

Mutual Assured Destruction is as immoral in international affairs as is the mutual threat of suicide in resolving a marital conflict

The MAD Nuclear Policy

Paul Ramsey

What are the imperatives for strategic thinking for the seventies? At the beginning of the seventies the United States adheres even more firmly to a policy of minimum or finite deterrence. Our power at all other levels of war and deterrence is increasingly challenged or outstripped. Even the possible vulnerability of our nuclear forces is tolerated for the sake of strategic disarmament treaties to come. It is difficult to tell the difference, for example, between editorials on strategic questions in the *New York Times* over the past two or three years and Dulles's "more bang for a buck" policy. The upshot seems clearly to be a greater reliance on the most politically immoral nuclear posture imaginable, namely, Mutual Assured Destruction.

I would say, therefore, that the major imperative for the seventies is that our nuclear posture must again be examined with the maximum concern of strategic, moral and political reasoning, so that—if at all possible—we may change present policies which commit us to total counter-people war and deterrence at the nuclear level. The question the President posed in his 1972 State of the World message is more urgent than ever: "Should the President have as his only option in nuclear war attacking an opponent's cities?" People as diverse as Professor Seymour Melman, Senator Stennis and Senator McGovern seem to agree that the President needs no other option. "Nuclear sufficiency" our immoral deterrent is now called. The ethico-political imperative to which I am calling attention only accents a line of thought that is developing among many who have thought long and hard about the relation of arms and men, between armed forces and a political society,

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between armaments and the political purposes they are meant to serve.

Thus, Donald G. Brennan of the Hudson Institute points out that the acronym for Mutual Assured Destruction is MAD.¹ We ought not to regard such a policy (today renamed "strategic sufficiency") as the most peaceful, stable, secure, cheap and generally desirable arrangement. If it were—as many people claim it to be—the cheapest and most efficient way to achieve it would be for the nuclear powers to mine each other's cities. Such a system is technically feasible, and far safer and more likely to work than missile deterrence. But a rational posture for providing for the common defense cannot be based on deliberately making us all hostages to enemy weapons, by creating a "system in which millions of innocent civilians would, by intention, be exterminated in a failure of the system." Brennan's *reductio ad absurdum* argument is that, "since a mined-city system is clearly the best way to achieve MAD posture, it follows that a MAD posture as a goal is itself fundamentally absurd—it is, indeed, mad." The mined-cities "thought experiment" is enough to show that there must be something wrong with that complete reversal of the relation between arms and the body politic which occurs when we institutionalize mutual assured destruction as a way of life.

In the structure of Brennan's analysis, it seems to me, it matters little whether "sufficiency" is obtained by few weapons or many; it is the posture, the targeting, that is wrong. Instead of being "busily engaged in forging a permanent Sword of Damocles," to hang forever over our heads, our efforts through SALT talks as well as military systems initiative should be to hold down offense, reduce our threat, and to make defense as effective as possible. While Brennan allows that we should be able to do about as badly unto the Soviets as they can do to us, still the Defense Department should be more concerned with assuring live Americans than dead Russians.

Arthur Lee Burns has attempted to think through the demands of modern security considerations in terms of the politico-ethical norms of the just war.² He believes shared calculations of "unacceptable damage" to be largely "chimerical" and "mere rationalizations for a policy that, once adopted, came to be valued for its own sake." He proposes instead the rule that military capability must be sufficient to "wreak such destruction on the attacker *that neither its government nor any successor at all acceptable to that government would continue to rule*" (italics added).

That already begins to "lower the bid," and to suggest that present deterrence postures may not be beyond human amendment. Even if they should prove, even temporarily, to be "beyond human amendment," Burns wants it clearly understood that that fact would not make terrorizing kidnapped hostages "any less evil." "The traditional ethic," Burns writes, "of sparing non-combatants as a prima facie obligation is not reconcilable with making them hostages, and unlike utilitarianism it takes account of the intention and the intrinsic quality of a policy, not *only* of the probable consequences." And he concludes: "I cannot see how a city-targeting strategy can possibly be reconciled with principles of the just employment of armed force, even though the threatened destruction of millions of non-combatants is by no means as evil as would be their actual destruction, and though the threat may deter war."

Burns espouses a policy of threatening to retaliate against armed forces only, including the most vital and vulnerable parts of nuclear forces. He contends that totalitarian regimes would regard the loss of whole armies (supposing they could be reached by the strike forces) as a graver threat to the continued existence of the regime than the destruction of a few cities, and to that state's security against conventional challenges by third powers: "The Soviet Union and China would be prepared to sacrifice some cities and industrial areas in order to preserve their conventional forces in effective strength." What objectives of policy could be worth the loss of the larger part of a nation's conventional power?

The same point was recently made by Professor Bruce M. Russett of Yale University, who, in the April, 1972, issue of *Worldview*, wrote in defense of the feasibility of a "countercombatant" deterrent: "The Soviet Union's ability to defend itself from its neighbors, even the small and now much weaker states of Eastern Europe, would be destroyed. To make this particularly painful the United States might strike, with special care, Russian bases and armed forces along the Chinese border. In effect, the penalty for a Soviet attack on the West would be Soviet impotence vis-à-vis their Asian neighbor."

I believe, however, that Burns is wrong in seeming to suggest that only totalitarian regimes might be deterred by threats to destroy the greater part of their armed forces, and in perhaps seeming to suggest cal-

lousness in a government that would value defense forces higher than a few cities. Nor, earlier, should we interpret Burns's definition of "unacceptable destruction"—"such destruction on the attacker that neither its government *nor any successor at all acceptable to that government would continue to rule*" (italics added)—to imply a regime's unconscionable desire to preserve itself in power. There is good reason for any nation to regard the destruction of a great part of its armed forces as a more serious threat to the political society as a whole than the destruction of some part of the population. There is reason to believe that speculation about an adversary's estimation of unacceptable damage to its armed forces would be less chimerical than speculation about the various estimates different societies and cultures would have of unacceptable damage in cities exchanged. A real threat to an essential ingredient in a nation's capacity for further independent action is a threat to its life in the international system. Even so, John Locke argued for the inalienable right of liberty on the grounds that a real threat to that is tantamount to a threat against the life of an individual in a "state of nature." "He who attempts to get another man into his absolute power," wrote Locke, "should be understood to have "a design upon his life. For I have reason to conclude that he who would get me into his power without my consent would use me as he pleased when he got me there. . . ."³ Similarly, a threat to take away armed forces which are essential to continued independence is a *vital* threat to any actor in the opposed international system. Not only totalitarian regimes or calloused political leaders would so view it. If enough of a nation's forces were deeply vulnerable to less than nuclear attacks, that would be a threat at least as serious to the integrity of that nation's life as the technical taking of certain hostage cities.

This was in fact the first of several elements in the analysis of a moral, *graduated* deterrent which I proposed in the sixties. I called it deterrence from anticipated "counterforce target destruction," plus additional elements of a composite graduated deterrence system that I will mention. If Burns is correct in some of his suggestions, and especially Russett in speaking of a "countercombatant deterrent," my expression was too loosely drawn—suggesting as it does a threatening posture concentrating on nuclear forces. It may be that a *countercombatant* deterrent (if we will but explore it and mount it) can provide a closer definition of an effective moral deterrent than a counter-nuclear-force deterrent. The latter might still remain "not unlawful" when measured by the principles of justice in war and in deterrence. It is my view that a *counterforce* deterrent remains just according to the principle of discrimination; a *countercombatant* deterrent—if that is a feasible alternative

or stress—may be required by the principle of proportion, or because it further minimizes destruction and risks.

I'd be happy, also, if strategic thinkers could come up with models or arrangements that do not need the other elements of my scheme of graduated deterrence: deterrence from a shared anticipation of collateral civil damage that is unavoidable, unintended, in no measure enlarged; deterrence from the ambiguity inherent in weapons that *could* be used against populations indiscriminately, or ambiguity in how an opponent *perceives* these weapons may be used; and, finally, deterrence from a "bluffing" manner in which these weapons are possessed. I now think that an input of deliberate ambiguity about the counterpeople use of nuclear weapons is not possible unless it is (immorally) meant, and not a very good idea in the first place.

I take it that Burns would not disagree with me that none of these elements of a possible deterrent—and I believe an effective one—would violate the laws of just war by *directly* threatening populations as such. Espousing "an assured second-strike counter-resource reprisal only," Burns says that "no threats to population need be explicitly uttered, no hostages explicitly taken," and he concludes that "since, though you have the means, you have no intention of striking at his people, you appear to avoid the ethical dilemma of nuclear weapons."

Burns is modest enough in the claims he makes for what he attempts to demonstrate. A "policy of military-targeting only," he urges, "appears feasible for deterring *less-than-ultimate* attacks and attempted coercion." Repeating what I believe to be an exaggerated distinction between totalitarian regimes and *any* regime responsible for the safety of an entire nation, Burns writes: "If there is anything in my view that totalitarian regimes depend upon their conventional forces and value them no less than some cities, etc.; or if the loss of strategic facilities would threaten their power-political positions *without greatly increasing the risk of major nuclear war* (italics added): then against a *less-than-ultimate* threat a nuclear response against military targets only may both promise to be effective and also escape the central moral dilemma."

But we must come at last to the question of deterring *ultimate* attacks, which Burns excludes from the effectiveness of his scheme. Or does he? For here Burns rightly shifts from the principle of discrimination (noncombatant immunity from direct, intended attack and from direct, intended threats of direct attack) to the other principle of the just war: the principle of proportion, or the expectation of success, success measured by the preservation of societal values. "One of the criteria of the justice of an employment of force is that there be a strong expectation that the employment will suc-



Mauldin in The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Good news, men—we're going back to civilized warfare."

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ceed"; there must be "a rational expectation that the means employed would achieve the proposed end." Altering *past* applications of that to say that against threats of *ultimate* attack a people today should be resolved still to resist by just means only, even though they perish, Burns states that "no universal theory of global deterrence can pass that test" of final success in preserving societal values. One "may not acquiesce in the committing of the certain evil of hostage-taking if it no more than probably averts a greater evil," namely, the destruction of both sets of hostages.^o He asks for calculations, if such are

^o Here Burns incorrectly puts together in a supposedly quantifiable calculus of probability two separate, incommensurable criteria: the evil of hostage-taking and averting a "greater" evil of actual destruction. He seems to give primacy to the first prohibition only because averting the latter is uncertain. This contradicts his earlier statement that such threats can never be moral "though the threat may deter war." Shall we absolutize the prohibition of deterrent violations of noncombatant immunity? Or should we say that the violation of populations by deterrent threats is wrong only because saving them is not apt to result from that? Today the two principles governing a rational resort to political violence have in actuality (and in experience rehearsed in scenarios) converged on the same point. That is to say, while in past ages we morally should have known that it was never right to do wrong that good might come of it (although undoubtedly sometimes good consequences came of it), at the higher levels of violence in the nuclear age we now know that no good can finally come from doing, in the central war, of planning to do, wrong that good may come.

possible, and that the public in Deterrent States be informed in a rational manner "by *how much* the deterrent effect of our reasonably assured retaliatory nuclear force would be *reduced* if we were to commit it to avoidance of non-combatants," etc. (italics added).

I think, by not much; or not demonstrably any at all, in view of the greater incredibility of threats the more destructive they become, given that the destruction is mutual. For these reasons, when first exploring the possible *feasibility* (which does not fall within my competence) of a moral, graduated deterrence (which does), I called attention to and took full advantage of a basic fact about modern warfare, namely, that war today becomes a *disproportionate* means to any substantive political purposes long before it need be judged to have become *indiscriminate* (if noncombatant immunity from direct attack is properly understood). This being so, if one starts from the bottom and moves upward in the scale, the deterring effects I have mentioned—which do *not* give and take hostage populations or reverse the relation between arms and society—would seem to be sufficiently powerful ways to persuade an adversary.

This seems to me to follow from an attempt to take seriously the just war theory as an ethics intrinsic to the nature of politics and to a purposeful use of force, and not as an ethics externally imposed on a neutral and alien realm of behavior. Given that political resorts to violence become disproportionate sooner than they become indiscriminate, solution to the moral dilemma of nuclear deterrence appears possible. One need not suppose that persuasive deterrence is necessarily dependent upon one's final willingness to threaten and to use the threat of attacks on whole populations.

Graduated deterrence seems, indeed, to threaten something "disproportionate," since its virtue entails issuing a signal that one may be willing to go to a level of destruction which is greater than what the cause is worth, politically, to oneself or to an opponent. If it is said that such an actual violation of the principle of proportionate good, threatened to another and accepted by oneself, would also always be a grave political immorality, three things can still be said in reply. The *first* is that not every threat of something disproportionate is itself a disproportionate threat, certainly not when the good at stake is shared persuasive limits upon the escalation of war in a nuclear age. The *second* is that the issuance of threats of disproportionate destruction is ever the nature of deterrence under any conditions of warfare. One has to reject deterrence in general or in any war in order to reject this account of justifiable deterrence in a nuclear age. At the same time, it must be granted that herein lies the tragedy of war, namely, that threats of disproportionate damage, although proportionate to the end of deterrence, may be disproportionately actualized, and on both sides (as in

Modern war: proportionate means and discriminate attack

the politically disproportionate countercombatant destruction in World War I). But this is a question of the immorality of warfare that has lost its objective or become disoriented from it. It is not a question of the morality of deterrence oriented upon *its* objective. The *third* reply is that, of course, there is an obligation never to mean to do and accept damage disproportionate to political goals; but I suppose no military commander would calculate on actually doing any such thing. If these rejoinders have force, then graduated nuclear deterrence, based on the issuance of threats that might do disproportionate damage to an opponent's military forces not only promises to escape the moral dilemmas. As well it promises to be effective in preventing all but the *ultimate* destruction—which anyhow cannot certainly be prevented by arrangements of military power that deliberately build that destruction into the scheme of deterrence itself.

Deterrence of the *ultimate* threat of destruction had better be left to the simple philosophic consequence of the possession of nuclear weapons (Kahn), the subjectively unintended consequence of the mere possession of these weapons. This is particularly the case, since the attempt to do otherwise inevitably skews the planned use of military power in war or for deterrence at lower, justifiable levels. Such an attempt also sickens political resolution at levels of usable power by the thought of its indivisible connection with unusable power and politically purposeless and therefore largely incredible threats. While ordinary political and military encounters may be a matter of "minimax"-ing the outcome, it needs to be said quite honestly that when it comes to the ultimate threat of destruction in a nuclear age, one cannot min the max or max the min. This is not only because military encounters are often other than "zero-sum" games in which one gains what another loses, but because one can readily traverse the range of violence to which proportion (costs-benefits) applies as a criterion and soon comes to the point where there are only costs, no comparable benefits. After that comes not a "mixed-motive game" but only "no motive" games. Continued in-

tellectual effort to devise abstractly rational schemes to prevent the ultimate destruction that is finally unpreventable by any force (should the system fail and have to be used) can only skew needed effort to prevent the preventable. If we are to assume, as we must, that our opponent is a minimally rational decision-maker, we should assume that substantive political purposes inform his reason, and not alone "winning" in an abstract sorites of interaction mounting to a level of destruction well beyond the worth of any objectives he may have.

One of the most thoughtful comments on the SALT agreements brought up the point about the superpowers' commitment to a MAD policy: "The limits on offensive weapons last only five years, while the treaty limiting defensive weapons is perpetual. Even with withdrawal and review provisions, this probably means the two sides are frozen into a system of mutual assured destruction. . . . Mutual assured destruction guarantees the utter devastation of both nations. [That] is probably the best we can do under present technology, though the pact outlaws defensive arrangements that might make it more stable. But if technological advance permits the defense of populations, might not we want to pick up that option?"¹

Arthur Lee Burns's description of the purposeful interaction going on in the international system is risky enough to any of the less-than-fundamental purposes of statecraft. "It is necessary to all *political* in-

teraction," he writes, "that those who interact put the ordering of their preferences at risk, endeavor to reorder the others' preferences, and remain in a position at any time to create a new object of preference or to apprehend such a new creation."⁵ That is an apt account of the world of political move and countermove. But one cannot without systemic violation of the nature of those ongoing interactions imagine that nations should put *themselves* at mutual total risk, and not only the ordering of their preferences. Seriously meant, counter-people deterrence can no more be an action within the life of the international system than suicide or meant threats of reciprocal suicide can be an act of life for individual persons. Both can be *done*, of course, as acts or designs; but both are contradictions of the moral terms on which each depends, of the goods such policies were supposed to serve.

1. *New York Times*, Op-Ed page (May 24 and 25, 1971).

2. "Ethics and Deterrence: A Nuclear Balance Without Hostage Cities?" *Adelphi Paper No. 69* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, July, 1970).

3. *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, 1690, Chap. III, para. 17.

4. "Go Slow on SALT," *Wall Street Journal* (May 30, 1972).

5. "Quantitative Approaches to International Politics," in Morton A. Kaplan, ed., *New Approaches to International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), p. 171.