

# BOOKS

## THE ILLOGIC OF AMERICAN NUCLEAR STRATEGY

by Robert Jervis

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It is difficult to review a book that opens with the words "A rational strategy for the employment of nuclear weapons is a contradiction in terms" and closes with "nuclear weapons have so changed our world that much of the truth does not make sense." Between such apparently absolute statements you'd expect a philosophical disquisition on suicide—perhaps something on the order of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* with a MIRV launcher substituted for the rock. What we have instead is a carefully reasoned academic critique of the "countervailing strategy" as well as its junior intellectual accomplice, "escalation dominance."

The basic idea of "countervailing strategy" is to buy enough weaponry to be able to match the Soviets at every possible level of threat. It is somewhat reminiscent of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's "flexible response" in the 1960s. "Escalation dominance" adds the capability to initiate action elsewhere, should the threat to intervene directly in some specific situation lack credibility—such as in Berlin. The official rationale is to gain sufficient flexibility in our use of strategic nuclear weapons so that we are never faced with the decision of either doing nothing or starting World War III. This, it is said, will enhance the credibility of our threats and deter the Soviets.

Make sense? Wrong. Dead wrong.

As Jervis points out, no matter how much we countervail or dominate escalation, the light at the end of the tunnel is still the multiple thermonuclear detonations of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Correctly, then, he views the rejection of MAD as a function of some deep-seated emotional need to deny an unpleasant reality. It is not the product of intellectual insight.

To Jervis, this is "conventionalization," a desperate attempt to treat nuclear weapons

as if they were conventional weapons and to turn mutual suicide into winnable war. The point he makes again and again, although he is gentle about it, is that, given the power of mutual assured destruction, the willingness to take risks is always the master of weaponry. Software controls hardware. But the "countervailing strategy" addresses software problems with hardware solutions.

It's interesting to observe Jervis at work. He treats doctrine like a side of beef, hoisting it for better inspection, carefully circling the carcass, taking one deft whack after another until, more than a hundred pages later, the countervailing strategy is but of-fal. In so doing, he cheerfully offers arguments that contradict each other. They are inevitable, given inherent contradictions in the doctrine itself. As is common with those who write on this subject, he tends to stress European security: first use, NATO, and whatnot.

This is fine, considering the controversy over cruise missiles and Pershings. But in this vein he buries a nugget of original insight—which is that "coupling," the inextricable linking of U.S. and European security by linking our strategic or intercontinental-range weapons with our shorter range or intermediate nuclear forces, cuts two ways: If firing INF would lead to a world war—and this is what coupling means—and the result of such a war would be the destruction of American society, why is the threat to use these forces credible? If American leaders thought a war in Europe would lead to world war, they would feel enormous pressure to find a peaceful solution in a crisis, even if to do so meant sacrificing other values. This was the effect of coupling in 1938. France was pledged to Czechoslovakia, Britain was tied to France. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain therefore knew that a German invasion of Czechoslovakia meant an Anglo-German war. Since this prospect was unacceptable, Britain had to bring pressure on the Czechs to concede. Thus coupling may well cause appeasement.

There are criticisms to be made of the book. For one thing, there is no discussion

of nuclear defense and its attendant controversy. While it is obviously a subject for a separate book, Jervis might have devoted a few paragraphs to it. As it is, he tosses it off, saying that scientists he knows have told him it won't work. (They're right, of course.) More important, he misses certain insights into the difference between countervalue and counterforce targeting. This is significant because counterforce targeting is the essence of the countervailing strategy, yet the difference between the two is not at all clear in practice. Ground zero at Hiroshima was the parade ground of an army base. Did that make Hiroshima a counterforce target?

In addition, to say that countervalue means just to "hit cities" is misleading. These are actually *strategic* targets: steel mills, oil refineries, rail yards, and every other facet of a modern industrial infrastructure. Sure, a lot of people live around them, but the primary objective is not to kill the people but to destroy their industrial base, thus depriving them of the means of modern war. This is why, incidentally, projections of an all-out exchange commonly predict more dead Americans than dead Russians. Such calculations are usually based on blast and heat effects; we rely on the Russian winter to complete our task.

Yes, it's gruesome, but it's a point that must be grasped. Counterforce, while serving as an argument for more expensive weapons, has changing meanings. Occasionally it means any military target. But today it usually means "hard target kill capability." A hard target is one that can withstand a thousand or so pounds of blast overpressure (your house would be blown away at five). These include command bunkers and radar sites, but most are missile silos. The problem with silo busting is that it impels the enemy to launch while under attack. All you've bought with counterforce capability is the ability to dictate the launch times of enemy missiles. The price, in addition to the dollars spent, is a dramatic increase in the possibility of some error that leads to an accidental nuclear war.

To be fair, Jervis's task is to expose claptrap, not add to it. His successful critique of established dogma is worthwhile. Although his writing displays a paucity of pith and punch, it is not turgid. Circuitous, yes. It is no accident that *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* issues from an academic press. Fortunately, the two-step flow of communications theory ought to assure an ample distribution of his arguments: If you don't read this book, you're sure to find yourself discussing it with someone who has. WV

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