

# THE **ILLOGIC** OF AMERICAN NUCLEAR STRATEGY

ROBERT JERVIS

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American Nuclear Strategy*

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*To James King, Thomas Schelling, Glenn Snyder,  
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R. J.

Everything about the atomic bomb is overshadowed by the twin facts that it exists and that its destructive power is fantastically great.

—Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon* (1946)

*Senator Glenn.* I get lost in what is credible and not credible. This whole thing gets so incredible when you consider wiping out whole nations, it is difficult to establish credibility.

*Secretary Brown.* That is why we sound a little crazy when we talk about it.

—U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations,  
*Hearing on Presidential Directive 59,*  
September 16, 1980

## *Preface*

Nuclear strategy is often seen as an arcane subject—and in detail it is. But one need not be an expert to understand the crucial issues. Indeed, expert discussion, which often revolves around the characteristics of specific weapons or the comparison of various arms-control proposals, frequently glosses over the fundamental questions on which analysis must rest. How one answers these questions in large part determines the stance one takes on a wide range of separate issues. We need to ask ourselves how nuclear weapons have altered world politics and, more particularly, how the fact that both superpowers are vulnerable to destruction affects the ways force and the threat of force can be used to reach foreign-policy goals.

American nuclear strategy for the past decade—the “counter-vailing strategy”—has been based on the assumption that what is crucial today, as it was in the past, is the ability of American and allied military forces to deny the Soviets a military advantage from any aggression they might contemplate. The United States must be prepared to meet and block Soviet force at any level of violence. The strategy, then, is generally one of counter-force: blocking and seeking to destroy Soviet military power. Its goal is deterrence. Although it is concerned with how the United States would fight many different kinds of wars, both nuclear and nonnuclear, one cannot correctly claim that the strategy is designed with the intent to engage in wars rather than to deter them. In fact, its advocates argue that the best way

to deter wars and aggression is to be prepared to fight if need be: the Russians are unlikely to start or risk a war if they know they will be defeated. The main theme of this book is that this argument, which makes perfect sense in a nonnuclear world, is profoundly misleading in the current era of abundant weapons of mass destruction. To a significant extent, current strategy fits with common sense; but nuclear weapons do not.

Because nuclear weapons enable the state that is losing a war to destroy the other side, they have produced a true revolution in strategy. In the past, military advantage allowed a state both to harm the other and to protect itself. Now protection is possible only with the other's cooperation. As I will try to show throughout this book, the result is that the current stress on being able to contain Soviet military thrusts at all levels of violence is misguided. Such planning makes a great deal of sense in terms of traditional military thought—a country can deter an adversary by being able to deny it the ability to reach its expansionist goals. But mutual vulnerability means that what now deters is the fear of the overwhelming costs of engaging in large-scale violence.

All-out war is obviously suicidal. Everyone recognizes this, but some go on to claim that this very fact means that nuclear weapons have very little influence, that the only thing the threat of all-out war can deter is a massive strike by the other side. If the Russians were able to win a military adventure at a lower level of violence, for example by a conventional war in Europe, they might launch such an attack, confident that their nuclear forces would deter the use of ours. Many of those who reject the countervailing strategy agree that nuclear stalemate increases the chance of nonnuclear conflict. Thus Robert McNamara argues that the "sole purpose" of strategic nuclear forces "is to deter the other side's first use of its strategic forces" and calls for the West to build up its conventional forces to a level at which they could repel a conventional Soviet attack.<sup>1</sup> But those who hold such views fail to appreciate the fact that statesmen, both Soviet and American, cannot know that vio-

## *Preface*

lence will not spread. Using military force is terribly risky. History is filled with cases in which small wars escalated, either because of accidents or because of explicit decisions. Without denying the irrationality of a major nuclear response to limited aggression, I will argue that because force cannot be easily controlled or compartmentalized, the fear of nuclear war does deter the other side from much more than nuclear attack. Irrational as it may be, the chance of devastation has made our world unusually safe.

As long as the societies of both sides are vulnerable (and few except President Reagan believe that missile defenses will ever be able to protect cities), gaining military advantage or denying it to the other side is much less important than the risks states are willing to run to further their values. Threats and force thus work differently from the way they did in the past. Because the countervailing strategy fails to take this into account, it cannot be accepted. The proponents of the doctrine of course realize that nuclear weapons have made some changes in world politics and know that each side can destroy the other. But because these insights are at variance with the ideas that provide the foundations of the strategy, when those ideas are worked out in detail they present a maze of incoherence and contradictions. To show this requires examining the strategy at length, and I have done so in chapters 3 and 4. These portions of the book, especially chapter 4, necessarily contain somewhat technical arguments, and nonspecialists may wish to skip them.

Overall, however, this book is designed for both experts and concerned citizens. In chapter 1, I argue that the changes nuclear weapons have produced in world politics constitute a true revolution in the relationships between force and foreign policy. The fact that neither side can protect itself without the other's cooperation drastically alters the way in which force can be used or threatened. The impulses toward both cooperation and conflict are increased, and statesmen understandably seek ways out of the resulting dilemmas. As chapter 2 shows, nuclear weapons inevitably bring with them new and painful ten-



sions for policy. All too often the reaction has been to try to find ways of escape which, while psychologically attractive, cannot work because they do not come to grips with the implications of the nuclear revolution. The most important of these for current policy is "conventionalization"—the attempt to understand our world by employing the intellectual tools of the prenuclear era. One result of this way of thinking is the countervailing strategy. It is described in the third chapter, and its crucial terms and assertions are examined to show how the faulty starting point inevitably leads to incoherence. In the next chapter specific issues are analyzed to show the precise ways in which the strategy contradicts itself. These detailed problems are part of the broader issue treated in chapter 5: whether the United States can deter attacks against which it lacks adequate defenses. I argue that it can, because in the nuclear era what matters most to statesmen is not who would win a local and isolated military encounter between the superpowers, but the risk that a conflict would lead to all-out war. In concluding, I discuss what my position implies for the design of a more sensible policy.

Criticizing a strategy is easier than designing an appropriate one, and I have been able to take only a few tentative steps in that direction. An adequate policy must start from an appreciation of the nuclear revolution, of the ways in which mutual vulnerability has altered the traditional relationships between force and foreign policy. Although of course we want to reduce the risk of war as much as possible, it is the chance of war—however small—that deters forcible alterations of the political status quo. I believe that each side's awareness of the utter destructiveness of large-scale nuclear war means that the chances of war between the United States and the USSR are very slight—even if the United States continues to follow its foolish policy—and that the Russians can be deterred from major military adventures. Our security problems are less severe than we usually think. This does not mean that dangers are absent, however. Most dangerous is a situation which current policy neglects: if either side came to believe that war was inev-