

# No First Use of Nuclear Weapons

## To Stay the Fateful Lightning

Bruce Russett

As a result of nuclear proliferation, new weapons systems, and new strategic doctrines, the danger of nuclear war is increasing. The very modest "arms control" agreements negotiated or in prospect under SALT are totally inadequate to contain this danger. According to Herbert Scoville, "Arms control negotiations have become a mechanism for promoting the arms race rather than controlling it." Even by a less skeptical evaluation the negotiations can at best slow Soviet and American acquisition of new weapons systems. Disarmament in the realm of strategic nuclear arms is nowhere in sight. Other countries, which have long demanded some degree of Soviet-American nuclear disarmament as the price of an effective non-proliferation agreement, can plainly see that their price will not be met. As a consequence, potential new entrants in the nuclear club will feel increased pressure to take up their option. India and—according to the recent report attributed to the CIA—Israel have done so in the past three years and will certainly not be the last in line. Bold new policies, supported by public pronouncements, are necessary if we are to reduce the risk of nuclear war in the immediate years ahead.

Many steps need to be taken. But a beginning, perhaps an essential catalyst, should be vigorous declarations by the President next elected that the United States will never be first to use nuclear weapons. Such declarations should be supported by a thorough review of procedures to prevent both the theft of nuclear weapons and unauthorized use of such weapons by local commanders. Other nuclear powers should be challenged to make similar declarations, though it probably would not be wise to make American action contingent on such a response or to take the slow, difficult, and extremely effort-consuming route of seeking a formal international agreement.

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BRUCE RUSSETT, Professor of Political Science at Yale, is author, among other books, of *What Price Vigilance? The Burdens of National Defense*, and *Power and Community in World Politics*.

Proposals to renounce the first use of nuclear weapons are not new. To "realists" they have often seemed utopian. But given our inability otherwise to control the arms race better than has been done so far, it is time to reconsider. Moreover, several technological and political developments now make the idea seem more promising than it did, as well as more urgent.

Present contingency plans call for American first use of nuclear weapons in a variety of circumstances, for example, many kinds of nonnuclear attacks on Korea, Israel, or Western Europe. The President is not required to consult with anyone before authorizing such use. Details of the situation are uncertain, but responsible members of the arms control community remain concerned that SACEUR and other commanders may also have the capacity to fire nuclear weapons, especially tactical ones in Europe. Controls against unauthorized use may not be adequate, and the danger of nuclear theft is a growing source of anxiety. This situation could easily encourage the Soviet Union to undertake a preemptive use of nuclear weapons in the event of a serious outbreak of conventional conflict, particularly in Europe. Contingency plans for American first use must be changed. For our own protection this change must be communicated publicly, and authoritatively—that is, by the American Commander in Chief—to opponents and to United States military personnel. This change would reduce the danger that we would either deliberately or inadvertently step across the "firebreak" from conventional into nuclear war. It would also serve, in some degree at least, to diminish the allure of nuclear weapons, removing the incentive for proliferation from those currently nonnuclear states that are considering going nuclear.

Such a declaration would represent a major change in American policy. Three major kinds of objections would immediately be voiced, and they must be seriously considered:

*Objection No. 1:* "You propose a unilateral declaration. What if the Russians won't reciprocate, or if they say they will but in fact retain their own contingency plans to use nuclear weapons first under some circumstances? We can't trust them."

*Rejoinder:* True, we can't entirely trust them. But we stand to gain a lot by controlling *ourselves* even if the Russians *don't* reciprocate. It's better if they do it too, but if a United States-initiated nuclear conflict got out of hand, we would lose as much as the Russians would. In any case, if the Russians do make a similar no-first-use declaration, modern intelligence methods give us ways to monitor, with substantial if not *very* high confidence, whether the Russians are in fact changing their own contingency plans.

*Objection No. 2:* "Your policy would require major revisions of American plans to defend our allies; it would diminish allies' confidence in the United States military guarantees."

*Rejoinder:* Yes, it would require major revision of current plans. That's just the intention. Let's look at the situation in various parts of the world. Japan is not subject to any significant military threat. Despite the rantings of dictator Park Chung Hee, South Korea is fully defensible against a North Korean attack by conventional (United States and South Korean) means alone. Given probable Israeli acquisition of their own nuclear weapons, an American first use of nuclear weapons to defend Israel would be unnecessary as well as extremely dangerous. West Europeans want an American guarantee to use nuclear weapons strategically against Russia on their behalf (a move that would bring Soviet retaliation against the continental United States) but have *never* wanted "tactical" nuclear weapons used *in Europe* because of the destruction they would unavoidably wreak.

The West European problem is the hardest case for any "no-first-use" policy. Many West Europeans will respond negatively to it, without doubt. Many others, however, will not, and adverse responses can be contained or mitigated. Some negative European reaction is a necessary cost if the wider benefits are to be achieved. Also, adverse *verbal* responses need not lead to *actions* adverse to American or European security.

American nuclear (and other) weapons presumably have three purposes: Defense against attack, deterrence

of attack, and the "psychological" or political reassurance of allies.

1. The nuclear *defense* of Europe may have made sense in the 1950's, when the United States had a great superiority in nuclear weapons, when the West perceived itself as weak in conventional forces, and when the level of political tension in Europe was relatively high. None of these conditions holds any longer:

a. Warsaw Pact forces, like NATO forces, are now heavily armed with tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. When both sides have them, tactical nuclear weapons convey no clear advantage to the defense. If anything, they help the attacker more. In any case, if they were used, the level of destruction would be so great that Europe would be destroyed. Tactical nuclear weapons cannot defend Europe; they can only destroy it. Europeans know this.

b. American and West European forces, even in the Central area, are not measurably inferior to Warsaw Pact forces. Total troop and expenditure levels are higher for the West, and much of Western equipment is superior. Weaknesses are primarily in military organization and selection of equipment. The conventional defense of Western Europe is plausible—though not certain—with existing forces; its plausibility could be raised without markedly increasing expenditures. New weapons systems, such as precision-guided munitions and antitank weapons, probably favor the defense in conventional war. General George Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently declared: "Today the NATO forces, principally the Germans and U.S. forces, have a very respectable capability to fight without resorting, early on, to nuclear munitions."

c. East-West tensions in Europe are now very low, as are almost everyone's estimates of a deliberate attack from the East. That risk is now a good deal *lower* than the risk that a low-level conflict could erupt (for example, over Berlin or in East Germany) and *escalate* to the use of nuclear weapons. The dangers in a nuclear posture thus become less tolerable. Reducing the risk of escalation will not raise the risk of deliberate Soviet attack, providing that Europeans accept more responsibility for their own defense by conventional means.

2. *Deterrence.* United States official policy is still that we would use nuclear weapons—tactical or strategic—

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to prevent the loss of Europe. Nuclear weapons deter Soviet attack only if the threat is believed. A Soviet nuclear attack should and would be met in kind by the United States, even if the initial attack were only on American allies. But the credibility of an American *first* use of *strategic* nuclears has declined since the loss of American *strategic* preeminence more than a decade ago. As for *first tactical* use, there is a contradiction. Despite the enthusiasts of limited war, the "firebreak" between conventional and nuclear war remains one of the most crucial barriers to holocaust. It is all too likely that, once the firebreak were crossed for tactical use of nuclear weapons, escalation to their strategic use would follow. Therefore either the United States would be very reluctant to initiate the use of tactical nuclear weapons (in which case their deterrent value has to be low), or there is a high risk that conventional war would become strategic nuclear war (in which case the deterrent value is higher, but at the cost that any low-level conflict may escalate to strategic war despite the initial intentions of the combatants). Thus the value of nuclear weapons as an acceptably safe deterrent to conventional attack is less than their proponents would have us think.

United States nuclear weapons do retain great value for deterring the first use of nuclears by the Soviets against America or American allies. Therefore the United States should retain strong strategic nuclear capabilities, and *keep tactical nuclear forces in Europe*. The proposal of a no-first-use policy is *not* a proposal for unilateral nuclear disarmament. At the same time, many tactical nuclear weapons could, and should, be withdrawn from Europe. The current seven thousand American nuclear devices in Europe are excessive, expensive, and risk-inducing.

3. *Reassurance of allies*. A no-first-use doctrine will unsettle some Europeans, despite the restricted utility of nuclear weapons for defense or deterrence. Some opposition would come from political and military bureaucracies, who will resist change in order to protect their own interests. Americans must weigh this against the risk that the current posture of European defense may lead to strategic nuclear war against American cities. Not all Europeans will be unsettled. Some will welcome a deemphasis of nuclears; the reaction will vary between different countries and within countries. Reassuring the Europeans will be important. This is one reason why some United States tactical nuclear weapons should be kept in Europe.

Nevertheless, the savings from withdrawing *some* tactical nuclears will be substantial, and the United States should devote those savings to strengthening conventional forces. (Note carefully: A no-first-use doctrine should *not* cost money, but its primary purpose is to reduce the risk of devastating war, not to *save* money.) Overall American force levels in Europe should not be reduced as part of a no-first-use doctrine. Rather, Europeans should be told that their acceptance of no first use is a *requirement to maintaining big United States forces in Europe*. Otherwise domestic American political support for European defense cannot be relied upon in the long run.

Europeans—especially the Germans—want American troops more than they want plans calling for the first use of nuclear weapons. Europeans may not like a no-first-use policy. But if American force strength in Europe is maintained, they will accept the policy. Those Europeans most committed to a first-use doctrine are strong anti-Communists, with the least real incentive to shift to neutralism.

**O**bjection No. 3: "Advocates of a no-first-use doctrine will be labeled utopian; right-wing critics will call them 'soft'; parts of the military bureaucracy will resist vigorously."

*Rejoinder*: If anything serious is to be done about the nuclear war problem, we will have to accept such criticism. Asserting civilian control on nuclear questions requires unceasing efforts. Moreover, there is substantial potential support for similar proposals among well-informed observers and among the public in general.

Professor Bernard Feld, the new editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, used the occasion of his initial editorial last November to push vigorously for a no-first-use policy. Senator Alan Cranston (D.-Calif.) has introduced a resolution that would require the President to obtain approval from Congressional representatives before any first use of nuclear weapons. The Arms Control Association and the Federation of American Scientists have endorsed the Cranston resolution. Dr. Fred Iklé, Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, has called for a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons *against cities*. Iklé's proposal is laudable in itself. It is consistent with former Defense Secretary Schlesinger's statements about flexible response and the possibility of avoiding cities as targets for nuclear weapons—but the flexible response doctrine raises serious worries that the United States might initiate first use of nuclear weapons "flexibly" against military targets. A no-first-use, *period*, doctrine, however, would eliminate those worries.

Finally, recent opinion polls show widespread public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons, markedly increased since the 1950's. During the 1950's about half the American population regularly answered "Yes" when asked, "If one of our allies in Western Europe were attacked by the Russian army, do you think the United States would be justified in using atomic bombs against Russia?" But to a different yet highly relevant question in 1970—"Could you conceive of *any* [my italics] situations in which nuclear war would be necessary, or not?"—only 26 per cent said they could. Similarly, a Louis Harris survey asked what people would want to see done if various countries were invaded by outside Communist forces. For West Germany, 59 per cent favored either action "with U.S. armed forces" or "military and economic aid." Yet of all respondents, only 7 per cent volunteered that they would approve the use of nuclear weapons.

Thus a no-first-use proposal, in addition to being prudent defense policy, might turn out to be a very popular initiative.