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The Nuclear Dilemma in American Strategic Thought

Robert E. Osgood

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For Elaine

Foreword

American attitudes toward world politics and particularly the use of military power were always close to the center of Robert E. Osgood's interests. His first major work, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations*, was a searching interpretative essay ~~on the evolution of the American outlook~~ toward the world during the half-century prior to World War II. It was a period of great change in the nation's international position. In analyzing the debates that attended this change, Professor Osgood traced the growth of political realism in the United States. He pointed out that an extraordinary transformation had occurred and that it had largely been the result of the fear of national insecurity. At the same time, he argued that although this fear had been the indispensable condition for the growth of political realism, it was not realism itself, and that, accordingly, the persistence of insecurity was no guarantee of the triumph of realism in foreign policy. Rather than promoting realism, insecurity might give rise to illusions quite as dangerous as those that in an earlier period resulted from the assurance of an exaggerated sense of security. Although a widespread political realism formed the indispensable balance wheel of a foreign policy that effectively responded to the nation's interests, there was no ready formula for achieving it, just as there was no final solution to the problem of determining the changing requirements of interest.

Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations was written at the beginning of the post-World War II period. Although it was clear that the United States would not revert to its

isolationist past, the habits and outlook formed during this past were still very much with us, and Osgood's effort was largely directed at countering their remaining influence. His appeal was to the nation's "own enlightened self-interest," the core of which was U.S. security. But if self-preservation constituted the core of interest, there still had to be a dimension of interest that went beyond a concern for the self. While appreciating that the nation could not be expected to support a policy requiring the sacrifice of blood and treasure unless it was shown that vital interest, narrowly defined, demanded such sacrifice, Osgood also appreciated and emphasized that the nation would never remain committed in the postwar world unless it was persuaded that something other and greater than self-preservation was at stake. The history of the United States' principal foreign policy since World War II—containment—bears out this prescient analysis. The "order" side of containment (that is, the side responding to conventional security interest) has never evoked the enthusiasm that, on occasion, the "justice" side of containment has. The latter is the side responding to the vision we hold of our greater role in the world as the champion of freedom. And it has not done so despite the fact that over the years U.S. power has responded more to the former than to the latter.

When *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* first appeared, the nuclear age was still in its infancy. World War II had shown what conventional weapons might do when used with little or no restraint. Given the power of nuclear weapons, the need to have force strictly subordinated to the controlling requirements of political reason became all the more apparent. The experience of the Korean War dramatized this need and indicated its promise. In *Limited War* Osgood wrote what was at the time perhaps the most noteworthy analysis of that promise. Later, in *Force, Order, and Justice* he took up the same central question of the role of force as an instrument of conflict and order among states and placed it in broad historical perspective. *Force, Order, and Justice* began and ended with the proposition that military power remained an indispensable instrument of conflict and order in international politics and

that nuclear weapons had not rendered it obsolete by depriving this power of its age-old functions.

The present book may be seen against the background of these earlier efforts. Since the end of World War II, the peace and security of the United States and its major allies have depended largely on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. Any weapon may, and generally does, have a deterrent effect. What is novel about nuclear weapons is not that they have this effect but that they do so to an extent previously unknown, and this because of the consequences expected to follow from their use. Nuclear deterrence is something new under the sun because of the scope and intensity of the expectations raised by strategies dependent on nuclear weapons. These expectations reflect the twin conviction that peace and security are largely dependent on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons and that the use of nuclear weapons would very likely lead to self-defeating destruction on a scale heretofore unknown.

The nuclear dilemma is the expression of this twin conviction that has given a distinctive quality to the postwar U.S. approach to military strategy. The history of U.S. strategic thought since World War II is largely the history of the various reactions to this dilemma. In these pages, Professor Osgood has examined the principal responses made to the nuclear dilemma and has done so with the critical insight and understanding that marked all of his writing.

Robert W. Tucker

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1

Military Strategy and Security in the Nuclear Era

THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC THOUGHT

In the period since World War II, the United States has encountered moral and strategic issues concerning the management of force in peacetime that are unique in its historical experience and novel in the history of international politics. At the core of these issues lies a dilemma—namely, the moral (as well as ethical) and strategic predicament of being unable to pursue one course of action without incurring the disadvantages of another.¹ It arises from the dependence of military security on nuclear weapons. This nuclear dilemma lurks in the background of every major military strategic choice and suffuses all the major strategic debates. The history of U.S. strategic thought can largely be comprehended as the story of how Americans have tried to cope with this dilemma by rejecting, abolishing, or mitigating it. This story not only illuminates the distinctive qualities of the U.S. approach to military strategy in the cold war, in all its ethical as well as expedient dimensions; it also tells us much about the moral and strategic issues of nuclear weapons that confront the whole world.

The nuclear dilemma is simply an expression of the momentous fact that the security and peace of the United States and its major allies depend heavily on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, and on the fact that this deterrent, if used, would very probably lead to self-defeating destruction and, possibly, an ecological catastrophe for much of civilization.

This dilemma plays a distinctively large role in U.S. strategic thought for several reasons.

1. The U.S. has the principal responsibility in the Western security community (including Japan) for deterring and constraining Soviet aggression overseas as well as against itself, and it controls the preponderant nuclear strength relevant to this end. This responsibility raises moral and expediential issues about the use of nuclear weapons against conventional aggression—issues of credibility and proportionality—that are particularly difficult to resolve and fraught with controversy.

2. These issues, though integrally related to highly technical military facts and judgments, are also fundamentally matters of political and psychological judgment—the natural province of social scientists rather than of the military profession.

3. The institutionalized U.S. tradition of challenging authority—especially military authority—gives civilian strategists a uniquely significant role in formulating and influencing policies concerning the use of armed force.

4. Because ethical principles and moral sensitivities have always played a central role in the nation's approach toward the use of force, as in the conduct of foreign policy in general, U.S. strategists have a special role to play in rationalizing and systematizing concepts of military security in terms of transcendent principles.

5. Strategies of deterrence are the principal means of supporting U.S. commitments through containment short of war. Strategies for the limitation of force promise to implement containment at a tolerable cost if force must be used. But because containment and the limitation of force (translated into strategic doctrine) rely on force to make force tolerable, they grate against the historic American aversion to managing and manipulating force, as opposed to renouncing it or unleashing it for victory. This tension stimulates doctrinal controversy and calls for an intellectual effort to resolve that controversy, an effort that civilian strategists have been well placed to undertake.

For these reasons, U.S. strategic thought has played the multifaceted role of rationalization, justification, criticism, and

advocacy with respect to issues raised by the nuclear dilemma. This role is comparable to that played by political scientists, historians, economists, and other intellectuals with respect to other kinds of foreign policy issues raised by the novel experience of managing power on a global scale in peacetime. U.S. strategists are the intermediaries between the esoteric science and art of developing and using armed force on the one hand and the familiar challenge of reconciling power and purpose in pursuit of the national interest abroad on the other. In this role they have been notably influential. At the same time, their role has increasingly spread out among scientists, journalists, theologians, politicians, and other groups as the nuclear dilemma has increasingly impinged on the mind and conscience of a broader public.

Of course, U.S. operational strategy is the product of many factors—budgetary, bureaucratic, political, and technological—other than strategic thought. Yet strategic thought has been far more than a rationalization of the net result of these other factors. It has exerted a major influence in shaping operational strategy, particularly because the professional military has constantly looked to changing theories of civilian strategists, who go in and out of office, for intellectual support in inter-service controversies and in the competition for defense funds. The relationship of strategic thought to force structures, targeting plans, procurement policies, and the like is seldom direct or logical. Yet military strategy, like economic theory, stands out as one of those few fields of intellectual inquiry that have had a pervasive influence on the policies and actions of the U.S. government.

The fact that a nuclear dilemma of profound moral significance lies at the core of U.S. strategic thought does not mean that strategists, in general, have been moral philosophers or even that they have been intensely or systematically concerned with the moral justification of their views. Most of them have been preoccupied with the practical or expedient aspects of the nuclear dilemma. Nevertheless, in the dominant strains of strategic thought, moral—especially humanitarian—concerns have been inextricably mixed with expedient reasoning; but such concerns have not been expressed merely for the purpose

of rationalizing expediency or for the sake of argument. Indeed, strategic reasoning must play a large part in moral reasoning because it is so central to the link between intentions and consequences. Regardless of whether it is explicitly conscious of the moral dimension of military strategy, U.S. strategic thought impinges on all the moral issues raised by the nuclear dilemma. Therefore, an analytical survey of this body of thought should be an exercise of moral inquiry as well as one of descriptive generalization.

APPROACHES TO MORAL REASONING

A moral inquiry concerning the nuclear dilemma must come to grips with the fact that nuclear deterrence inevitably incurs a serious moral cost, whether or not the cost is a reasonable price to pay for its benefits. The moral cost arises from the inordinate human destructive potential of nuclear weapons, the implicit or explicit intention to use the nuclear weapons that deterrence presupposes, the possibility that deterrence may fail, and the great and incalculable risk that any use of nuclear weapons will escalate beyond a level of civil destruction proportionate to reasonable political gain.

Moral reasoning, however, can reach quite different conclusions about the policy implications of the moral cost of deterrence in any particular situation. Philosophers and theologians have no special claim to wisdom in this matter, since so much of moral judgment depends on assumptions about material, psychological, and political factors that bear upon hypothetical contingencies. But, by the same token, neither are scientists, social scientists, or even strategists entitled to such a claim.

To cope with the nuclear dilemma, moral reasoning must first relate the overt use of force to deterrence. Military deterrence—the dissuasion of adversaries from taking a hostile action by convincing them that this will incur an unacceptable risk of a military counteraction that will prevent their anticipated gain or make it too costly—presupposes a willingness to use force, no matter how unlikely or unwanted one regards

this contingency. The most comprehensive and time-honored moral guidance for the resort to and overt use of force is found in the doctrine of just war. Because the actual employment of armed force is implicit in the threat or prospect of force, the doctrine of just war must be part of a doctrine of just deterrence.

These two objects of moral concern—detering aggression and supporting deterrence with force—converge, but they are not identical. The principles of just cause—the exhaustion of peaceful alternatives, authoritative political control, means-to-ends effectiveness, proportionality of means to ends, and the avoidance of unnecessary civil damage—are notoriously ambiguous and thus difficult to apply. They are also notoriously susceptible to self-interested distortion. Nevertheless, one would be hard-pressed to improve upon them as moral guidelines for the overt use of force, including nuclear force.

But the doctrine of just war does not satisfy all the requirements of a doctrine of just deterrence. It pertains to only one of three interrelated objectives of a doctrine of just deterrence. The first two are *making deterrence as effective as possible* and *minimizing its dependence on nuclear weapons*. The third objective, to which the principles of just war apply, is *limiting and controlling the use of force if deterrence should fail or be inapplicable*. In the pursuit of these three objectives, prudential requirements converge with the moral imperatives of military strategy.

These three objectives should complement each other—but, pursued to their extremes, they may conflict with one another. Thus, the most destructive and least controllable threatened response to Soviet aggression (e.g., Herman Kahn's proverbial Doomsday Machine)² might be the most effective deterrent; if it were carried out, however, its physical and human destruction would automatically exceed the limits of a rational response to even the most extreme provocation. Similarly, a defensive posture that reduced NATO's dependence on a nuclear response to zero, assuming that effective conventional resistance capabilities were provided, would eliminate the immediate risk that resistance to aggression might be suicidal; but it might also weaken deterrence and therefore make war

more likely. Strengthening NATO's conventional forces in order to avoid having to consider the early use of nuclear weapons might both strengthen nuclear deterrence and enhance the prospect of limiting and controlling a war for a reasonable negotiated purpose. It might strengthen deterrence by somewhat relieving allies of the terrible burden of resorting to nuclear war after failing to withstand a conventional blitzkrieg. It might facilitate the limitation and control of war by avoiding the terrible risk of nuclear escalation. But if the effort to strengthen conventional forces were interpreted principally as a sign of unwillingness to use nuclear weapons, and if the strengthened conventional forces were still incapable of preventing the Soviets from achieving a limited objective by conventional means, neither deterrence nor political control would be served. In reality, therefore, there are trade-offs in the advantages of pursuing one of the three objectives of just deterrence at the cost of another.

How one chooses to draw the optimal balance among these three objectives depends on judgments not only about their relative value but also about the feasibility, costs, and risks of implementing them. Thus, the extent to which one chooses to rely on the calculated limitation of military responses to aggression, whether conventional or nuclear, depends, among other things, on the feasibility of such limitation and the effects of the effort to implement this objective on arms competition and the defense budget.

Equally important, the balance one draws among these objectives will depend on one's risk-taking propensities and the assumption one makes about Soviet risk-taking propensities. More fundamentally still, the balance will depend on assumptions about the utility of force—whether overt, threatened, or implicit—in the nuclear age.

The history of U.S. strategic thought and the controversies related to it abundantly reflect the varying weights assigned to these three objectives. An analysis and synthesis of the principal competing patterns of strategic thought, therefore, will not only help explain this important aspect of postwar U.S. foreign policy and international politics but will also provide a data base, so to speak, for elaborating and refining the elements of a doctrine of just deterrence.

2

The Spectrum of Approaches to the Nuclear Dilemma

The nuclear dilemma is so fundamental to postwar military strategy and so pervasive a factor in U.S. strategic thought that one can categorize this body of thought in terms of divergent approaches to coping with it. Three principal approaches stand out: *rejection*, *abolition*, and *mitigation*. Inasmuch as they correspond to basic approaches to the moral dimension of the dilemma, they constitute the basis for moral as well as expedient reasoning. The followers of *rejection* approach military strategy and arms control as though the nuclear dilemma does not exist. The proponents of *abolition* are convinced that the nuclear dilemma is so dangerous and immoral that it must be eliminated through disarmament. The advocates of *mitigation* believe that the dilemma is unavoidable but must and can be alleviated through strategy and arms control.

These categories of approach to the nuclear dilemma are not just ideal types. They are distillations of the views of real people. Not every strategic thinker fits neatly into one category. Some have shifted from one category to another. Others combine elements of one approach, qualified by another. But these three approaches do correspond to basic orientations, advocated or opposed by real people who have defined the core of the principal strategic controversies in the United States.

The proponents of mitigating the dilemma—the mitigators—are the principal source of elaboration and refinement of U.S. strategic concepts. They have exerted the principal influence

on operational strategy. They also have been the principal generators and articulators of strategic controversies, which have turned upon two competing approaches to mitigation—let us call them *maximalist* and *minimalist* for lack of better words—which differ primarily in their respective emphases on the limitation and control of warfighting capabilities and on the unavoidable prospect of nuclear escalation leading to catastrophic damage. However, the rejectionists, as both operators and thinkers, have also exerted a major influence on strategic thought. They have helped provoke the mitigators to formulate their views and to apply them to operational strategy. And the abolitionists—who are more explicitly concerned with the moral than with the expediential dimension of the nuclear dilemma—have provided a continuing challenge to the theory and practice of mitigation. Indeed, this challenge has enlivened the strategic debate, pervaded official rhetoric, and occasionally sounded an echo in operational strategy, especially through the channel of arms control.

An examination of these three positions and how they have interacted in the controversies over the employment and restraint of force in the nuclear age will illuminate the entanglement of moral and expediential considerations in sufficient detail and complexity to enable us to return with enriched insights, in the final section of this study, to the challenge of outlining a doctrine of just deterrence.

THE REJECTIONISTS

The rejectionists reject the nuclear dilemma—whether deliberately or by indifference—in their approach to the management of force in the nuclear age. They see no moral or practical conflict between declaring and actually carrying out the strategy of deterrence, either because they are completely confident that the nuclear deterrent will work or because they have no practical or moral compunction about using nuclear weapons if deterrence fails. Among those who systematically and publicly articulate views about nuclear deterrence, there are now very few rejectionists—far fewer than during the first

two decades of the cold war. But in those decades they left a permanent mark on U.S. strategic thought and military policies, if only by the opposition they aroused among mitigators and abolitionists. Moreover, their basic approach to deterrence seems to linger on, inexplicitly, in the programs and polemics of some of those who are strategic do-ers rather than thinkers.

The Warwinners

At the outset of the cold war and up to the Kennedy-McNamara administration, the most important rejectionists among the experts and professionals were to be found in the Strategic Air Command (SAC). SAC single-mindedly pursued a militarily offensive strategy of using nuclear weapons—and using them first and soon against a Soviet conventional attack in Western Europe—in order to defeat the Soviet Union by destroying its military-industrial assets and, as a “bonus” resulting from the urban location of these assets, by destroying millions of Soviet citizens as well.³

As the Soviet Union gained an intercontinental nuclear capability, it became the rejectionists’ central objective not only to maintain the capacity to win a European war but also to deter a direct attack on the United States by maintaining the capacity to disarm the Soviets. As the number of nuclear bombs and the bombers and then missiles to deliver them increased, so did SAC’s targets, which came to include various military or counterforce targets (principally, nuclear weapons) as well as countervalue targets (that is, concentrations of people and economic life). But SAC leaders, such as General Curtis LeMay and General Thomas Powers, convinced of the decisive offensive capabilities of air power, continued to reject any effort to alter war plans so as to spare cities or in any way limit the infliction of maximum destruction with maximum speed. This group of rejectionists might be called the *warwinners* because they believed that effective deterrence had to be based on obliterating the USSR’s capacity to fight—no holds barred—in accordance with the most unrestricted methods of strategic bombing practiced in World War II.