Reader’s Response II

Man vs. War Machines

W.S. Bennett

I respond to Francis X. Winters’s “The Nuclear Arms Race: Man vs. War Machines” in the September issue of Worldview, not because I disagree with his criticism of countervalue strategy, but because his premise is in error: that weapons—his “war machines”—cannot be controlled by men and will, in turn, control men themselves. If moralists like Father Winters shift their efforts to blaming technology for our problems, then to whom can we look for guidance to reduce men’s proclivity for solving problems by entering into war? I worry that Father Winters will abandon his search for solutions because he thinks he has found the villain, nuclear weapons, and will restrict his career to a sterile chorus of “Let’s pretend they don’t exist by getting rid of those we have.” “We,” of course, is the U.S., and perhaps the British and French along with us, although that’s not clear.

I first met Father Winters several years ago at Georgetown, when he was kind enough to invite me to his series of seminars on ethics and nuclear weapons. I was encouraged that a moralist could explore both these topics together, since it is more often assumed a priori that to imply nuclear weapons have any value is immoral. The morality of war has perplexed me ever since my youth, as an enlisted man in World War II. It continues to perplex me as a staff member at Los Alamos, where many like me still look on nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent to war. To my knowledge, nuclear weapons have not caused any wars. They may have reduced the scope of some—as in keeping the USSR out of any actual combat role in Korea and Vietnam. Communications technology (the “hotline”) may have averted some wars. But the ultimate ability to live together in peace will come from the hearts and minds of men and their leaders—not from technology.

‘Father Winters, like most people who are repulsed by the hypothesis that tens of millions on both sides could be killed in a strategic nuclear war, seems to have fallen into the trap of believing “a nuke is a nuke is a nuke.”’ He sees no distinction between the defensive use of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons and the indiscriminate destruction that could follow the failure of the mutual strategic deterrent. This is understandable because it has become fashionable to assert that even the defensive use of tactical weapons would inevitably lead to a strategic exchange. This fear has led to such tight controls on the use of tactical weapons that we may have a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In NATO, for example, where we deploy tactical nuclear weapons, any conventional shortcomings are overlooked, for they are thought to be compensated for by those weapons. But the very fear of escalation keeps these weapons so unavailable that there is doubt they could be used in time; they cannot be counted on. The effectiveness of low-yield weapons depends on their prompt use against tactical military targets before these targets enter friendly territory and friendly cities. Discriminating use requires that the enemy be targeted at the point of invasion. The U.S. is reluctant to declare this intent, so we have to threaten escalation, thereby relying on a strategic deterrent. Two colleagues and I have argued this

W.S. BENNETT writes from the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, University of California, in Los Alamos, N.M. The writer accepts sole responsibility for the opinions expressed here. There is no implication that they reflect the views of the Laboratory or the University.
case whenever we could find an audien-
tence (see, e.g., "A Credible Nuclear-
Emphasis Defense for NATO," by
W.S. Bennett, R.R. Sandoval, and
R.G. Shreffler, in Orbis, Summer,
1973). This has not been frequent, so
Father Winters is justified in saying
that "a majority of analysts" say that "...it
is necessary to abandon the weapons
that have proven to be incompatible
with the tradition of civilized warfare."

With considerable experience as an
operations analyst on military prob-
lems, I am accustomed to sometimes
grasping calculations of the relative
costs of achieving an objective by al-
ternative means. If method A costs fewer
lives than B for the same objective, A is
preferable to B. That may make it more
civilized than B; I'm not sure it makes it
civilized. I firmly believe that War is
Hell. I appreciate my interactions with
career military personnel who know that
War is Hell, and who live by the motto
"Peace Is Our Mission." Father Win-
ters bases his rejection of nuclear weap-
on's inability to find an accept-
able numerator in a cost/benefit ratio
that would show the costs were worth
the gains. If both the numerator and
denominator were in lives, there could
be some merit here; but he implies the
denominator could be a political gain,
or "defense," or "sovereignty," and
that the result of this arithmetic can
determine morality and identify a "just
war."

L.F. Richardson, a Quaker physicist,
dedicated much of his life to an attempt
to analyze wars objectively and statisti-
cally. The introduction to his study
(Statistics of Deadly Quarrels, 1960)
reflects his purpose: "I notice that many
of those who are considered to be ex-
erts on foreign affairs do not base their
opinion on historical facts, but on some
sort of instinctive reasoning." His main
tabulation, covering over three hundred
wars between 1820 and 1949, conveys
his impression: "Collected Information
on Wars and Murders." Richardson's
data do not cover any nuclear wars of
course; he died in 1953 and his manu-
script was published by his son. But an
update would not cover any nuclear
wars either, for there have been none.
Richardson did find that states tend to
become involved in wars in proportion
to the number of states with which they
have a common frontier. But the actual
occurrences have been even less, pro-
portionately, as the opportunities for

war have increased through the advance
of sea and air power." We can hope that
this indicates that the responsibilities of
power tend to constrain belligerency.
(Admittedly, this could be a false hope.)

Richardson tested the hypothesis that
wars became more frequent and more
destructive of life as the world's popula-
tion grew; does belligerency rise with
the increase in numbers of people? He
found no such trend; indeed, "....there
is a suggestion, but not a conclusive
proof, that mankind has become less
warlike since A.D. 1820."

Others are continuing Richardson's
studies. In the meantime I remain doubt-
ful about the analysis that led to Father
Winters's claim that "The advent of
nuclear weapons has changed both the
pattern of recurring violence and that
efforts to limit war and the spread of
weapons." At least on the last two
points, my undocumented "instinctive
reasoning" makes me believe that ef-
forts have increased, not decreased.
Superpower confrontation has been
avoided meticulously, and nonprolifer-
ation is receiving more attention than
ever.

But Father Winters reminds us all too
properly that war has not passed away.
We charge the U.S. President, as com-
mander in chief, and our military forces
with the responsibility to defend us
against all enemies, foreign and domes-
tic! But there is no defense against
intercontinental missiles. Even attempts
at developing such defense have been
denounced officially. Strategic defense
has been judged "destabilizing" (with-
out reference to the debates on either
capability or cost). Yet the respon-
sibility is awesome. I've seen no signs
of the "smug complacency" (ACDA
Director Ikle's words) that Father Win-
ters cites. Mutual deterrence is a terrify-
ing stalemate while we search for
mutual trust, mutual security, and
mutual disarmament. These are politi-
cal moods and ethics. This is the arena
in which I hope Father Winters and his
colleagues will continue to search for
solutions, because I believe it is the only
one in which solutions are likely to be
found. The problem is not weapons or
technology; these are only symptoms of
man's fear, his distrust of other men.

This leads me to several rebuttals to
the technological premises in Father
Winters's paper. I wouldn't bother, ex-
cept that his misunderstandings of these
points apparently are leading him to
fight technology, and thereby distract-
ing him from the search for peace. Ex-
ceptions from his paper are headed FXIV;
my responses WSB:

FXIV (first quoting ACDA): "Yet
another surprise was the discovery that
electromagnetic pulses can play havoc
with electrical equipment itself, includ-
ing some in command systems that con-
trol the nuclear arms themselves. Much
of our knowledge was thus gained by
chance...." For the first time, I believe,
we can read in an official United States
Government bulletin about the eerie
possibility that these machines of war
may escape the grasp of their designers
and deployers, and themselves begin to
determine the course of the war.

WSB: Much scientific knowledge has
often been "gained by chance." Never-
threats, it is gained because it is
being looked for. These effects were
found because they had been suspected.
Weapon arming systems are designed
superconditionally to "fail safe," i.e., not
to give a nuclear yield if the control
system malfunctions. No U.S. nuclear
weapon has ever given a nuclear yield
because of an accident. Control systems
are repeatedly tested by imposing delib-
erate command malfunctions.

FXW: [E]ven the military command-
ers do not claim they can exercise
"command and control" over the
hostilities once a nuclear weapon has
been used.

WSB: Nor before. All war is unpre-
dictable, but technology does now give
more command and control redundancy
and reliability by higher echelons (even
the White House) than ever before. Loss
of control would limit our effectiveness,
by failing-safe. Technology does not
launch mindless robots, as Father Win-
ters seems to imply. Men fight wars. If
they lose communications, they fight
less responsively; weapons are not re-
leased (fired) when their commanders
want them to be fired.

FXIV: We now know that nuclear
weapons might escape human con-
trol....

WSB: Which is to say, they might
"dud." Why does this affect the mor-
ality of their deployment?

Without being students of any "just
war" school, Sandoval, Shreffler, and I
nevertheless fear the instability of stra-
tegic deterrence as much as Father Win-
ters does. But we see neither the U.S.
nor the USSR willingly tipping that
balance of terror unless it were a tragic escalation from a more local war—most likely in NATO Europe, where both sides are already deployed face to face. There is a felt need in Europe for a defense. Sandoval, Shreffler, and I argued in Orbis that neither we nor our NATO allies seem willing to pay for an adequate conventional defense (if such is even possible against a nuclear threat). So we see a role for low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons that can be used accurately and discriminately against the military force of an invader. We argued that this force should not rely on the threat of escalation but should have its own teeth.

Unknowingly, then, except with the "morality" common to most people concerned with defense responsibilities, we satisfied all of Father Winters’s cited criteria for a "just war." Purpose: Defense. Discrimination: Yes. Proportionality: Yes. Contrary to his assertion that "no political utility has yet been discovered for their use," I believe our proposal for a credible nuclear defense plan for NATO does have political utility. It threatens nothing but the ambitions of an aggressor. It is a tactical deterrent, unlikely to be challenged. It would give Europeans the confidence and willpower to resist economic pressures from the USSR. Shreffler has summarized it: "The best defense is a good defense."

Sandoval likened this defense to that of a porcupine. "With the defense of its borders entrusted to forces structured around the firepower of nuclear weapons, any nation...not harboring ambitions for territorial aggrandizement, could walk like a porcupine through the forests of international affairs; no threat to its neighbors, too prickly for predators to try to swallow" ("Consider the Porcupine: Another View of Nuclear Proliferation," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, May, 1976).

Our hope, in our Orbis article, was that when each country sees that it can defend its territory from occupation, then the superpowers might have the confidence and feeling of security necessary for realistic mutual strategic disarmament. If people fall victim to "a nuke is a nuke is a nuke" simplification, then meaningful progress may be denied us and mutual terror will continue to hold us.

Father Winters wonders if it is "even desirable for the entire U.S. citizenry to awaken at once to the peril in which we live." If the majority are to be left blissfully ignorant, it is all the more important that we have leaders who are realistic; ones who will not retreat from the challenge by wishing the world had never changed. It has changed, and I hope Father Winters will rejoin the effort to find a way to live with those changes. "Machinery" is not the enemy. The enemy is still man's fear of man, until we can learn to live together.