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# Strategic and Moral Questions in the Nuclear Debate

## Abstract

*The strategy of deterrence as a military option is in trouble today. The left has always been against the policy of nuclear weapons being stockpiled and strategically arranged to create a deterrent because of possible use either accidentally or by design. The right said that nuclear weapons could play some role as a military option. But with the advent of the Strategic Defence Initiative even the right sees the deterrence argument as bankrupt. For the first time, this puts the western world in a position of striking out and reshaping the debate in a way that will make it productive in terms of security, defence, economy, and safety.*

The place we ought to begin in discussing nuclear weapons is not with people's conclusions, but with their premise. I think people start from one of two premises when they think about nuclear weapons. They start from a premise which says nuclear weapons and nuclear war are qualitatively different than anything we have ever known before and, therefore, we have to think about politics, strategy, and ethics from that premise. Or, they start from the premise that nuclear weapons are somewhat different, but not qualitatively different, from what people have faced in the past and, therefore, they start to think about war, politics, and strategy from that premise.

I think we can highlight the nature of the proposition if we think about the two people who have taught the western world to think about war, politics, and ethics. These two people were a 19th century Prussian general and a 5th century African saint. The 19th century Prussian general was Carl von Clausewitz, who said that war was the extension of politics by other means. What Clausewitz meant was that war is a rational activity

that can be engaged in to achieve rational political goals. Augustine, fourteen centuries before Clausewitz, said that war was not only a rational activity, but it even could be described as a moral activity if it was conducted in a certain way, for a limited purpose with limited means and the right intention. If you say nuclear weapons are qualitatively different from anything we have ever faced before, what you are really saying is that nuclear weapons essentially reverse Clausewitz and Augustine, that this kind of war is neither rational nor morally justifiable. If you think that nuclear weapons are not qualitatively different but only somewhat different, then your tendency is to take Clausewitz and Augustine and stretch them just a bit, and make them fit this new reality.

You can take those two premises, qualitatively different or only somewhat different, and you can divide the way people think about war, politics, and ethics in the nuclear age. Brody was the first person to write, in 1946, a serious analytical work on nuclear strategy. Brody said that in the past we have raised armies in order to use them. From now on we will raise armies so that they will never be used. In the nuclear age they can have no other purpose. He was not saying that you would never use force again. He was saying in this era of nuclear weaponry, you reverse the premise by which defence policy, war, and politics had been thought about.

The McNamara position is the most recent statement of the Brody proposition. In 1983 this man, the former Secretary of Defence, and the one who essentially shaped the American nuclear policy, said nuclear weapons have no military utility whatsoever; not that you can't use them, but you can't use them rationally. So from Brody to McNamara you get a school of thought that says: once you have split the atom, you must think of war and politics differently.

But that has not been the only way people have thought about nuclear weapons. The other school says: you split the atom, and it was decisive, but that does not make war and politics qualitatively different; what we need to do is to stretch the old categories and make them fit a new reality. That way of thinking has produced three conclusions in the strategic debate: the limited nuclear war argument, the counterforce constituency, and the defensive option. These policy conclusions seek to fit nuclear war back into the classical box. The assumption that underlies all three is that you can contain it, that you can limit it, that you can use it for rationally justifiable purposes and, therefore, you can use it for morally justifiable purposes.

The limited nuclear war argument runs from the early Kissinger to the early Reagan. Henry Kissinger's first book essentially said that we've always had to contain and limit force in every period of history and we'll have to do it again. This is usable force, so we have to somehow make it

usable. And then he retreated from that position within the next four years, but it was there on the books. The second argument, the counterforce constituency, was an argument that was very classical, i.e., in warfare, it is only legitimate politically and morally to attack competence, military targets. But the questions nuclear weapons posed was whether one could ever hope to be that precise. The argument was that you had to try; you had to target military targets. That has all kinds of implications for strategy, and it keeps reappearing again and again in the debate.

Thirdly, there is the defensive option. While there are aspects of the SDI proposal that are new, one should not miss the underlying theme. It is the same theme that surfaced in the anti-ballistic missile debate, in the late 1960s. In both cases, people are saying that for centuries people raised armies in order to defend themselves; and now the two most powerful nations of the world, in terms of nuclear weapons, are in a position where they can no longer defend themselves. We must be able to launch a defence that is possible. It is once again an attempt to make the new reality fit the old category. Are we in a qualitatively different situation, or are we in simply a somewhat different situation? Do we have to start from scratch when we talk about war and politics – and then war, politics, and morality? Or do we simply inherit what others have said and stretch it just a bit?

The moral argument runs along exactly the same lines, when you look at the literature on the morality of nuclear policy. Moralists are divided over not only what is morally acceptable in terms of their final answer to the questions of whether or not they could ever use nuclear weapons, and what they think about deterrence; but they also are divided over whether these weapons are a qualitatively new challenge to the moral doctrine or whether they are simply another chapter in a long story. The most widely written moralist in the United States on nuclear weapons, Paul Ramsey, professor from Princeton, argued that nuclear weapons were different but not qualitatively different, that you had to somehow shape a justifiable use for them, and thirdly, that deterrence was clearly justifiable if you could conceive of justifiable uses of nuclear weapons.

At the time Ramsey was writing, in the early sixties, a group of English Catholic moralists were drawing exactly the opposite conclusions on the morality of nuclear weapons. Walter Stein and a group of his colleagues, in England – all people who held the principle that some use of force was morally justifiable – set themselves to examine nuclear weapons. Their conclusions were that these weapons are qualitatively different, that they could not conceive of any use of the nuclear weapon under any circumstances that would be morally justifiable, and that because you couldn't conceive of a justifiable use, you couldn't possibly have a justifiable deterrent. A justifiable deterrence could involve an intention to use these weapons, and that would be communicated effectively to your

adversary. That meant you held an intention already to do evil. That position has most recently been reargued within the last six months by an English philosopher, Anthony Kenny, in a recent book called *The Logic of Deterrence*.

There has developed a third position on the morality of nuclear weapons. It emerged in the 1970s in the writings of the philosopher, Michael Waltzer, and to some degree was reflected in a number of other writings on the nuclear debate – people who said that clearly these weapons are qualitatively different, that we can conceive of no morally justifiable use for them, but thirdly, we are not prepared to move from that to a condemnation of deterrence. Why? Because a clear condemnation of deterrence would so destabilize the nuclear relationship that in fact you would provoke use. So they tried to somehow put together a no-use policy while maintaining the deterrence dimension. Now my point so far has simply been to say that no matter which side of the debate one fell on, the shape and scope of the challenge of nuclear weapons really illustrated that all the centuries of thought about war, politics, and ethics may at best provide some help, and may at worst, simply not be relevant to the kind of question we face.

There is a way in which passage into the nuclear age at least challenges, if it does not reverse, the most fundamental ways we have tried to think about war, politics, and morality. The reason I put it in those stark terms is so that I can talk about the character of the nuclear debate today. We are now in the late 1980s looking forward to the next thirteen years before the end the century. I am struck by the character of the nuclear debate today. I'm struck by the way in which it is driven back to first principles. I do not mean that we are carrying on our discussion, decision-making, and thinking about nuclear weapons in a better way than people have before us. Let me try and illustrate what I mean. There is, first, the concept of deterrence itself. Running through this history – whether one looks at the political strategic literature, or the ethics and strategy literature – has been the idea of deterrence. This is the policy by which both superpowers have amassed very substantial arsenals of nuclear weapons. They threaten to use them, and they communicate that threat in a convincing way to their adversary. And the end product of the mutual threat is presumably to make the use of the weapons so utterly irrational that one is not tempted to use what one has.

So one has a dichotomy between the physics of force and the psychology of force and the cost benefit analysis of force. The superpowers have amassed a physics of force that goes beyond anything that anyone has ever imagined before. The psychology of force is a recognition that the use of that force, itself, challenges the possessor as well as the adversary. And the cost benefit analysis, when it works, is supposed to say that, if the

policy is irrational, the force will not be used. The logic of deterrence is that kind of logic. And for the last thirty years the debate has been about how much deterrence is needed – what kind of forces, what kind of targeting doctrine, what kind of strategy.

Deterrence is challenged today both from the left and the right of the political spectrum; both launch a political and moral case against it. The left argues that you cannot simply sustain the deterrence policy without eventually, by mistake or miscalculation or madness, using it. There's an inevitability to it, it is argued. Secondly, it is argued that this inevitability leads not only to morally intolerable consequences but also to morally intolerable choices about allocation of resources, given the problems that exist today. So the charge is that deterrence itself is the problem. Curiously enough, the right provides a mirror image of the same arguments. The President's SDI speech argues that the policy of deterrence is morally bankrupt because it inevitably targets civilians and, secondly, that it is politically ineffective because the Soviets don't agree with the premises of deterrence and therefore are gaining a margin of influence. While we abide by the notion of deterrence, they seek a war fighting capability that once again will create the "window of vulnerability."

Now my view is that it is much easier to criticize deterrence than to replace it. The way we have thought about war and politics at least is itself under fire. That is the first of the first principles that we are driven back to debate today. Secondly, the SDI argument is one side of the challenge to deterrence. If you've listened to President Reagan, he cast that challenge in moral terms. He argues that the SDI is a morally superior way to deal with the nuclear age. Now I submit the SDI debate will once again drive us back to first principles, because the President's moral argument essentially says: My intention is to render nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete, and the way I'm going to do it is to shift targeting not only from civilians to competence and military targets, but away from people entirely to weapons. Now if you look at the intention of the policy, it is hard to dispute it.

The question is, when you judge policy morally, whether you only look at intentions, or whether you also look at consequences, because, if you raise that question, then it is clear that you can't confine the debate about the Strategic Defence Initiative to what its moral intentions are. You then have to ask three other questions about its consequences – its consequences technologically, strategically, and economically. Technologically, the question is: What is feasible? It is one thing to say what one wants to do, and quite another thing to convince people you can do it. The technological argument at the moment in the scientific community is loaded against the policy. But its advocates will drive the debate through the whole technological morass in order to win that case. While the technological argument is against it, the funding for research and

development is all moving in that direction. Secondly, there is the question of the strategic impact of the SDI. What will be its impact on the arms race? Once again, I think we're back to fundamental principles.

And finally, there is the economic question. In the United States there has been the presumption for most of the nuclear age that you could spend whatever you wanted to on defence and still have a humane society. The economy was big enough. The technology was good enough. The productive capacity was broadly based enough. SDI challenges that proposition because of a third new issue, and that is the relationship of deficits and defence. The nuclear debate today is constricted by economic reality in a way it has not been in the past. What is absolutely clear in the U.S. congress is "if you take a dollar from here you do not have it over here," and that creates two fundamental debates about defence policy and other parts of social policy. It is clear that there's no spare change in the treasury, and therefore we are in a head-on collision with a defence budget that has been increasing at a rapid pace for the last five years, and predictably creating deficits over the next ten years. There is a second debate about deficits and defence. If you are going to spend what the SDI is going to cost, it is clear you are not going to be able to do other things in the defence budget.

The concept of deterrence, the notion of offence and defence in the nuclear age, the relationship of deficits and defence – all of them are driven back to first principles. And so fundamentally, we're forced to go back and look at how we have thought about war, politics, and ethics, and how we think about them today. The shape of the debate, it seems to me, has shifted; the consensus is not there. The popular concern about where we go in the nuclear age is higher than it has been. The arguments in politics, strategy, and morality that have been cast up during the debate of the 1980s give us the raw material to fashion a new direction in policy. Now, they may also simply crumble the consensus that did exist and leave us with a vacuum – a possibility that is not at all optimistic. The possibility of striking out and reshaping the debate in a way that is productive in terms of security, defence, economy, safety, is an enormous job. You either reshape it, a consensus that works, or you're maybe left with a vacuum guiding a policy where the stakes of the policy are higher than they have ever been before. For in no other age of history have we ever lived with the awareness that we live with today. In the Catholic Bishops' letter on nuclear weapons, when they tried to describe the meaning of the nuclear age, they said we are the first generation since Genesis to understand war, politics, and morality in the way we must understand it today. Every other generation since Genesis has understood that creation was a gift. We didn't create it, we were given it, and we were expected to pass it on. Our generation knows that creation is a gift, but it also knows that we might not pass it on. The stakes of the debate are that high and the shape of the debate is different than it has been in a long time.