

# MORALS AND STRATEGY

## Distinguishing Virtue from Ignorance in Problems of National Defense

*Bernard Brodie*

The community of intellectual and moral leaders of the nation have tended to treat with an aloofness that certainly reflects a feeling of moral opprobrium those who labor in the field of national defense, especially those who contribute to the intellectual content of that field. They frequently speak or write as if those professionally involved with national defense have somehow betrayed their intellectual heritage.

For example, in a review of John Strachey's book on *The Prevention of War* which appeared in *The New Leader*, one reads:

For about half this book the American reader finds himself marching over grounds probably more familiar to him than to Strachey's English readers—more familiar because, perhaps unfortunately, the RAND Corporation is located in Santa Monica instead of Sussex. With urbane competence Strachey expounds the developing views on retaliatory capability, credibility, first strikes, second strikes, equations of deterrence, etc., of the American Clausewitzes: Messrs. Kahn, Morgentstern, Brodie, Kissinger and others. And as anyone who tries to keep up with it knows, the intellectual refinement of this literature has reached a point of such byzantine preciousness that one wonders whether there has ever existed in the history of the world a politician or a military commander capable of comprehending it, or acting upon it.

I would say that the answer to the implied question of the last sentence is "No," which is a bit irrelevant. I offer the passage not because of what the reviewer says but because of the feeling that pervades it, which is one of distaste. He doesn't say that these people (Kahn, Morgentstern, Brodie, Kissinger) are immoral, but he implies that there is something a little unspeakable about their work.

Now Mr. Peter Ritner, the reviewer, is unavoidably involved in the activity which he dislikes. For one thing, his taxes help pay for it. And if he means to protest against it only by this kind of statement, then his protest is extraordinarily weak. In other

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Dr. Brodie, a senior staff member of the RAND Corporation, has written extensively on war and modern weapons. His book *Strategy in the Missile Age*, (1959) deals largely with problems of strategic nuclear deterrence.

words, he is by default of real opposition a collaborator, and by much more than his monetary contribution. For there are certain benefits in this system which he is not only enjoying, but which he probably insists upon—I mean those things which we generally imply when we talk about national security.

I have always felt respect for the thoroughgoing pacifist, though obviously I cannot share his values. I mean the person who is totally opposed to violence in all its forms and who is willing to accept the necessary consequences for being so opposed—which of course would mean the acceptance and the spread abroad of all kinds of tyranny, as well as the strong possibility of his personal subjugation to it. He is at least consistent, and the moral tenet which he has raised to an absolute—the avoidance of violence—is hardly a contemptible one. I need hardly add that this kind of complete pacifist is very rare.

Certainly the vast majority of those people who habitually express feelings like Mr. Ritner's are not that kind of pacifist. They do wish to resist injustice and tyranny and especially to oppose its spread where it threatens to do so by violence, and they are therefore willing to support the only instrument of force which is both available to us and capable of doing the job, and that is the national military power. Because that power is national, the interests for which we appropriately use it can only be national interests—which, however, can include, should include, and I am confident do include the values I have just specified.

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Once the decision is made that one is interested in maintaining certain national interests by force of arms if necessary, or at least by the provision of arms, then it is difficult to establish the exact limits that morality imposes in the way we go about it. The end we have accepted certainly entails also the acceptance of certain well-established means. Nevertheless, the intellectual and moral community often finds itself looking back nostalgically at its lost innocence. One frequently encounters, therefore,

controversies in which there is a willful confusion between virtue and ignorance. Let me offer a few examples.

I know of only one outstanding issue since World War II when it seemed to me that a moral issue was genuinely involved in a debate on national security. This happened not to be a politically important debate, not only because it was mostly hidden from public view but mostly because there was never a chance that the decision would be different from what it was. This was the debate in the early days of the atomic era—in the late 40's, that is—concerning the question of “preventive war.”

A small group of people, who were to be found mostly though not exclusively within the military, thought that the time to wipe out the menace of the Soviet Union was *now*. “Now, while we have monopoly of the Atom Bomb, and before they get it. We can't afford to let them get *this* instrument. Our bombers ought to be on the way—the sooner the better.” This in general was the voice of that school, which had a number of rather prominent adherents. One of them, Major General Orvil Anderson, then Commandant of the Air War College, achieved public notice in the autumn of 1950 for advocating this idea publicly, and for getting fired from his War College job as a result.

In political terms this view was absolutely unimportant. Certainly the great majority of people in this country, including the Administration of the day, were totally opposed to it. And I believe it was essentially an immoral proposition. Why? Because it called for our carrying out a tremendous destruction of innocent lives for the sake not of saving ourselves from impending attack but simply of sparing ourselves fear, a vague fear of ultimate danger.

One might also consider the decision in World War II to use the two atomic bombs over Japan, the only two in our arsenal at the time they were used. I think that most relevant comments on that issue concern the imputed *necessity* of dropping the bombs. After all, the immorality of doing so was somewhat overshadowed by the fact that shortly before the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were dropped, there were 1,000,000 deaths from the great fire-raid on Tokyo with conventional incendiaries and high explosives.

I happen to believe that it was unnecessary to drop those bombs when we did because (1) our invasion was not scheduled until November, and we had the months from August to November to see whether or not the Japanese would yield, and (2) we were suffering very few casualties during that period, so that we could have afforded to wait. But

if dropping those bombs was militarily unnecessary, which was not clear at the time, was it also for that reason immoral? In a context in which the Tokyo forms of attack were not regarded as immoral, it is not clear to me that it was immoral to use the atom bombs.

• It is always desirable before we strike a moral pose to be clear about the state of our relevant knowledge. One case I have in mind is the great shelter scandal of two or three years ago. I call it that because I believe the intellectual community behaved scandalously. One image, totally irrelevant and trivial, was repeated *ad nauseum*. It pictured a man at the door of his shelter keeping his neighbors out with a gun. “Isn't this what we are inviting?” the argument ran; “Isn't this what is going to happen?”

So far as a government program was concerned, the first question to be asked was: “Would a particular shelter program help to protect life in the event of war?” That is a statistical question, and it requires knowledge to answer it, not feelings. It is a problem one can study, and incidentally it *has* been studied—by some of the unspeakable RAND people. But people who had given it no study at all were confident they had all the answers.

A second question to ask about a shelter program is, “Would it have any effect on deterrence of war?” One of the arguments frequently made at the time was that it would weaken deterrence. If true, that would be both pertinent and important. But on what basis was the truth of that assertion established? On no basis at all, except strong distaste for the idea. I consider as simply preposterous the argument that people and their governments will be readier to resort to total war with nuclear weapons merely because there are shelters scattered around the countryside.

A third pertinent question is: “What would it cost financially?” Inasmuch as we are already spending about 51 billion dollars annually on national defense, which includes buying offensive weapons like long-range missiles, why not spend say one per cent of that amount on so purely defensive a medium as shelters? How could shelters be more “provocative” than missiles?

This is one of the numerous instances where the answers to all the pertinent questions can be, if not established, at least explored—but only by a diligent search for the facts. Perhaps the relevant research carries us only a small part of the way that we would like to go, but it's the best we can do. Systematic

and disciplined speculation is a lot better than random, emotionally motivated impressions.

One can think of a number of cases that involve fundamentally the question of the knowledge we have of our major opponents, the Russians and the Communist Chinese. It is clear that we *do have* a great deal of such knowledge, at least about the Russians. That famous statement of Sir Winston Churchill's that Russia was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" was untrue even at the time he made it. Since then there has been a large amount of skillful research by a number of quite talented people, among whom, I am happy to say, we have a number in my own organization, The RAND Corporation. Some of our national debates, however, have been couched in terms that would suggest that such knowledge does not exist.

One such debate concerns the Korean War. There was not much argument about whether we should intervene in Korea. Later a few troubling issues did arise. One was whether the United States should use nuclear weapons. Mr. Truman made some random remarks at a press conference to the effect that the government had not ruled out consideration of the use of these weapons. Mr. Clement Attlee, then British Prime Minister, at once made a hurried trip to Washington to persuade Mr. Truman to give no further thought to the use of nuclear weapons. I feel sure we would not in any case have used them throughout the war, even though we had at that time an effective monopoly of atomic weapons.

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There are several reasons why we did not use those weapons—reasons which have nothing to do with morals. One was that we had only a small stockpile, which we wished to hold in reserve for what our leaders thought was the more threatening situation in Europe. Another reason was that our military people did not at that time think that nuclear weapons had much tactical utility, in which respect they were simply in error. At any rate, the reasons why we did not use the weapons were quite special to the occasion, and for the most part technical. I thought at the time that it was the better part of wisdom that we did not use them. My present attitude is that I'm not so sure. The Chinese Communists intervened in that war after we had been fighting for about five months and after we had suffered defeats without being provoked to use nuclear weapons. Would they have intervened if we had used them? The answer is not clear, but it is worth considering.

Something else happened at the end of the war

for which we paid very bitterly. This was a much larger issue than the decision concerning the use of nuclear weapons. When the Communists showed an interest in discussing an armistice, which they communicated through the Russian delegate to the U.N. headquarters in New York, Mr. Truman immediately stopped an offensive which our forces had recently initiated and which was going extremely well. This was done for the sake of making a gesture—a sort of goodwill gesture. We tend to feel it is morally good to make such gestures. We learned soon afterward that at the time we stopped our offensive, the Chinese Red Armies had been in a state of incipient collapse. Our relaxation of pressure gave them a chance to save themselves, to restore their army from a condition of absolute demoralization. It of course also relieved the pressure on the Communist negotiators. The result was that the negotiations for the termination of that war dragged on for something over two years. I submit that had we continued that offensive until an armistice was actually signed—as nations at war have always done in the past—the negotiations would have lasted a few days to a week rather than over two years, and the terms would have been much more favorable to us. Further, the Chinese would not now be calling the United States a "paper tiger." One perhaps dismisses this kind of label, saying it does us no real harm. I think it does. I think it does us harm in a way that may ultimately cost lives.

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The Berlin crisis, which is a continuing crisis, affords another opportunity for examining certain presumably "moral" attitudes. One attitude frequently encountered is that surely we ought to be able to negotiate with the Russians a mutually satisfactory settlement of the issues outstanding. Let us, in other words, reach a compromise. Those words "negotiation" and "compromise" have in our times certain moral overtones. I must ask simply—and, of course, the Administration is obliged to ask—negotiate what? compromise what? It seems quite clear from even a casual study of the record that every change that has been made since the end of World War II, every change in the *status quo*, has been a change in the Russian favor, without exception. Often these changes have been brought about illegally through a *fait accompli* which we did not thereafter challenge.

It is in this area particularly that sophisticated knowledge about Russian behavior is extremely pertinent. We find that these minor aggressions are in fact probes, many of which are trivial—pin-pricks,

affronts against our dignity rather than anything else. For example: the demand that members of the American Government, whether civilian or military, show their papers at the checkpoints, even though the provisions of the agreement for the occupation of Berlin specifically rule out the necessity of U.S. officials showing their papers; or the request that all troops mounted on trucks should dismount when the caravan is stopped for checking on the Autobahn, despite the fact that the agreement clearly specified—or, at any rate, originally specified—that they should not have to dismount.

The tendency of the uninformed is to say that a person of wisdom grants these things, which are obviously not important. But a person of wisdom does not grant these things, because they *are* important. They are important because they are intended by the Russians as probes to see how much we will tolerate, and to achieve gradually accumulating gains through steady erosion of our resistance. Informed people are generally convinced that we should resist vigorously the most minor aggressions; that it is not wise to ignore pin-pricks; and that initial resistance will save us from more serious confrontations later on.

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The Cuban crisis of October 1962 seems to bear this out. One of the important questions to ask about the Cuban crisis is *why* did the Russians put missiles and bomber aircraft into Cuba only to show themselves ready to take them out the moment they were confronted with our readiness to use force? The people who put them in were, after all, no tougher, no more aggressive, than the people who took them out; they were in fact the same people. It is clear that they put the missiles in not because they were willing to take great risks, which clearly they were not, but because they thought from our preceding behavior that we would let them get away with it, that we would make some kind of adjustment to their being there. This would then put them in an ideal situation for forcing a new settlement about Berlin. What I am trying to suggest is that we must have flashed them the wrong signals in the year and a half preceding that week of crisis.

Among the signals we flashed to the Russians was, perhaps first, our weak conduct during the unfortunate Bay of Pigs episode—though I should like to say that I think the essential error was not withholding the air cover but rather letting so weak an expedition go in the first place. A second signal was our tolerating the Russian military buildup up to the point of their putting in long-range missiles. We

let them send a large number of troops there and put in all kinds of other military installations, including surface-to-air missiles. We tolerated all of this without real protest, benevolently saying periodically that the one thing we would *not* let them put in were long-range (or intermediate range) missiles. But our protests were by word and not deed, and inasmuch as we tolerated so much, can we blame the Russians for deciding to test us? We could have been spared the confrontation that finally did take place in October 1962 if we had previously convinced the Russians that we would not in fact tolerate missiles and bomber aircraft in Cuba. Was it really so hard to do so?

Incidentally, one of the things the Cuba episode proved, at least to me, is the benefit in terms of wear and tear on the nerves of being strong. When the crisis broke, I personally lost no sleep over it. I felt utterly confident that this crisis would not deteriorate into war. This confidence separated me from some of my friends, and I am sure it annoyed them. I felt this confidence simply because I had information which convinced me that we were enormously superior in every important branch of arms to the Russians, and that *they knew it*. And knowing a few other things about the Russians, I was about as confident as one can possibly be under those circumstances that no conflict would come of it. I was sure that when they realized we meant what we said, they would yield. They would and could take no other course.

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When that crisis was resolved by their yielding to our specific demands, Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop, among others, rushed forward with a round burst of applause for our government for its “wisdom” and “statesmanship” in granting the opponent a broad avenue of gracious retreat, thus sparing him excessive humiliation. This we accomplished by limiting our demands—for example, by not requiring the Russians to get out of Cuba altogether. Here is another example of emotion suffused by sweet moral feeling getting the better of our knowledge. This attitude might apply to other people, but we know enough about the Russians at least to doubt whether it applies to them. I mean “Russians” not ethnically but in terms of the particular and peculiar characteristics of Bolsheviks.

Throughout the Cuban crisis, Khrushchev acted absolutely in the classic Bolshevik pattern. The old Bolshevik pattern of precepts, which is of course available to us for study, demands, whenever retreats are necessary, disdain for the fear of suffer-

ing "humiliation." Had Khrushchev been more concerned about it, he could have done things to help conceal whatever humiliation attended his retreat. He seemed not to be interested in doing so. He perhaps regarded the conspicuous acceptance of humiliation as a virtue, since it only proved he was a good Communist in the Leninist sense. Mr. Lippmann and Mr. Alsop were advocating what would have been appropriate to a Western and especially to a pre-World War I kind of diplomacy and to a pre-World War I kind of diplomat, but much less so to a modern Russian one. Of course one does not wish to push this point too far, especially since the aftermath of our Cuban behavior has been extremely good—and notice that despite my above reservations, it was on the whole bold and forceful behavior, and it produced these good results.

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Concerning negotiations, it is obvious that they should always be calculated to serve the national interest. If this is disputed, I would ask: What other interests should they serve? After all, we enter these

negotiations as a national entity. The persons empowered to carry out negotiations for us are empowered to do so for the country by the national Administration. World peace is also a national interest of the United States, and the charge cannot stand that the Administration is likely to be forgetful of that.

But before making any far-reaching decisions of national policy, whether for negotiations or for anything else, we must take full account of the nature of the situation and the nature of our opponent. In many important instances there is far more relevant knowledge available to us than non-specialists are in a position to understand. The entire burden of my argument is that this knowledge should be further cultivated, and it should be applied. This brings us back to the ultimate and traditional morality of politics as well as strategy—the obligation to acquire and to apply the relevant knowledge, and to do so courageously. The injunction to avoid what is dangerous and evil is superfluous. Knowledge tells us what is or is not unduly dangerous, and in issues of war and peace only moral monsters have the wrong values.

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*"The self-deceptions of national pride continually need to be deflated and the temptations of nations to abuse power need to be exposed. In an open society in which freedom to criticize is safeguarded and in which institutions that are independent of the state are encouraged to be themselves, this type of national self-criticism should be expected. One of the effects of the separation of Church and State should be the preservation of the Church's freedom to criticize the state from its own vantage point as the interpreter of the transcendent will of God and as itself a universal community that includes people on the other side of every international conflict."*

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by John C. Bennett

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