

# ETHICS, TECHNOLOGY, AND NUCLEAR WAR, III

## The Search for a Solution to Our Present Dilemma

*Joseph I. Coffey*

The dilemma which confronts us today is that to maintain the peace we must threaten millions of men, women and children with destruction. And if our efforts to maintain the peace fail, there is an increasing possibility that these people will form the only feasible targets for our retaliatory strikes.

Although there may be those who can face such a situation with equanimity, they are few and far between. Many will side with Representative Holi field of California, who cried out,

When 72 million people are killed (in a possible Soviet attack), when 71 cities are wiped out, when that terrible havoc hits the Nation, I will ask you, what could we do to retaliate and what good would it be? . . . a policy of massive retaliation after attack is a completely fallacious doctrine.

Others, like Herman Kahn, will argue that the policy of nuclear retaliation makes sense only if it is based on an active and passive (civil) defense program which both limits damage to our society and makes credible our intention to employ nuclear weapons if necessary. While it is impossible to discuss in all their subtlety the complex considerations bearing on military policy in the nuclear age, I would like to outline some of the major alternatives, around which subsequent discussion might then focus. In so doing, I shall exclude both those courses of action which are clearly unacceptable morally (such as the construction of a "Doomsday Machine" which would automatically destroy all life on earth in response to a nuclear attack) and those which are politically unfeasible or unacceptable (such as American surrender to the USSR). In a real world, we must deal with real problems.

I think that first of all it is necessary to dispose of one alternative: that technology, which brought us face-to-face with the question of employing nuclear weapons, can solve it for us—at least over the short run. While there is always the possibility of a technological "breakthrough," or of the unveiling of novel weapons systems, those developments which

are known offer little promise of altering the strategic situation already described. For example, even greatly improved space reconnaissance vehicles would find it difficult to locate hidden missiles and to direct against them, in the short period between readiness and launching, intercontinental ballistic missiles or space-borne nuclear weapons. Anti-missile systems might serve to diminish the weight of a nuclear attack, but it is unlikely that they could prevent an enemy from inflicting severe damage should he design and employ his nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles with this end in mind. And while civil defense programs might save some fraction of the population, we cannot count on the Soviets to solve our ethical problem for us by undertaking a massive civil defense effort. In short, we must consider other means of making our deterrent strategy more compatible with our ethical concepts.

One way, of course, is to do precisely what we are now doing: make our strategic striking forces less vulnerable to Soviet attack, less dependent on quick reaction, and more flexibly respondent to civilian control. In this way there exists a possibility that our retaliatory strikes may either be delayed pending an effort to restore peace, or directed at military targets in a planned, coordinated attack. However, I would be less than honest if I presented this program of delayed and flexible retaliation as anything more than a philosophy. In the first place, the problems of obtaining information as to strategic targets, of deciding which of these to attack, and of reworking flight plans for bombers and of reprogramming missiles would be technically difficult and very time-consuming; in the interim, second and third attacks by the USSR might destroy still more of our retaliatory forces. In the second place, it is difficult to imagine either a psychological atmosphere or, in the event of surprise attack, a continuity of governmental control, which would permit such a pause and such a response.

Moreover, as already indicated, retaliatory attacks against missile sites, submarine bases, and other possible locations of strategic nuclear weapons will prob-

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ably become even less effective in the future than they are now. At best, our second-strike forces would probably have to follow General White's prescription and "do the greatest possible damage to the Soviet Union as a whole with attention to applying that destruction in such a way as to do as much damage as possible to their residual military striking power."

If, then, any use of nuclear weapons threatens to cause millions of deaths, what about getting rid of them? I think we can dismiss at once the idea of unilateral disarmament. Whatever the attractiveness of the idea in the abstract, it represents a false choice, indeed an unnecessary choice. As Hugh Seton-Watson puts it in the Fall, 1960 issue of *Daedalus*,

The choice is not between the certainty of destruction of the human race and the certainty of Communist domination but between the possibility of destruction, if the West retains atomic weapons, and the certainty of Soviet dominion, if the West unilaterally disarms.

A much-discussed alternative is the abolition by agreement of all weapons of mass destruction, which include nuclear weapons as well as chemical, biological, and radiological ones. Leaving aside the impact that this might have on relative military power, the major difficulty is that measures which might seem desirable to us may be neither acceptable to other nations nor easy to implement. To take just one illustration, the French are currently unwilling to agree to a nuclear test ban because they are still engaged in developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, the possible gains from "cheating" on any agreement to dispose of nuclear weapons are so enormous as to lead us, in self-defense, to insist on adequate procedures for the inspection and verification of weapons stocks and strict controls over nuclear piles and reactors. If our experience at Geneva is any guide, the requisite controls will neither be easy to devise nor be agreeable to the rulers of the USSR, who have an almost pathological obsession with secrecy and who tend to regard Western-backed control procedures as "spying." I think that any sweeping proposals for disarmament can be ruled out on the grounds of sheer improbability.

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This judgment, discouraging as it may sound, is not intended to be final. There are ways of decreasing the damage from war while still retaining an effective deterrent force; there are steps which, if taken, will at least reduce the possibility of accidental war; and there are, accordingly, arms control measures (albeit modest ones) which may be in the inter-

est of both the United States and the USSR. These I should like to discuss in turn.

One way of continuing to deter Soviet aggression while at the same time limiting damage should war occur would be to stabilize our nuclear striking forces at some predetermined level, rather than seeking predominance through numbers. As I have previously noted, the search for predominance is in any event a losing game, since even a very large numerical superiority (although it may have a considerable deterrent effect) would probably not suffice to wipe out all of the enemy's retaliatory forces. If our own weapons systems are designed with sophistication, if a mix of fixed, mobile and hidden weapons is developed, then we should be able, even with forces of equal strength, to create uncertainty in the minds of the Soviet leaders as to their ability to destroy or blunt our retaliatory forces and hence able to deter attack.

I recognize that there are many arguments against such a line of action, largely centering around the thesis that the Soviets are inherently more aggressive than we and hence might be tempted to threaten or assault our vital interests unless restrained by fear of overwhelming and disproportionate destruction from a nuclear exchange, i.e., that U. S. nuclear superiority is essential to "extended deterrence." Although in my own opinion, the thesis of greater Soviet aggressiveness requires re-examination, it is at least debatable, whereas the premise that the U. S. can maintain a meaningful nuclear superiority *in the face of a determined Soviet effort to nullify that superiority* is very doubtful indeed.

Some of the steps taken to make our forces less vulnerable may also have desirable side-effects, since weapons systems which are obviously suitable for a "second strike" may be less fear-inspiring and consequently less provocative than those whose greatest utility would be in a "first strike." If these "second strike" weapons were programmed to attack either military installations or cities, and their target selection were directly controllable by our top civilian authorities, we could also take full advantage of any possible opportunities for delayed or partial retaliatory strikes—unlikely as these opportunities may be. As Henry Rowen has pointed out,

General thermonuclear war is not necessarily Armageddon, and our policies should aim both at preventing general war and mitigating its most catastrophic consequences. Revenge in itself is of no interest to us, nor are we especially anxious to commit national suicide. There are measures that make it possible to limit a general war, just as there are measures that make it possible to have limited wars. To be sure, it takes two sides to do this, and we cannot be sure that our

enemies will cooperate. But it is surely wrong for us to assume that they would inevitably behave in a way to bring about the destruction of both sides. (U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *National Security and the American Economy in the 1960's*, Study Paper No. 18 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 61.)

Since even under these circumstances a nuclear exchange would probably mean millions of deaths, we must take all possible measures to minimize the chance of accidental war, of catalytic war, or of escalation. To discuss these measures in any detail would take more space than I have, and would in any event be repetitive. To name just a few obvious moves: the possibility of accidental war could be reduced by separating hostile forces currently confronting each other; the chance of catalytic war could be lessened by providing better systems for identifying the origin of incoming missiles or attacking planes; while forces capable of initially resisting aggression without recourse to nuclear weapons could afford more time for deliberate decision-making and minimize the possibility that someone would "push the panic button" when there was no need to do so.

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Some of these steps, such as strengthening conventional forces, are already under way, others are certainly feasible, and none of them depends on reaching agreement with the Soviet Union. However, there is hope that actions such as these might be matched by Soviet actions likewise designed to avoid starting a war which no one wants. For example, the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations has officially questioned our practice of flying Strategic Air Command bombers towards an imaginary "fail-safe" line in the Arctic north of Russia; if United States cessation or curtailment of such training missions were accompanied by a discreet hint concerning the desirability of preventing clashes with Soviet submarines off our coasts, the USSR in turn might modify its provocative military operations. Even if it did not, the net result of the American action might be to enhance our national security through diminishing the risk of starting an accidental war.

In some cases, there is at least a faint prospect that Soviet interests in arms control may converge with our own. For instance, the USSR, despite its seeming intransigence at Geneva, has good reasons to agree on banning nuclear tests—reasons which can be summed up in two words: China and Germany. The Soviet Union is not likely to relish the establishment of either country as an independent nuclear power, a process which might be slowed by a ban

on testing nuclear weapons. (See Khrushchev's interesting comment on Walter Lippmann to the effect that "When the time comes that she [China] can [make nuclear weapons], there will be a new problem. We would like all states to sign a nuclear [test ban] agreement." (*The Washington Post*, 17 April 1961, p. A 13.) The same convergence of interests may exist with respect to prohibiting the introduction of nuclear weapons into outer space, and with respect to other minor measures—although no one should imagine that arms control agreements in these areas will be cheaply purchased or quickly reached.

In short, there are both unilateral steps and tacit or formal agreements which could reduce the danger of war, "damp" the arms race, and possibly reduce the level of destruction should war occur. Basically, however, these actions and measures are aimed at decreasing the likelihood that a general thermonuclear exchange may take place, purposefully or accidentally, and not at resolving our dilemma covering the uses to which nuclear weapons might be put should deterrence fail. Indeed, I suggest that this dilemma can be resolved—if at all—only by putting an end to wars, and not by devising measures which will enable one side or the other to wage them with greater restraint.

To many, this suggestion will seem Utopian—and perhaps it is. Many of man's fears and failings, most of his loyalties, and all of his history weigh heavily against such an outcome. Nor can we forget, as was earlier mentioned, that it takes two to make peace. As long as the Communists, although eschewing direct aggression, seek to undermine and subvert the free world, then force is both a needed restraint on their actions and a means of precluding their success—as in South Vietnam. We are therefore faced with the dual necessity of preventing the kinds of Communist gains which might encourage further "pushiness" while simultaneously promoting the further alterations in their aims and attitudes (as well as in our own) which will make possible peaceful coexistence in a meaningful sense of that phrase. To this latter end the "balance of terror" may contribute, if only because it induces men to think through the potentially devastating consequences of their decisions and their actions.

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Where, then, does all this lead us? In my case, at least, it leads to the following conclusions:

1. While there are certainly dissenters from this view, neither ethics nor international law seemingly bars states from using force in self-defense, to obtain redress, or in a "just cause," providing this use of

force is proportionate to the wrong done. Indeed, some go so far as to argue that there are great ends whose preservation or attainment warrants the employment of nuclear weapons, with due restraint exercised.

2. The difficulty here is twofold: first, that it is hard to determine when a wrong is of such magnitude as to justify considering a nuclear strike a "proportionate" rejoinder, and second, that by their very nature nuclear weapons are difficult to use "with restraint." Even limited nuclear strikes against "military" targets may still cause millions of civilian casualties among enemy and friend alike. Further, the rise of the Soviet Union as a nuclear power increasingly puts the United States in a position where it may, in the event of war, have no recourse save to launch retaliatory attacks against Soviet cities.

3. Those who leap from this to the conclusion that we should unilaterally "ban the bomb" both ignore the greater good for which we strive and underrate the ability of human beings to coexist with their problems. While no one can be happy about living under the Damoclean sword of mutual strategic deterrence, this can certainly be regarded as a lesser evil than surrender to communism and a more acceptable alternative than nuclear war.

4. Within this range of alternatives, it is possible to take realistic and meaningful action. Although sweeping arms control measures which would prohibit and destroy nuclear weapons do not seem likely, there are limited initial steps on which the great powers might agree. Moreover, there are unilateral measures which the United States (and the USSR) could take to reduce the likelihood of accidental or catalytic war, to discourage preemptive attacks, and to limit the damage which might result from a nuclear war.

5. The great difficulty is that such measures are both part of and conditioned by the confrontation between the U. S. and the USSR, the major protagonists of their respective camps. To maintain the security of the free world, while at the same time alleviating and transcending the present conflict with the Communist bloc, will require initiative, imagination, and enterprise beyond anything that we have yet devised. In this task the statesman, the scientist, and the moralist have roles at least as important as that of the strategist. To paraphrase Clausewitz, "Policies must be pursued by other than warlike means."

(This is the third and final section of Dr. Coffey's article. The two preceding sections appeared in the February and March issues of *worldview*.)

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