THE NUCLEAR OBSESSION: IV. MILITARY "EFFICIENCY"

Jack Walker

In previous essays on the nuclear obsession, I have criticized those whose horror of nuclear war seems to have impaired their perceptions of military and political reality. Such individuals and groups either look for abstract theories which promise that wars can be fought at minimum cost (perhaps by mercenaries who are outside the mainstream of American life) or strive for moralistic declarations of intent designed to inhibit nuclear proliferation.

In the following brief comments, I intend to deal with what might be called the bureaucratic aspect of the nuclear obsession. It clearly needs more analysis. Those who prepare and defend the budgets and programs of the Department of Defense obviously feel a need to "prove" that the weapon systems they propose to buy will be used ."effectively," "efficiently," and "economically," and that they will be employed only against "military" targets. Those who attempt to "calculate" with precision the number of combatant and noncombatant lives that might be snuffed out in certain types of nuclear exchange are easy targets of criticism, for they can easily be made to appear as the embodiment of the worst characteristics of the "military mind." In recent years, of course, military people have not been the only targets for such criticism, as witness the reception given Herman Kahn's books (especially their titles).

To oversimplify, the criticisms go something like this: it is impossible to be coldly "rational" about nuclear catastrophe and, when strategic planners make the attempt, they do the nation a disservice. Moreover, the argument goes, the planning process itself invites an acceptance of nuclear warfare. It is not clear at all whether, in this argument, the strategic planners are the "chicken" or the "egg," for they feel that the American political context requires them to restrict the national arsenal to purely "military" weapons. Even to hint at the possibility that weapons might be more political than military would, they feel, subject them to even worse criticism.

For the sake of getting on with the discussion, let me assume for the moment that military planners begin the process by attempting to relate their plans to the old and hallowed military principle of the "objective." In this context, the major premise usually is that military activity should be directed against the opponent's military force, whatever the nature of that force, and that noncombatants are to be spared. From this point on, the dialogue becomes exceedingly complex; everyone, especially the theologians, makes an all-out effort to define who and what should and should not be included within the definition of the "objective." These far-ranging attempts at precision are well known to readers of this publication.

Now none of this is very new. Many countries have made attempts over the years to refine categories, the results sometimes being best understood through the use of analogies drawn from the world of sports. In accordance with Marquis of Queensbury rules, for example, prisoners of war are to be spared because they are in a defenseless position, much as the boxer is spared when he can no longer raise his hands in defense. And the same distinctions are drawn on a much larger scale. In World War II, for example, General Eisenhower argued that he could not support, on military grounds, Prime Minister Churchill's proposal to enter Berlin.

What seems equally clear, however, is that these distinctions can easily disappear under the intense and immediate strains of war itself. U.S. bombing strategy in World War II started out with the premise that the objective was to be precision bombing of carefully selected military and economic targets, although even this definition included the labor force —if only by inference. As the war proceeded, and especially when we turned to the bombing of Japan, the distinctions were more or less forgotten, and the new strategy was describable only as "saturation" or "area" bombing. The target was indeed the very fabric of the enemy society, though we failed to admit it until it was time to drop the first atomic bomb.

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What should be most obvious is that the much acclaimed, discussed and disputed distinctions are virtually impossible to maintain in the nuclear age. It is this factor which has given such an air of unreality to such concepts as that of the "clean" bomb, to Secretary McNamara's 1962 attempt to describe thermonuclear war as something involving only the attack of weapons upon other weapons, and to the notion that the U.S. can produce "miniaturized" nuclear weapons capable of destroying a single bridge in such a "sanitary" way that the surrounding countryside is unaffected. The Europeans, even more so than others, have been dismayed at such approaches. Yet the American political and bureaucratic environment forces the planner to think and talk in purely "military" terms, and the results are almost amusing.

Having decided that he cannot describe weapons in "political" terms, the planner develops a substantial literature to support the military applications of nuclear weaponry. He then undertakes the most complex (not necessarily sophisticated) mathematical analyses imaginable in an ongoing attempt to relate the quantity and quality of U.S. weaponry to the arsenals of potential enemies. Megatonnage, circular errors of probability, numbers of war-heads, warning networks, *et al*, go into the equations along with more abstract conceptions such as "strategic superiority," and "assured destruction." Having adjusted both assumptions and intelligence estimates, it is not surprising that the calculation eventually "proves" that the U.S. can survive a maximum onslaught by the Soviet Union. What does surprise us, however, is the failure of our allies to agree that our analysis is a sound one, and the resultant diplomatic stalemate. U.S. and French attitudes are, of course, the best example of this.

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If one examines the French approach to nuclear problems, as a colleague of mine has done, it is easy to detect a sophistication that is absent from the American approach. French military writers, for example, use the phrase *jeton de présence* to describe the French nuclear force as a token entitling its holder to representation in the club of major powers. Again in French words, "the only stable and permanent advantage that possession of nuclear weapons gives is a certain augmentation of political influence in international relations." The French admit at the outset that nuclear weapons are hardly military at all, and they devote virtually all their attention to the political and psychological problems of deterrence. Admitting that any war in Europe will be an all-out nuclear one, the French are less than enthralled with U.S. attempts to build complex contingency plans which include concepts of "graduated response." On the other side of the coin, the French military planner sees the direct technological benefits to be gained from the national nuclear program; through it, the French may be able to close the "technological gap" which is of such great worry to the Europeans as they view the U.S. And, finally, the French insist that, like any other nation, they must exercise their full measure of national responsibility for the preservation of vital national interests. Even the French military planner, then, includes in his rationale the political, economic, and military aspects of the question.

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I have said enough already about the American approach to indicate how vastly different it is. In our military planning, at least so far as nuclear weapons are involved, we do not deal in a sophisticated manner with political questions. We might admit, upon occasion, that "bonus" effects can be achieved through the use of such weapons, but the term itself is objectionable and, moreover, it is used only to describe things that happen *after* we destroy the enemy's military forces. The "bonus" effects do not justify the purchase of a weapon system in the first place. We argue, in addition, that military efficiency demands that an alliance such as NATO cannot be a classic one in which strategic plans and their implementation are only "co-ordinated," and we set forth a "Single Integrated Operational Plan," described by one NATO military planner as an "automatic contingency plan that has been worked out in advance to the last detail and with the precision of clockwork." And, of course, the American planner shys away from attempts to relate military programs to more general needs for economic and technological development.

A great deal of ethical thought goes into these attempts to separate political and military aspects of strategic plans, and to deny that certain types of weapons can be more political than military. The result, however, is two major paradoxes,one intellectual, one military, both traceable to the nuclear obsession.

In the years since World War II, a great deal of money has been spent by the U.S. government in an attempt to increase the level of intellectual awareness and sophistication within the military services. I need not detail here how many senior officers have been sent to war colleges, how many have been exchanged with the State Department, how many have been sent off to graduate schools, etc. Unfortunately, it turns out that the political environment I have outlined above has the total effect of preventing a sensible amalgamation of political and military insights into specific international problems. On the surface, of course, there appears to be at least one major exception to this generalization: considerable attention is given to the "politico-military" aspects of low-level wars. A closer examination, however, reveals that this usually refers to the use of military organizations in non-military (non-shooting) activities. It does not refer to detailed studies of the political effects of military weapons.

If one looks at large-scale strategic plans, one must be struck by the remarkable discontinuity between the political and military sections of the plans. Each plan usually contains a political "scenario" written by a military planner who probably has an advanced degree, and he produces suitably urbane prose about the political shape of the world in, say, 1975. Ultimately, this reduces itself to the question of "Who is the enemy?" and the remainder of the plan is devoted to catalogs of the U.S. military force needed to destroy that enemy's force.

It is paradoxical to see such a dichotomy between political and military activities in a country that has been so lavish in its education of military leaders. And the overall military result equally reflects the paradox. The U.S. ends up with a military force (especially the missile force) that is much larger than it would be if the political characteristics of the force were adequately considered. And this, in turn, takes money out of the more humanitarian programs that sorely need it. Once again, then, the nuclear obsession produces wholly unintended results.

Space does not permit the comparison of this aspect of the nuclear obsession with the parallel problems which often engage the readers of this journal, e.g., chemical warfare and torture. Some distinguished military analysts, notably Liddell Hart, have argued for years that some forms of chemical warfare would be preferable to what we call conventional war, because the chemical weapons would be more humane. Questions pertaining to the legitimacy of torture are in a similar category and subject to similar analysis. Without taking a stand on the use of nuclear weapons, chemical agents, or torture, let me observe that any sophisticated analysis must include both the military and political characteristics of any weapon or any methodology.

The Experts, The Critics and Public Opinion

Nuclear War: The Ethic, the Rhetoric, the Reality, by Justus George Lawler. Newman Press. $4.95.

by John K. Moriarty

A book such as Mr. Lawler's induces in me a mixed reaction. The subject matter is clearly of compelling importance; the author's writing style is fluent and often entertaining, if sometimes undisciplined; and I find myself in agreement with the general thrust of most of his views—to the extent that they are explicit, which often they are not. But Mr. Lawler is so intemperate—indeed almost irresponsible—in his accusations, his approach is frequently so personal rather than analytical, and the implications of his views are so inadequately developed, that it is difficult to take this book seriously. This is truly a pity, because liberal, articulate American Catholics with the courage and the will to examine U.S. military policy critically are entirely too few.

In *Nuclear War: The Ethic, the Rhetoric, the Reality*, Mr. Lawler has set out with the primary purpose of rebuking his fellow Catholics for their insensitivity to the moral horrors of present U.S. nuclear strategy. As a secondary objective, Mr. Lawler attempts to establish the claim of the theologian, the humanist and "the utopian" to a role in "the elaboration of foreign-policy programs" and in the assessment of "large questions of national strategy." If one should grant that both objectives are soundly conceived, their practical feasibility and even their desirability are not demonstrated by Mr. Lawler.

Let me state first what I believe are the strengths of this book—and there are strengths. In the first place, the author aims at a proper target when he excoriates the unquestioning acquiescence, the frequent chauvinism and the not-infrequent outright bloodthirstiness of so many American Catholics in their attitudes toward their country's military policies. Whatever the sociological, historical or religious reasons, Catholics have by no means led the United States, or even significantly influenced it as a unique group (as opposed to merely constituting one additional element in an already developing

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