

Doubts About Deterrence

One might think that after more than a third of a century of deterrence policies, there could be no question about what deterrence is or how it works. "And yet," laments Theodore Draper, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, "everything that is being done or recommended, from no-first-use to preparing for a nuclear endurance contest, is supposedly in the interest of deterrence. It may yet equal liberty for the number of crimes committed in its name." In an age of sophisticated technologies, including thousands of super-powerful weapons, precision targeting, and remote sensing, and in the midst of dizzying debates about the wisdom of freezes or no-first-use or the varieties of equivalence and superiority, we seem to be fueling some doubts about what nuclear deterrence is, whether and how it works, and whether the risks are morally acceptable.

As an initial step toward making sense of deterrence policies, we should distinguish between two basic kinds of nuclear deterrence. The first has as its goal preventing nuclear war. This is usually understood to mean that we should *possess* nuclear weapons as an essential part of a strategy that will deter their *use*. A different kind of deterrence aims at preventing something other than nuclear wars. For the United States, this normally means threatening to use nuclear weapons as part of a strategy to contain Soviet expansion or aggression, although nuclear deterrence has been considered also as a way of influencing the behavior of nations other than the U.S.S.R.

One set of questions, of course, is whether these different goals are compatible or whether pursuing one undermines the other. Does a policy that threatens to use tactical weapons against Soviet tanks in Europe, for example, make nuclear war between the superpowers more likely? Behind such strategic questions, however, lie several philosophical issues. Moral problems are raised about the use, or the threat of using, nuclear weapons, especially weapons targeted to destroy a nation's cities and its economic base. Nuclear deterrence also raises certain philosophical paradoxes, concerning the relationship between intentions, actions, and outcomes.

Detering Nuclear War

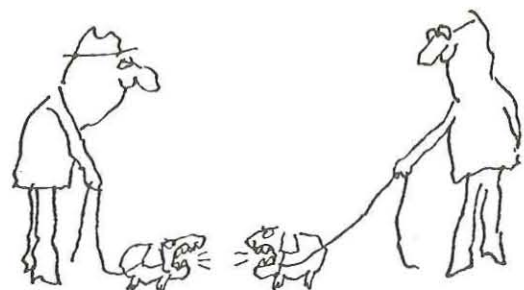
First and foremost, we must avoid all-out nuclear war. There is no debate about this need. By current estimates, the superpowers have over 17,000 strategic warheads aimed at each other and their allies. If these

arsenals were unleashed, they might conceivably destroy human life on the planet. Nobody knows for sure; nobody wants to find out.

For years it was accepted that possessing enough weapons to destroy the major cities and industrial capacity of a country in retaliation for a nuclear attack was both necessary and sufficient to deter that country's use of nuclear weapons. That assumption apparently no longer holds, as both superpowers have deployed weapons far in excess of that amount and threaten to deploy still more. Some experts now argue that a threat of first use or a capability to fight and prevail in some imagined prolonged nuclear conflict are vital parts of a successful deterrent threat. At the other extreme, it has been argued that strategic weapons have little deterrence value over possible conventional and economic sanctions and the prospect of the far-flung damage that would follow were any of the major powers to be destroyed. In a debate this wide open, we cannot very well ease our moral qualms about the use of nuclear weapons by appealing to "hard-headed realism" about how the world really works, for how our possessing strategic weapons influences the behavior of other nations is part of what is at issue.

The moral problems of strategic deterrence include the threat to noncombatants, which appears to violate principles of *jus in bello* (if not the actual laws of war). One of the ironies of deterrence policies is that the decision to engage in nuclear war must be made by a very small number of people, but that to deter such a decision our weapons threaten very large numbers of people—even entire civilian populations. Some (large number of) persons are threatened as a means to influence the actions of others. For utilitarian moral theories, this may be an acceptable practice, but then

From "The Use and Misuse of Game Theory"
by Anatol Rapoport.



Bark and counterbark

this very fact has become one of the standard reasons for objecting to utilitarianism as a moral theory.

The Christian moralist John Bennett once asked how a nation can "live with its conscience and know that it is prepared to kill twenty million children in another nation if worse should come to worst?" ("Moral Urgencies in the Nuclear Context," in Bennett, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and the Conflict of Conscience*). Another Christian moralist, Paul Ramsey, agreed that such a threat to innocents is wrong, even if it is a successful deterrent. Ramsey suggested the analogy of deterring reckless automobile drivers by tying babies to their front bumpers (*The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*). But Michael Walzer rejects these arguments and objects to the analogy. Walzer argues that the moral wrong of actions that harm innocent people is not a reason also to condemn actions that only threaten or risk harming. Ramsey's innocent babies are not only being exposed to terrible risks; they are also being forced to endure a terrifying experience, which is an actual harm. Nuclear deterrence, according to Walzer, imposes threats that simply do not impinge on our lives in the way the analogy would require, for we continue to lead normal lives: "It is in the nature of new technology that we can be threatened without being held captive" (*Just and Unjust Wars*).

Surely, though, the technologies that enable us to impose such risks on others without holding them captive are not thereby acceptable. If the potential danger is irreversible, or if the harm cannot be compensated, the imposition of risk itself may be unacceptable. An extortionist who threatens to fire a gun into a crowd is morally horrible, whether or not he actually shoots anyone. Some further questions have recently been raised, moreover, about whether the threat of nuclear war itself might not be producing certain harmful psychological effects in children.

The paradoxes of nuclear deterrence involve adopting as public policy a strategy that one hopes will never be enacted and increasing the credibility of one's threats or intentions in order to reduce the likelihood that they will actually be carried out. These paradoxes arise in conflict situations where the outcome depends on the actions of more than one agent. Each actor determines its course of action partly in response to its beliefs about the beliefs and intentions of the other

actors. Thus, to attain the desired goal, an actor may find it rational to adopt as a strategy the pursuit of some other, perhaps even conflicting, goal, if such pursuit will send signals that induce a desired response from the opponent. In order to succeed, however, bluffs must be believed, so they must be made believable. This may require a willingness to act them out.

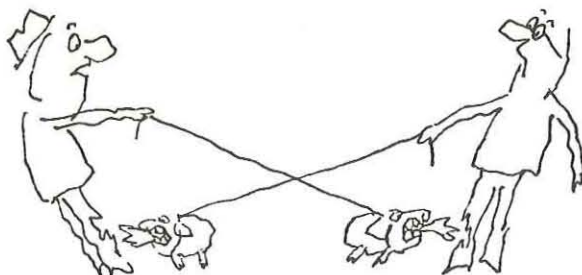
It is in such a setting, following this kind of reasoning, that our deterrence policies are formed. Thus, in order to avoid ever actually having to wage a nuclear war, we have prepared to fight ever bigger, more complex, and more destructive wars. Thus, too, at least some opponents of a no-first-use policy argue that willingness to launch first decreases the chance of another nuclear war.

The general theory of deterrence was developed long ago, but there has always been some question about how well it applies in the nuclear context. It has never been very adequately shown that all the assumptions of rationality basic to game theory apply very well to the political world in which security policies and emergency decisions must be made, in which mistakes and accidents are possible, in which new actors and options can appear suddenly and alter the game, and in which the game itself has important moral dimensions.

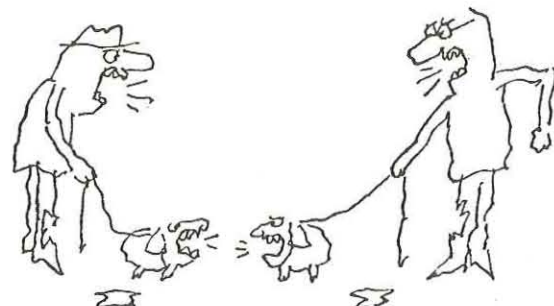
Deterring Soviet Aggression

Even as nuclear weapons were being developed in the 1940s to be used by the United States against Japan, debate was under way in this country about how these weapons would figure in a post-war policy to restrain Soviet aggression in Europe. It was decided that the United States would (1) monopolize its technological secret and (2) control virtually all of the world's high-grade fissionable material. Thus, the United States would (3) successfully deter Soviet aggression in Europe with the threat, or even the preemptive use, of atomic bombs.

The explosion of the first Soviet-built atomic bomb in 1949 exposed (1) and (2) as horrible miscalculations. What should we say about (3)? Many experts believe that the threat of nuclear weapons does deter aggression, and that without that threat "much war and



Bite and counterbite



Escalated conflict

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much death would inevitably result," as Edward Luttwak suggests in his *Commentary* article, "How to Think About Nuclear War." Luttwak denies that "the small risk of nuclear war is a greater evil than the virtual certainty of the large-scale death in great-power wars no longer deterred."

One might wonder, however, whether nuclear weapons deter at all. They have not prevented Soviet aggression into Hungary or Afghanistan; nor have they kept the United States out of Central America or Argentina out of the Falklands. Nuclear weapons seem not to have had any impact where the superpowers indirectly confronted each other, such as in Vietnam; and from 1945 to 1949, when the United States had the world's only nuclear weapons, they seem to have had little discernible effect on Soviet moves in eastern Europe. That there has been no war in Europe since 1945 might also be explained without nuclear deterrence, by appealing to economic interdependence and other factors, which might also sufficiently deter belligerent activities in the future.

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Some people believe, moreover, that there is something inherently wrong with using any nuclear weapons, even weapons that might conceivably be less destructive than nonnuclear weapons that would accomplish the same goals. These critics regard nuclear weapons, like biological weapons, as having a special moral dimension. They favor banning their use in toto, and not on a case-by-case assessment of potential risks.

Nuclear weapons have been treated as different from the start, long before arsenals achieved the size at which their potential for universal destruction was seriously contemplated. In the bombing of Hiroshima, according to Walzer, the Japanese people experienced warfare which "was actually limitless in its horrors." This was true of a bomb which might now be considered merely tactical, one that was orders of magnitude smaller in its destructive potential than today's strategic warheads. This was true even though, as Walzer points out, fewer people were killed at Hiroshima than in the earlier firebombing of Tokyo. In Hiroshima, civilians "were killed with monstrous ease. One plane, one bomb: . . . Atomic war was death indeed, indiscriminate and total." This event, not Tokyo or Dresden, inaugurated a new age of war.

The more frequently heard objections to using tactical nuclear weapons, however, are strategic. They are based on the fear that the use of tactical nuclear weapons would raise considerably the risk of escalation

into all-out nuclear war. This fear of escalation is one of the main reasons given for supporting a no-first-use policy.

Interestingly, the belief that tactical nuclear weapons carry with their use an especially high risk of escalation presupposes a belief about the special moral nature of all nuclear weapons. The risk of escalation is so high because the use of even tactical nuclear weapons in a conflict would violate a moral taboo. It would cross an important qualitative or moral barrier about acceptable weapons. Once this barrier is transgressed, it is feared, further escalations might be more likely because they would then involve changes only of degree, not of kind. A similar fear is also expressed in the concern over nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism by third-world nations and subnational groups.

Ironically, even those who reject such arguments and advocate deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Europe sometimes rely in their own defense on the existence of such a barrier or taboo. Consider Luttwak: "By far the most likely outcome is that a war would end very soon if any nuclear weapons, however small, were actually to be detonated by any side on any target. The shock effect on leaders on both sides . . . and also the devastating psychological impact upon the forces in the field would likely arrest the conflict there and then." If Luttwak is right, then tactical nuclear weapons would be effective precisely because of the tremendous moral and social opprobrium that now attaches to the use of nuclear weapons per se. Their effectiveness as deterrents would be directly proportional to the moral horror of their use, and our ability to preserve peace in Europe by their means would depend on our ability to convince the world that we were prepared to use them.

Of course we might have doubts about this scenario. The effect of using tactical nuclear weapons might be instead, as defenders of no-first-use believe, to invite a nuclear response and to make escalation more likely once one side appears to have declared that no holds are barred. But even if deterrence works in the way Luttwak suggests, the kind of dilemma upon which his argument depends means that deep moral doubts will remain.

—Douglas MacLean

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For more information, contact Rachel Sailer
Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, 301-454-6604