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Not With a Bang: The Moral Perplexities of Nuclear Deterrence

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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In this issue:

Does deterrence work? If it works, does anything else matter in its moral assessment? And what if deterrence fails? These are among the most vital questions we face, for “any policy which is seriously thought necessary to maintain peace, yet which may end by extinguishing all human life, must raise moral perplexities on an unprecedented scale” p. 1

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In this century, poets have wondered whether the world will end in fire or ice, in a bang or a whimper. But in the almost four decades since the first atomic bomb was detonated over Hiroshima, eschatological questions have no longer seemed the poet’s special province. Fears of global nuclear holocaust have occupied millions of ordinary human beings who, though more or less resigned to living with the bomb, remain determined not to die by it.

These fears are now particularly intense. Anti-nuclear rallies proliferate in Europe to match the proliferation of nuclear warheads positioned there. Referendums calling for a bilateral freeze on the development of new nuclear weapons have appeared on local ballots across the country, and have met with an enthusiastic response. A full conference of the U.S. Catholic Bishops last May approved a highly publicized pastoral letter expressing grave reservations about the moral legitimacy of current U.S. deterrence strategies. And tens of thousands of demonstrators in Greenham Common, England, have formed a human chain around a proposed Trident nuclear warhead site, resolved to resist Armageddon.

No goal could be more widely shared than the goal of having human life on earth continue and flourish, of not destroying human life or—perhaps even worse—altering it beyond recognition. Do the over 17,000 nuclear warheads the superpowers currently point at each other place human life as we know it in peril? It is a commonplace to observe that each side possesses ample nuclear capability to destroy the other side many

times over. Those who build and deploy these massive arsenals maintain, however, that, unlike all previous weapons known to man, nuclear weapons, precisely because of their terrifying destructive potential, exist not to be used, but to *deter* their ever being used. They serve the ends of peace, not of war, by making nuclear war too terrible to contemplate.

Philosopher George Sher of the University of Vermont finds these claims about the deterrent role of nuclear weapons radically perplexing: "Any policy which is seriously thought necessary to maintain peace, yet which may end by extinguishing all human life, must raise moral perplexities on an unprecedented scale." Certainly our current deterrence policies raise a battery of urgent moral questions. Does deterrence work? Which policies work better, deter more surely? If policies of deterrence work, do we need to know anything else to assess their moral acceptability? What other human concerns could possibly weigh in the balance against the need to avert nuclear war? And what if deterrence fails?

Counterforce and Countervalue

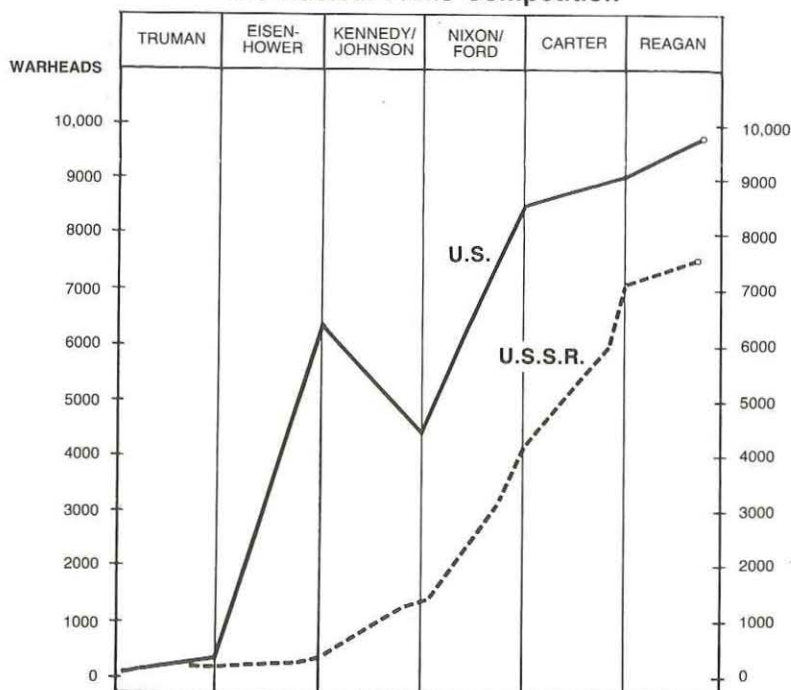
Two dominant positions have defined themselves in the nuclear strategy debate among those who can bring themselves to deploy nuclear weapons at all: one camp would target the warheads against cities and civilian populations; the other would restrict the targets to military installations and missile sites, with the primary aim of disarming, rather than decimating, the other side.

The latter, *counterforce* strategy embodies the longstanding military tradition that, in the words of University of Maryland political scientist George Quester, "To attack the enemy of the same cut of uniform is fair game. To bomb civilians is not. . . . The most honorable note of military training anywhere is that the only legitimate target will be people in uniform on the other side." Civilian immunity is a cornerstone of just war theory, which condemns waging war against the "innocent."

In the nuclear age, however, *countervalue* strategy has come into its own. In the early years of nuclear weapons design, indeed, targeting technology was insufficiently developed to permit aiming at specific military installations. Accuracy extended only to targeting enemy cities, raising the specter of the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians. Deterrence theorists have turned this very crudeness of nuclear weapons to advantage in justifying their existence, however. Unsited for waging and winning a war, these new and terrible weapons were suited instead for ensuring that such a war would never be fought. Counterforce strategy, these theorists claim, however humane it might sound, is actually far more dangerous, for it destabilizes the fragile peace that countervalue strategy can preserve.

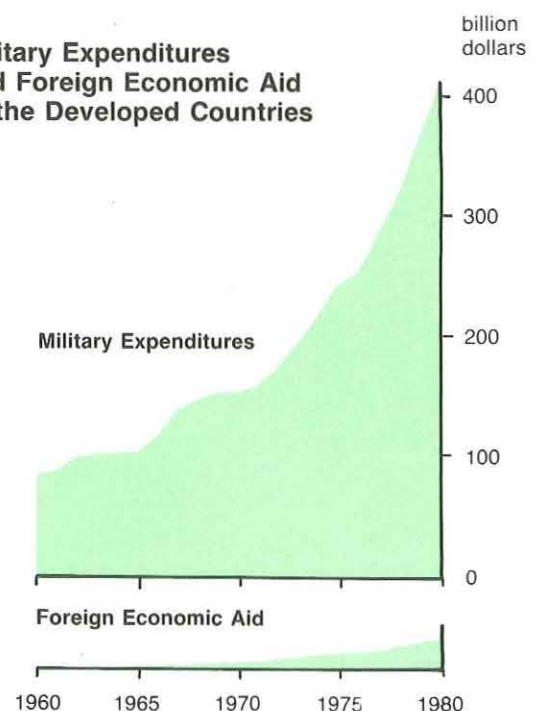
Quester explains: "When either side has the ability to disarm the other's military, it will be tempted to do so, lest it lose this ability later on, lest the other side attain it afterward. . . . Victory may simply go to whoever strikes first, with a result that each side will race to strike in crisis, shooting first and asking ques-

The Nuclear Arms Competition



Source: National Defense Budget Estimates FY 1983
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, March 1982

Military Expenditures
and Foreign Economic Aid
of the Developed Countries



Source: Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1981*

tions later, producing a war which neither side may have wanted." Strategists must consider not only how to wage a war fairly and effectively, but how not to let the war begin in the first place. It may not matter if counterforce strategy makes war somewhat less deadly if it also makes war more likely.

If each side pursues a countervalue strategy, targeting its missiles against civilian population centers instead of missile sites, then neither side has any incentive to strike first. Neither is led to the brink of "use them or lose them" trigger-happiness, for each side's arsenal will survive the other side's attack. But their

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cities, and their vital life as a nation, will not survive. If A destroys B's cities, B's weapons will be launched in retaliatory destruction against A's cities as well. Countervalue strategy raises the stakes of war by ensuring that everyone, including any side that gambles on starting a war, will lose utterly. This approach of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD) is argued to be a powerful peace-keeper.

Strategies like MAD escalate the magnitude of the possible horror, but seek above all to deter it. On the traditional counterforce strategy, the horror is less horrible, but considerably more likely to befall. Since the consequences of nuclear war in either case will be horrible enough, and only dubiously contained, it may be most important that the war not begin. As George Sher notes, "The consequences of nuclear war will count against deterrence only if that policy runs an appreciable risk of failure. . . . If there is no appreciable risk of failure, then the consequences of failure become irrelevant." In the final analysis, it seems, what counts is whether deterrence works.

Does Deterrence Work?

What does it mean for deterrence to work? McGeorge Bundy, advisor on major elements of U.S. foreign policy over the past twenty years, remarks that in one sense our deterrent policies have obviously worked: there has been no nuclear war. In the same sense, he reminds us, the deterrent policies of Finland, Austria, Canada, and Mexico have worked as well. These nations also have a concept of deterrence, "a view of what is necessary to prevent the use of nuclear weapons against them." And these nations can equally well claim on behalf of their policies that "there has been no war against them, and no coercion that has prevented their citizens from living lives decisively bet-

ter than those of the generation before them." Clearly, Bundy says, "the judgment that deterrence has worked is not a judgment that any particular form of deterrence was the best available—or even that it was necessary. . . . It is only an assumption, and one not open to proof, that the nuclear weapon [is] indispensable to [deterrence]."

These considerations imply that other policy elements may work to deter as much as the balance of terror does—or perhaps more. Bundy suggests that detente itself may be "a reinforcement to deterrence, in the sense that clear agreements can be more stable, more reliable, more costly to challenge, and more reassuring than tension caused by open disagreement."

Such considerations also imply that the vast economic costs of the MAD strategy are not unimportant in its assessment. When no one can empirically prove or disprove that a massive arsenal effectively safeguards peace, it is not clear how many additional trillions of dollars should be earmarked for the military. But Bundy, for one, thinks that "prudent modernization" should suffice to maintain a credible deterrent, so the monetary costs of deterrence perhaps need not be as staggering as Pentagon estimates might suggest.

Mutual Assured Destruction carries with it moral as well as economic costs, however, and some have argued that these may be great enough to count decisively against MAD, *whether or not it works*. Some means may be flatly ruled out as morally unacceptable, even if they are necessary to achieve important ends. We ordinarily don't believe that "It works" gives a full answer to the question, "Is it morally acceptable?" Of course, most ends are not as vital as deterring nuclear war. What moral reasons tell against MAD, and how much weight should we give them?

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Intentions, Innocence, and Immunity

The original objection to MAD was that targeting nuclear warheads against cities violates the principle of civilian immunity. To this it was replied that MAD is not a strategy for fighting a nuclear war, but for deterring a nuclear war, and so the carnage that *could* result if a war *were* fought on this strategy need not count against it.

It is true, nonetheless, that the warheads are in fact pointed at civilian populations and that each nation has threatened to launch them if attacked. Our leaders

even now declare their firm intention to launch such a retaliatory assault, knowing full well the resultant slaughter. Suppose we believe that it is always wrong to kill the innocent, and that the ordinary citizens of any country are by and large innocent of any acts of war. Is it any less wrong to *intend* to kill them than to commit the killing itself?

Gregory Kavka, philosopher at the University of California at Irvine, explains our usual reasoning for thinking it is not. "We regard the man who fully intends to perform a wrongful act and is prevented from doing so solely by external circumstances (e.g., a man whose murder plan is interrupted by the victim's heart attack) as being just as bad as the man who performs

supposed immunity of innocent civilians. Generally we believe that "persons have moral immunity, and it is impermissible to deliberately impose significant harm or risk on them, unless they are themselves morally responsible for creating relevant harms or dangers." But the degree of moral responsibility necessary to annul this immunity may be construed more or less strictly in different situations. "Our beliefs about dangerous situations are complex enough," according to Kavka, "to take account of the fact that there are various kinds of connections an individual may have to a given danger, and that these may hold in various combinations and degrees. . . . When there is a significant present danger, and control of that danger *requires*

Wide World Photos



Protestors in Greenham Common, England, form a chain for peace.

a like wrongful act." (Kavka notes that the principle also holds if I intend to kill my neighbor *if he insults me* and fail to kill him only because he happens to refrain from insult.) We tend to treat the intention to perform an act as the beginning of the act itself.

However, Kavka rejects the principle that if an act is wrong, intending to perform it is also wrong. The principle fails precisely when applied to deterrent intentions, to "intentions adopted solely to prevent the occurrence of the circumstances in which the intention would be acted upon." In the usual case, an agent forms an intention to do something because he or she desires to do that thing, and thus the moral evaluation of intention and act are fused. But in the case of deterrent intentions, the intention is formed independently of any desire to carry out the act intended and is indeed compatible with desiring *not* to carry it out. The intentions driving the MAD strategy, Kavka concludes, may be evaluated on their own merits.

Furthermore, Kavka casts doubt more broadly on the

loosening the conditions of liability, our inclination is to regard some loosening as justified."

Thus, we feel more justified in stopping a knife-wielding madman by shooting him than in achieving the same result by shooting an uninvolved third party, although the madman is not strictly responsible for what he does. Or, Kavka suggests, compare deterring country Y from attacking by threatening retaliation against its cities, with deterring it by threatening retaliation against the cities of uninvolved nation Z. In the case of collective action by an organized group, individual contributions are typically indirect and insignificant, and to insist on a tight causal connection to establish responsibility "would be to let too many people (in some cases perhaps *everyone*) off the hook, and largely lose the ability to influence group acts by deterrence."

Finally, we may not want to accept the moral prohibition against killing the innocent in its most absolute form. Even those who believe that certain acts

are wrong regardless of what good they may produce or what evil they may avert are reluctant to rule out *all* attention to consequences. If the fate of the world hangs in the balance, acts that would otherwise lie beyond the moral pale may be countenanced.

It seems, therefore, that this objection against Mutual Assured Destruction strategies of deterrence fails. If nuclear deterrence works to avert a great evil—and of course no one can know that it does—then these moral costs it involves do not seem weighty enough to tip the scales against it.

If Deterrence Fails

Suppose, however, that deterrence fails. Despite nation A's declared intention to retaliate against any nuclear attack launched by nation B, B pushes the button. Millions of A's citizens are killed; untold millions

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more are horribly maimed and burned. The threat of retaliation having accomplished nothing, should A retaliate nonetheless? *May* A retaliate? For retaliation could accomplish nothing more, it might seem, than sheer, pointless vengeance, butchery for butchery, with no human good to be gained.

The one thing we can know about what *would* happen if deterrence failed is that we can know nothing. Bundy writes: "No one can have or hope to have any clear idea of what would in fact happen 'if deterrence failed'—that is, if nuclear war began. This difficulty is not escaped by any theory, because no theory can predict with any confidence the behavior of any government, friend or foe, in such a situation." How would heads of states react in a situation of "unprecedented stress and danger, . . . in the midst of already appalling destruction"? Would credible communication among the superpowers still be possible? Which weapons would function with what efficiency? Which intentions would be read into what actions? "Would the impulse to stop the slaughter be stronger than the impulse to kill the killers, and would it be the same or opposite on the two sides? Who can tell?"

Philosopher David Lewis of Princeton University argues that in situations of such vast and overwhelming ignorance we can also know next to nothing about what we *should* do. In the early stages of a major nuclear war, no strategist could know what course of action could help to save his or her country—or if there was a country left to save. Where no one can possibly know what retaliation could or could not accomplish,

moral evaluation of the decision to retaliate is on extremely shaky ground.

Lewis points to the radical uncertainty under which generals and soldiers of all ranks would be groping toward a decision. "It might indeed be true, if deterrence failed, that our retaliation would accomplish no good purpose, would accomplish nothing but dreadful and off-target vengeance. It might also be false. What is preposterous . . . is to imagine that anyone could *know* that there was nothing left but vengeance. . . . I say that it might well be right to launch the counterattack: instrumentally rational and morally right, all things considered. As right, that is, as any choice could be in so desperate and tragic a predicament."

It might, of course, be wrong. Retaliation might do nothing more than to complete the devastation already begun, gratuitously incinerating additional millions and rendering huge portions of the earth unfit for human life—if the extensive genetic damage that would also be wreaked did not preclude the possibility of future generations' enjoying anything that could be called "human" life. And it *would* be wrong, on Lewis's account, for our strategists to *intend* to launch a counterattack massive beyond any military necessity, massive beyond any consideration of what could possibly be right.

Wrong, and pointless. For Lewis believes that "no such intentions are necessary to provide deterrence. The intention to launch a counterattack only if, and only to the extent that, it is right provides deterrence

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galore. . . . The sort of counterattack that might serve a good purpose would be a dreadful retaliation as well."

We need not worry that anything less than the vastest devastation imaginable will not be sufficiently terrifying. In a world such as ours, with arsenals such as ours, there is no shortage of fear, just a shortage of hope.

The views of George Sher, George Quester, McGeorge Bundy, and David Lewis are taken from papers presented at a conference on Nuclear Deterrence: Moral and Political Issues, sponsored by the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at the University of Maryland, April 7-9, 1983. Gregory Kavka's views are taken from his paper presented at this conference and from his article "Some Paradoxes of Deterrence," which appeared in The Journal of Philosophy, vol. LXXV, no. 6, June 1978. Selected papers from the conference will appear in The Security Gamble: Deterrence Dilemmas in the Nuclear Age, edited by Douglas MacLean, Maryland Studies in Public Philosophy.