we would never use nuclear weapons, this balance might be shifted: the chance to exploit our fears would then outweigh their own sense of risk.

Given the limits on our ability to predict our own behavior, an asymmetry of this sort could be profoundly destabilizing. Our nuclear pacifism, and the military posture it may have engendered, might draw our adversaries into a more aggressive policy than they would otherwise pursue. We might then become so upset that, in desperation, we would resort to apocalyptic threats to get them to withdraw. Having gotten in so deep, however, they might find it difficult to pull back; and this, combined with the inferences they drew from our prior policy, might lead them to discount our threats and risk a real test of will. This, the best historians argue, was the way war came to Europe in 1939 — a war, it must be remembered, that neither Hitler nor the British wanted at the time.²² For many years after World War II, we were perhaps too obsessed with certain crudely drawn lessons of the Munich period. The risk now, after Vietnam, is that in ignoring the lessons that should be drawn from a study of the 1930s, we might again end up making the same sort of mistakes that were made then.

This issue can also be viewed from the perspective of the history of American strategic thought. One of the nicer points made in the strategic literature in the 1950s was that policy pronouncements — like no-first-use, for example — were, among other things, attempts to predict our future behavior. But are we quite sure that, when the chips are down, regardless of what we might say now, we would prefer a conventional defeat to any kind of nuclear option, no matter how massive that defeat, no matter how great its political consequences? Calling for a conventional buildup is no way of getting around this question, since, even if conventional parity were achieved in principle, no one could predict the outcome of a nonnuclear conflict with any certainty.

If we are not sure that we would be prepared to accept a total defeat — over Berlin, for example, or even over Western Europe as a whole — then we run the risk of unintentionally misleading an adversary into thinking we would not be tempted to resort to nuclear threats, when in fact we might. In the past, we in the West have certainly misled our adversaries about our ultimate willingness to use military force. This was most obvious in the case of the Korean War when the whole thrust of American policy prior to the North Korean invasion of the south had

²² The best discussion to my mind remains Raymond Sontag's classic article, "The Last Months of Peace, 1939," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1957, 507-24. This was the basis for his treatment of the subject in Chapter Thirteen of his book *A Broken World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

been to signal our intention to disengage from Korea and to place it outside our "defense perimeter." But perhaps the pacifism of the 1930s provides a more relevant example. To many in Britain at the time, the horrors of war were detested and feared in the abstract. Nothing could justify a new war with Germany, and the weapons to fight it with could therefore not be justified either. An image was projected which led Hitler to feel that Britain would not resist German expansion in the east; but the events of 1939 were to show that the British had not had a clear sense for what their feelings would be when not war itself, but the threat of a Nazi-dominated Europe, emerged as the most pressing problem.

The point of all this is not that we should be ready to use nuclear weapons in defense of any particular political goal, but only that we need to think through how we might react in certain extreme and apparently remote contingencies. This, after all, is what strategy is ultimately about; the central problems of strategy relate to the most painful decisions, not to the ones most likely to arise.

If we adopt no-first-use, then, would we be prepared to write off West Berlin if its status were again challenged? Would we be prepared to accept a conventional defeat, no matter how massive, no matter what the political consequences — in Central Europe, in the Middle East, or indeed in any place in the world? If we simply swept aside questions like these, we would be asking for trouble if such awesome decisions ever presented themselves — and issues like no-first-use are of interest only to the extent that such problems are indeed real.

The Terms of the Trade-off

There is an argument that a shift to no-first-use and related policies would not increase the risk that we might some day be forced to face such decisions. The claim is that whatever we say or do, as long as nuclear weapons exist, there is a finite chance that they might be used in certain contingencies, this in itself assuring an adequate level of deterrence. The concept of "existential deterrence," as McGeorge Bundy calls it, thus serves as a kind of *deus ex machina* allowing us to have our cake and eat it too: we get the benefits of a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons without any real sacrifice of deterrent effect.

This thesis turns on the assumption that a major conventional conflict inescapably entails a great risk of escalation past the nuclear threshold. In 1969, Bundy was explicit about these matters. The American nuclear commitment, he argued, was basic to the defense of Europe, but nuclear "superiority" was never necessary for the American guarantee to work. It depended instead — and this is a point that recurs even in his

recent writings — on the presence of an American army in Europe, and on “the very evident risk that any large-scale engagement between Soviet and American forces would rapidly and uncontrollably become general, nuclear and disastrous.”²³ It was for this reason, in fact, that he used to argue that “the deterrent does work, even at a distance, as in Berlin. Maybe the American nuclear commitment is not as firm as it seems,” he continued, “but what sane Soviet leader wants to put Soviet society in the scales to find out?”²⁴ If no-first-use ever is accepted as policy, one could still write that deterrence could work because no rational Soviet leader would want to take the chance that the American nuclear commitment is as weak as it seems. But do we really want our security to depend on calculations of this sort?

In any case, most important about this line of reasoning is its inconsistency with the arguments about the “unusability” of nuclear weapons, the military irrationality of first use, and the virtual impossibility that any government with a modicum of sanity would actually decide to employ them. Bundy in 1969 had argued that because of the danger of retaliation, there was “literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war.”²⁵ But he was then thinking mainly of central war: a massive strike with strategic weapons, rather than tactical “first use” on a much smaller scale. Assumptions about the virtual inevitability of escalation, however, or even its high probability once the nuclear “firebreak” is crossed, tend to erase the distinction.

If nuclear war, then, even in the most extreme circumstances, cannot possibly come about through sane, conscious decision, how then can it come? One thinks of such things as unauthorized launches, but are we quite sure that it is technically possible for nuclear weapon use to be initiated without such a conscious decision by the political authorities in either country? In this context, it is interesting to note the testimony of Admiral Gerald E. Miller, the former deputy director of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff, and thus someone who was in a position to know:

I think we would have considerable difficulty getting any nuclear weapons launched, getting authority down through the system, to the point where the

²³ The quotation is from his speech to the Annual Conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 1979, “Strategic Deterrence After Thirty Years: What Has Changed?” published in the *Atlantic Community Quarterly*, 1980, no. 4, p. 486, and also in Adelphi Paper No. 160, but he had been making this point in other writings for many years: see his “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1969, esp. pp. 17-18, and his Ditchley Foundation lecture, “The Americans and Europe: Rhetoric and Reality” (Ditchley Park, 1969), p. 16, where he also made the argument about the American nuclear commitment being essential to the freedom of Europe (pp. 5-6).

²⁴ Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

weapon would actually be triggered and exploded. There is a fantastic amount of concern about the civil authority over these weapons. I have watched it grow in the past 20 years to the point where I think we would have a lot of difficulty getting one off if the entire civilian hierarchy was well, surviving, and in close communication within the whole system. There is considerable constraint on release.²⁶

It is hard for an outsider to know how accurate this picture is. But one thing that is clear is that the no-first-use movement is not interested in making escalation more automatic: the kind of measures it seems to want — e.g., the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from forward areas — would tend to make “unintentional” nuclear weapon use even less likely than it is now. Thus, it hardly makes sense for proponents of no-first-use to count on the risk of unintended escalation as the only real guarantee of the freedom of Europe, for, in that case, they would be relying on a phenomenon that they were doing their best to undermine.

One cannot have it both ways. Whichever way policy shifts, there is a price to be paid. It is therefore crucial to approach these problems in such a way that the trade-offs are evident and intellectually manageable. And this involves thinking through the problem of how benefits are related to risks — of whether, to use the language of the economists, “deterrence” is a scarce good or a plentiful one.

The argument about “existential deterrence” is tantamount to an assumption that deterrence is plentiful, in the sense of being easy and cheap to achieve. It is thus strange to see it linked to the opposite argument that deterrence is scarce — i.e., that because the risks are so great, the threat of going nuclear no longer has much credibility. Similarly, claims about a great and irreducible risk of escalation from the conventional to the nuclear level (linked to the “existential deterrence” thesis) are not completely consistent with the view that the real risk of escalation emerges only once the nuclear “firebreak” is crossed. When Bundy and his associates argued in their *Foreign Affairs* article that “no one has ever succeeded in advancing any persuasive reason to believe that any use of nuclear weapons, even on the smallest scale, can reliably be expected to remain limited,”²⁷ they were emphasizing the importance of the “firebreak.” If they had chosen to make the equally plausible argument that *no* U.S.-Soviet war could “reliably be expected to remain limited,” the effect would have been to play down its significance.

If the existential deterrence thesis has its problems, so does the opposite argument, which bases its case for no-first-use on the assumption of military irrationality and on the related claim that the threat of possible first use is simply not credible. Since the assumption is not

²⁶ “First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” p. 71.

²⁷ Bundy et al, “Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance,” p. 757.

that use is impossible (if it were, no one would have to worry about nuclear weapons), what this argument assumes is that the risk of use is finite but small. Assume, for example, that under certain extreme conditions, given present policy, there is a mere 5 percent chance that a war would go nuclear. There would, therefore, be an overwhelming probability — a 95 percent chance — that no nuclear weapons would be used; hence, the argument would be that the threat of first use is not credible and that policy instead should be built on the principle of no-first-use. Note the logic here: from the point that credibility is weak is drawn the conclusion that it should be weakened still further — a fallacious approach because it does not take into account the price tag that would be attached to such a shift in policy.

We are talking here about a trade-off: we can drive down the probability that we might escalate from the conventional to the nuclear level, but in so doing we lose a bit of the deterrent effect. Is there anything that can be said about the terms of this trade-off? The general principle of diminishing marginal utility would imply that this end of the spectrum is perhaps the worst place to try to drive down the risk of escalation. In the present context, this principle would mean that a shift from a zero percent to, say, a 10 percent probability of escalation would have a greater marginal deterrent effect than a shift from 10 percent to 20 percent, while an increase from 20 percent to 30 percent would have a still smaller effect. If the principle applies, then at the low end of the scale, where the risk of the West's initiating a nuclear action is slight, small increases in the probability of escalation would have a big deterrent effect. Gradually, as the level of risk increases, the curve flattens out and the marginal increase in deterrence diminishes. Therefore, it is precisely at this end of the scale — the area where "credibility is weak" — that we are likely to get the biggest return for marginal increases in the level of risk, and where we pay proportionately the biggest price for small cuts in the level of risk.

All these issues involve trade-offs of one sort or another. Since there is no way of disinventing nuclear weapons — no way, that is, of turning back the clock to a period of nuclear innocence — there is also no way, no matter what we do, of completely eliminating all risk. The problem must therefore be one of balancing risks, of weighing the anxieties associated with one line of policy against those linked with another. In this context, probably the most we could honestly say is that we would not want even to consider nuclear weapon use except in the most extreme and dire contingencies. Even then we are not sure what we would do,

but we would like at least to keep our options open. To try to do more than that would almost certainly create more problems, and more serious problems, than it would solve.

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