Robert Jervis

THE MEANING OF THE NUCLEAR REVOLUTION

Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon

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Robert Jervis

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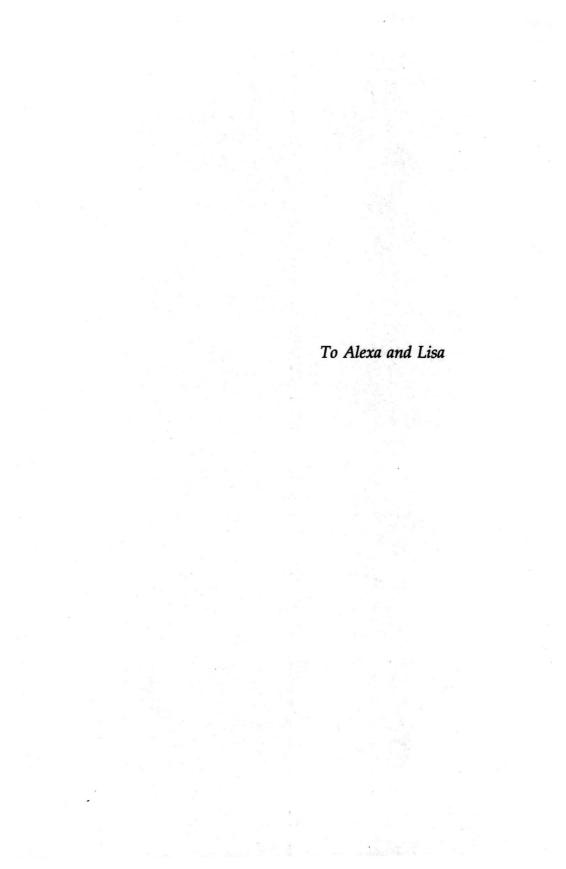
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Preface

Nuclear weapons have existed for only half a century, a very brief period by historical standards. In a sense, the human race is just becoming accustomed to their presence. Yet most of us have lived with nuclear weapons all our lives. The idea that not only could we die at any moment—this has been true for any given individual throughout history—but that everyone and everything we care about could be destroyed in a twinkling, must remain always frightening, however familiar it is.

Our merely living with nuclear weapons has not been sufficient to give us an understanding of their influence on world politics. It is of course a fallacy to believe that "big" causes must have "big" effects, but I believe that the fact that nuclear weapons could destroy the world has changed the way people think and the way nations behave. I also believe that a better understanding of their role can make the world safer. None of us can, nor should we, put the nightmare of nuclear holocaust out of our minds. Indeed, it is important that it be there if we are to understand that large-scale violence is no longer a viable tool of statecraft.

This book explores some of the effects of nuclear weapons on world politics, particularly on relations between the superpowers. Several of the chapters were written in response to invitations to address selected topics and have been extensively rewritten for publication here. Chapters 3 and 7 are new.

I have not discussed the consequences of the recent changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy, even though they may be the most important developments in world politics since 1945. Even if they fell within my area of expertise, they are simply too new and too rapidly changing to be analyzed here. Furthermore, I doubt that they will lead

to the abolition of nuclear weapons. And, as long as they do not, they will leave intact much of the framework this book presents. I also have said little about arms control because I think the underlying principles are those which operate in the more general arena of nuclear strategy and international politics. But the general perspective stressed by arms control infuses this book: what is important is not each side's unilateral decision on what arms to build, but rather the ways in which such decisions interact to produce an overall configuration.

I am grateful to my friends who have commented on drafts of these essays: Robert Art, Richard Betts, McGeorge Bundy, Joseph Grieco, Ole Holsti, Deborah Larson, Joshua Lederberg, Joseph Nye, George Quester, Edward Rhodes, John Ruggie, Glenn Snyder, Jack Snyder, and Marc Trachtenberg. Kay Scheuer and Holly Bailey of Cornell University Press and Joanne Ainsworth of the Guilford Group worked their usual magic on the manuscript. William Daugherty provided the index.

The Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University provided a stimulating home, and its staff typed endless versions of the manuscript with hardly a complaint. The research was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation to the Research Institute on International Change.

In ways they might not recognize—or approve—my students have contributed greatly to this book by their questions, arguments, and friendly skepticism. Although at times I thought classes might run more smoothly if they would only sit there and take notes, this book—not to mention the classes—has been greatly improved by their insights.

Chapter 1 is very loosely based on "The Nuclear Revolution and the Common Defense," published in *Political Science Quarterly*, 101, no. 5 (1986). A version of Chapter 2 appeared (under the same title) in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 9 (December 1986). Chapter 4 is a revision of "Morality and Nuclear Strategy," published in *International Ethics in the Nuclear Age*, ed. Robert Myers (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), sponsored by the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs. An abridgment of Chapter 5 appears in *Lurching toward the Brink*, ed. George Simpson (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1989). An earlier version of Chapter 6 was published by the Political Science Department of the University of Illinois at Urbana. I thank the editors and publishers concerned for permission to use this material.

Robert Jervis

The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution

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[1]

The Theory of the Nuclear Revolution

[After nuclear war, the] two sides would have neither powers, nor laws, nor cities, nor cultures, nor cradles, nor tombs.

-Charles de Gaulle, May 31, 1960

A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

—Joint statement of President Ronald Reagan and First

Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, November 21, 1985

CONTRADICTIONS AND PUZZLES

The most important points often are the simplest ones. No one can win an all-out nuclear war. While this statement is open to dispute, I maintain that it is correct and that its implications have not been fully appreciated. The odder implications are discussed in later chapters; here I want to present the underpinnings of the argument.

We need to explain a series of remarkable if familiar contradictions: the United States and the Soviet Union possess unprecedented military might, yet they cannot protect themselves; the absence of war between the great powers since 1945 coexists with unprecedented fear of total destruction; what the United States and the USSR threaten to do to one another during war would be suicidal, yet attempts to moderate these threats are often greeted as dangerous if not aggressive; the superpowers threaten each other with enormous devastation yet avoid serious provocations; levels of arms have varied greatly since 1945, and yet the basic outlines of the status quo have remained unchanged. We

I am grateful to McGeorge Bundy for the reference to and translation of de Gaulle's statement.

[1]

need to understand what nuclear weapons have done to world politics, yet the attempts to maintain familiar intellectual frameworks compound rather than alleviate the dilemmas. The key to solving these puzzles is an understanding of the transformation of the nature and sources of security in the nuclear era.

First let me explain some basic concepts, sketch the difference between military victory—which is no longer possible in a war between the superpowers—and political victory, which depends on the threat of war, and explain why the superpowers' nuclear arsenals provide greater protection for allies than is often believed. Parts of this discussion will be familiar to experts in the field. I will then treat the central claim of this book—that nuclear weapons have drastically altered statecraft—as a theory. That is, I will ask what consequences should follow if it is true and see whether international behavior since 1945 has been consistent with these theoretically generated expectations.

The difficulties in coming to grips with the implications of nuclear weapons are perhaps best epitomized by our inability to answer the straightforward question of whether these weapons have made the United States—and the world—more or less secure. The common reply—that nuclear weapons have both decreased the chance of world war and increased the destruction that would result were such a war to occur—is not a direct answer, although it may well be correct. Thus it is not a contradiction for public opinion to affirm simultaneously that nuclear war would mean annihilation and that nuclear weapons have served the cause of peace.¹

But evaluating this trade-off is so difficult that decision makers have made ambivalent if not inconsistent responses. In early 1949, five days after President Truman told a trusted adviser that "the atomic bomb was the mainstay and all he had; that the Russians would probably have taken over Europe a long time ago if it were not for that," he asked, "Wouldn't it be wonderful... if we could take [our atomic stockpile] and dump it into the sea?" President Eisenhower displayed the same contradictory attitudes. Early in his administration, he argued

^{1.} This position is presented as a contradiction by Daniel Yankelovich in *Voter Options on Nuclear Arms Policy* (New York: Public Agenda Foundation, and Providence, R.I.: Center for Foreign Policy Development, Brown University, 1984), p. 3.

^{2.} Quoted in David Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 2:466-73. In NSC-68, which Truman endorsed, it was also said that "it appears that it would be to the long-term advantage of the United States if atomic weapons were to be effectively eliminated from national peacetime armaments" (John Gaddis and Thomas Etzold, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy*, 1945–1950 [New York: Columbia University Press, 1978], p. 417).

that nuclear weapons were not different in kind from conventional ones. When discussing disarmament proposals in 1955 he also told his press secretary that "of course, the Reds were proposing to eliminate all atomic weapons, . . . which would leave them with the preponderance of military power in Europe."3 But when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said that of course everyone knew that because of the vast Soviet superiority in manpower, the United States could not agree to abolish nuclear weapons, Eisenhower vigorously dissented: According to the records of the National Security Council (NSC) meeting, "the President said that if he knew any way to abolish atomic weapons which would ensure the certainty that they would be abolished, he would be the very first to endorse it, regardless of any general disarmament. He explained that he was certain that with its great resources the United States would surely be able to whip the Soviet Union in any kind of war that had been fought in the past or any other kind of war than an atomic war."4 This was not an isolated outburst: the next day he said that "he would gladly accept nuclear disarmament [even without conventional disarmament] if he was sure he could get the genuine article.... He would gladly go back to the kind of warfare which was waged in 1941."5 The 1986 Reykjavik summit meeting called up the same ambivalence.

The difficulties stem in part from the fact that the trade-off between the chance of war and the consequence of war is an extremely painful one, the kind that people try to avoid facing.⁶ The ambivalence also may represent an instinctive recognition of the fact that nuclear weapons are very powerful in one sense but not in another. John Thibaut and Harold Kelley draw the general distinction between fate-control and behavior-control.⁷ As the terms indicate, the former is the ability to determine what happens to others, the latter is the ability to control their behavior. Both we and the Soviets have fate-control over the other, but it is far from clear how much this can translate into behavior-control. Indeed, the possession of nuclear weapons can decrease the state's freedom of action by increasing the suspicion with which it is viewed.

^{3.} Quoted in Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 246; for similar statements see pp. 153, 491.

^{4.} Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, vol. 2, National Security Affairs (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), pt. 2, p. 1469 (hereafter cited as FRUS).

^{5.} Ibid., pt. 1, p. 688.

^{6.} Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 128–42.

^{7.} John Thibaut and Harold Kelley, *The Social Psychology of Groups* (New York: Wiley, 1959), pp. 101–11.

India, China, and Israel may have decreased the chance of direct attack by developing nuclear weapons, but they have not increased their general political prestige or influence.

The Impossibility of Military Victory

President Reagan and First Secretary Gorbachev formally ratified what has long been understood: both sides (not to mention bystanders) would suffer so much in a total war that they both would lose. President Eisenhower recognized this reality, often giving vent to his exasperation with those who thought that military victory was possible. Even before the Soviet Union was capable of doing overwhelming damage to the United States, he noted the problems of postwar reconstruction. As he put it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff when they talked of a world war: "I want you to carry this question home with you: Gain such a victory [as would follow from a nuclear attack], and what do you do with it? Here would be a great area from the Elbe to Vladivostok . . . torn up and destroyed, without government, without its communications, just an area of starvation and disaster. I ask you what would the civilized world do about it? I repeat that there is no victory except through our imaginations."8 Later, when he considered Soviet retaliation, his concern was not with who would come out ahead. He told the critic of his disarmament policy that "even assuming that we could emerge from a global war today as the acknowledged victor, there would be a destruction in the country [such] that there would be no possibility of our exercising a representative free government for, I would say, two decades at the minimum."9 At an NSC meeting he asked, "What would we do with Russia, if we should win in a global war?" Indeed, "the only thing worse than losing a global war was winning one; . . . there would be no individual freedom after the next global war."10

As he continued to contemplate the growing Soviet arsenal, Eisenhower wrote to a friend: "We are rapidly getting to the point that no

^{8.} Ambrose, *Eisenhower the President*, p. 206. Similarly, at an NSC meeting Eisenhower mused about the difficulties of occupying Russia, which "would be far beyond the resources of the United States.... A totalitarian system was the only imaginable instrument by which Russia could be ruled for a considerable interval after the war" (*FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 636; also see ibid., pp. 639–41, 804).

^{9.} Quoted in Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 47.

^{10.} This is the paraphrase of Robert Cutler, Eisenhower's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 397. In public, however, Eisenhower reversed this formulation: he told a press conference on September 30, 1953, that "the only possible tragedy greater than winning a war would be losing it."

war can be won. War implies a contest; when you get to the point that contest is no longer involved and the outlook comes close to destruction of the enemy and suicide for ourselves—an outlook that neither side can ignore—then arguments as to the exact amount of available strength as compared to somebody else's are no longer the vital issues."11 Eisenhower's views were not unusual: others asked similar questions about what American war aims might be and the policy statements that tried to answer these questions are both few and inadequate.12 Eisenhower was not completely consistent. Indeed, in the course of one NSC meeting he said: "After the first exchange of thermonuclear blows...the United States would have to pick itself up from the floor and try to win through to a successful end." But later in the same meeting he declared that, "one thing he was dead sure: No one was going to be the winner in such a nuclear war. The destruction might be such that we might have ultimately to go back to bows and arrows."13

What is new about this world with nuclear weapons (or, to be more precise, mutual second-strike capability, where neither side can launch a first strike that is successful enough to prevent retaliation from the other) is not overkill, but mutual kill—the side that is "losing" the war as judged by various measures of military capability can inflict as much destruction on the side that is "winning" as the "winner" can on the "loser." Furthermore, the level of destruction would far surpass that accompanying previous wars. Even a decision maker who was willing to risk a crushing defeat for his own country might be restrained by the unimaginable loss of worldwide life and civilization. ¹⁵

^{11.} Dwight D. Eisenhower to Richard Simon, April 4, 1956, Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary, box 8, "Apr. 56 Misc (5)," Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.

^{12.} See the papers associated with NSC-20/4, "U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security," in FRUS, 1948, vol. 1, General: The United Nations (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), pt. 2, pp. 589–669; NSC-79, "United States and Allied War Objectives in the Event of Global War," FRUS, 1950, vol. 1, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 390–99. (also see the discussion on pp. 94–100, 197–200, 390–93). For the Eisenhower administration's attempt to deal with this problem, see FRUS, 1952–1954, vol. 2, pt. 1, pp. 379–434, 635–46. Also see David Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," International Security, 7, (Spring 1983), 13–14.

^{13.} Minutes of the 272d Meeting of the National Security Council, January 12, 1956, Ann Whitman File, NSC series, box 7, pp. 6, 13 (also see p. 3), Eisenhower Library.

^{14.} Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), chapter 1.

^{15.} The most recent and careful studies indicate that the environmental effects of nuclear war would be enormous, although not as cataclysmic as had been portrayed a

Nuclear weapons are different not only in the scale of destruction they can bring, but also in their speed. This is not to say that destruction would have to be carried out quickly. As I will discuss in later chapters, protracted or slow-motion wars of punishment are logical possibilities. But in the past, punishment had to be slow. Conventional bombing, blockades, and even poison gas simply could not extinguish all cities overnight. Both sides then knew that there would be time for bargaining during the war: momentary impulse or inadvertent escalation could not lead to mutual suicide. The possibility that all cities could be destroved within a period of hours, without any room for negotiations or second thoughts, can deter where the danger of total destruction would not if it had to be carried out a little bit at a time. In the latter case a state might be confident that its greater willingness to bear pain, its advantageous bargaining position, or its greater skill would permit it to prevail. But these assets could not prevent an all-out nuclear attack arising out of the adversary's planned strategy, the overwhelming emotion of its leaders, or its strategic forces escaping central control. 16

In the past, mutual vulnerability did not dominate and so conflict could be total. There could be wars without bargaining in which each side simply tried to reduce the other's military capabilities because the stronger side could win by destroying its adversary if need be. The former would pay some price for doing so, but it would not be prohibitive. Of course, few situations reached this extreme. As Paul Kecskemeti has shown, even World War II did not end in "unconditional surrender." The losers had some bargaining power, in part because it was understood that the defeated countries could not be ruled without at least a modicum of cooperation on their part. But the main stages of the conflict involved military battles in which each side tried to gain the upper hand. The side that surrendered or accepted unfavorable peace terms did so because it realized that if the conflict continued, it would fall further and further behind, eventually facing complete defeat.

Wars, even large-scale wars, often paid off for the winner. Sometimes

few years earlier. See Starley Thompson and Stephen Schneider, "Nuclear Winter Reappraised," Foreign Affairs, 64 (Summer 1986), 981–1005.

^{16.} As Schelling notes, "if cities could be destroyed indefinitely, but at a rate not exceeding one per week or one per day, or even one per hour, nobody could responsibly ignore the possibility that the war might be stopped before both sides ran out of ammunition or cities" (Arms and Influence, p. 163). For a comparison of nuclear bargaining with wars of attrition in which pain is inflicted only slowly, see George Quester, "Crises and the Unexpected," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 18 (Spring 1988), 701–19.

^{17.} Paul Kescskemeti, Strategic Surrender (New York: Atheneum, 1964).

the winner was simply better off militarily and politically after the war than before it. But even when this was not the case, as it was not for the European states in 1918 and 1945, the winners still were better off in having fought the war than they would have been had they made the concessions necessary to avoid it. (This was not true for czarist Russia because World War I destroyed the regime, although not the country.)

Mutual vulnerability has made a crucial difference in how we view war, but not everything has changed. In earlier eras waging war could be very costly even to the side that was winning; that victory was possible did not mean it was possible at an acceptable price. In addition, states did not have to believe that they could win in order rationally to decide to fight. If the gains of victory were high and the difference between losing a war and making the concessions necessary to avoid it were slight, even a small chance of victory could justify the decision to go to war. Futhermore, in many cases states fought even though they lacked any clear idea of how a conflict might be brought to a favorable conclusion. This situation was perhaps true for Germany and certainly for Great Britain in September 1939 and even more so for Great Britain in the period between the fall of France and the German invasion of Russia and for the Japanese when they attacked Pearl Harbor.¹⁸

What is new, however, is that the other side must cooperate if the state is not to be destroyed. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union can impose its will on the other by superior military power. Thus Bernard Brodie's famous sentences: "The writer... is not for the moment concerned about who will win the next war in which atomic bombs are used. Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose." ¹¹⁹ It might

^{18.} See, for example, David Reynolds, "Churchill and the British 'Decision' to Fight On in 1940: Right Policy, Wrong Reasons," in Richard Langhorne, ed., *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 147–67.

^{19.} Bernard Brodie et al., *The Absolute Weapon* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), p. 76. As Brodie and others later noted, it was really the development of much larger bombs, especially thermonuclear ones, that brought about the situation he foresaw in 1945. Winston Churchill put it eloquently in 1955: "There is an immense gulf between the atomic and the hydrogen bomb. The atomic bomb, with all its terrors, did not carry us outside the scope of human control or manageable events in thought or action, in peace or war. But [with the development of the H-bomb], the entire foundation of human affairs was revolutionized, and mankind placed in a situation both measureless and laden with doom." Interestingly enough, it was in this speech that Churchill voiced the