Defence, deterrence and cultural lag

James M. Skelly

Ronald Reagan was right, although it wasn't apparent to me at the time. When he said, "I've become more deeply convinced that the human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence," he was trying to make American strategic military policy accord with the fundamental moral positions of the overwhelming majority of Americans and most other citizens of the world. In the speech of 23 March 1983 that gave birth to the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), Reagan, much to the consternation of many defence intellectuals and several of his own advisors, was attempting to break out of the moral and political conundrum that had been created by the strategy of nuclear deterrence. He asked, "Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them?" The common-sense answer of most individuals was an unequivocal, "Of course!" What normal person could deny that it would be better to defend than avenge, especially when so many of the lives lost through nuclear vengeance would be those of children and other innocents.

Reagan envisioned a post-deterrence world where "free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant retaliation to deter a Soviet attack" and where "we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies." Unfortunately, his own simple common-sense instincts could not prevail in a political environment where deterrence had provided overwhelming legitimacy to an extensive array of hardware and associated institutional structures. A defensive military orientation coupled with deterrent nuclear forces would undermine deterrence as a strategy. The reason was that the combination of the two resulted in a war-fighting capacity that inevitably would lead to a politically and militarily destabilizing arms race, or so the argument went.

Reagan's defence initiative therefore, initially resulted in contortions in the logic of strategic policy as administration officials tried to avoid choosing deterrence or defence as the core concept around which American military strategy and forces were organized. Reagan himself was clear about the choice a few days after the initial Star Wars speech, when he told the National Space Club, "We're not discussing a concept just to enhance deterrence, not just an addition to our offensive forces, but research to determine the feasibility of a non-nuclear defence system: a shield that could prevent nuclear weapons from reaching their targets." Casper Weinberger, then Secretary of Defence, tried to put the matter to rest by asserting that SDI would "enhance" deterrence, not undermine it,

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and Reagan himself in his 1988 State of the Union speech would ultimately be forced to conclude that SDI was a way to "offer the world a safer, more stable basis for deterrence." Nonetheless, the contradiction remained latent, and now in the past few years it has come to the fore again with the debate around National Missile Defence (NMD).

Deterrence forever

As we know, the choice of defence or deterrence was for a time in recent years rendered irrelevant as both the costs and technical unfeasibility of SDI undermined political and fiscal support for the initiative, while the end of the Cold War seemed to make strategic policy a peripheral concern. Nuclear weapons stockpiles were being reduced, forces were no longer on alert, and treaties and understandings with a Russia more benign than the former Soviet Union seemed set to define the 1990s. To the extent that any direct external threats to the United States might exist, there was a vague sense in the public mind that a reduced form of nuclear deterrence was acceptable—but only as the world made the transition to new security arrangements in which many people hoped nuclear weapons might play no role at all. Of course such a transition was not meant to be, and the United States Government began to make it clear that it had no intention of giving up nuclear weapons or their centrality to American political and military strategy. Nuclear deterrence would continue even though the threat upon which it was premised had become ever more ephemeral.

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In a statement to a Senate Subcommittee in early 1997, the Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, Walter Slocombe, made clear that "nuclear weapons continue to play a critical role in deterring aggression against the United States, its overseas forces, its allies and friends." The threats that would be deterred by American nuclear weapons were of two sorts. First, although Slocombe said that the United States did not regard Russia "as a potential military threat under its present, or any reasonably foreseeable government", he and his colleagues had concluded that, "We cannot be so certain of future Russian politics as to ignore the possibility that we could need again to deter the Russian nuclear force." For those who might think that Slocombe's argument was not particularly compelling because he was essentially saying that although Russia is not a threat in the foreseeable future, nuclear weapons were needed to deter it because it might be a threat in the unforeseeable future, he conjured up the second threat — the threat from so-called "rogue" states. Here Slocombe asserted that a survey of the list of such states with potential programmes for the production of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) leads one to conclude that nuclear weapons were a deterrent to threats that the scoundrel states might otherwise be tempted to make.

The naïve reader might ask exactly why deterrence of the sort Slocombe was talking about became so central to American policy and why it still seems necessary when the justification appears so thin in comparison to the past. After all, it is received wisdom that nuclear deterrence worked during the Cold War, and therefore perhaps Slocombe was right that it is still working in the new environment of threat and security. To explore this question, it is necessary to engage in a cursory review of the development of nuclear weapons and the theory of their use through non-use, or deterrence.

Nuclear weapons were the logical end point in the development of sophisticated new weapons systems by states in the late nineteenth century. As William McNeill has shown in *The Pursuit of Power*, the development of new weapons' technologies began to stall in the 1870s because the costs of R&D became prohibitive for private companies. Thus, when the British Admiralty took the lead

in developing the naval quick firing gun in the early 1880s, a precedent was established for direct state involvement in the development of ever-more technically advanced and destructive weapons systems. The Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb were the ultimate realization of this involvement in weapons' development. With the successful test of the bomb on 16 July 1945, the ultimate weapon of destruction had been created, and the world would never be the same.

Nuclear weapons and cultural lag

Following the use of atomic weapons against Japan at the end of the Second World War, great efforts were expended on understanding the implications of the bomb. How should one think about it? Many people — Curtis LeMay comes quickly to mind — considered the bomb as just another weapon, though with wondrously more destructive power. LeMay and others planned for pre-emptive or preventive war with the bomb as the centrepiece of their strategy during the late 1940s and into the 1950s. LeMay, as commander of the Strategic Air Command, apparently continued to plan for a first-strike preventive war against the Soviet Union even into the early 1960s, and attempted to provoke the Soviets during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 so that such a strike could be launched.

Others saw the bomb as unlike any other weapon, and therefore attempted to remove it from the arsenal of offensive weapons that the United States or any other nation could rely on. The Baruch Plan, for example, would have placed the bomb under international control. President Truman, who fostered the Baruch initiative, was among those most reluctant to continue to place the bomb in the United States offensive arsenal. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had left him with an abiding sense of the horrors of using atomic weapons. Henry Wallace recorded in his diary that "Truman said he had given orders to stop the atomic bombing. He said the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing, as he said, 'all those kids'."

In a discussion with David Lilienthal two years later, Truman also said "I don't think we ought to use this thing unless we absolutely have to. It is a terrible thing to order the use of something that is so terribly destructive beyond anything we have ever had. You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women, children and unarmed people, and not for military use. So we have to treat this differently from rifles and cannon and ordinary things like that."

Bernard Brodie however, sketched the outlines of a theory of the bomb early on that struck a middle ground between those who wanted to use it and those who wanted to give it up. Brodie's analysis would provide the core of what would become known as strategic nuclear deterrence. Essentially, like those who thought that it should be put under international control, Brodie argued that the bomb couldn't be used as offensive weapons had in the past, and that henceforth the purpose of the military was to avert war rather than engage in it. In arguing that the only viable function for atomic weapons was to threaten their use as a deterrent, Brodie indicated that the United States should "take all possible steps to assure that multilateral possession of the bomb should that prove inevitable, be attended by arrangements to make as nearly certain as possible that the aggressor who uses the bomb will have it used against him." In other words, in a bow to those who didn't want to give up the bomb, Brodie was saying keep it, but only threaten to use it.

Despite the constraints on the use of the bomb, it would be naïve to think that those who had associated themselves with the coercive power of the state might simply have given up nuclear weapons as some proposed at the end of the Second World War. As Stanley Kubrick demonstrated with the blackest of humour, there were too many people in key positions, like LeMay, who loved the bomb. If one reflects on it, this affection was quite understandable. After centuries of seeking the

ultimate in destructive weaponry, the United States was finally the nation that had created it. Of course they were not going to give it up then, or even now, though the possibilities of persuasion in this later regard are a bit more promising today than previously.

The choice in the first half-century of the bomb's life was quite simply between its use, as LeMay and others would have had it, or its non-use, as those who ultimately argued for deterrence wanted, despite their many confusions. Their confusions are instructive because they demonstrate that deterrence has functioned primarily as a transitional theory of nuclear weapons. From the moment its explosive potential was made manifest, a good number of people recognized that the introduction of this new mechanism would require profound adaptation at a cultural level. Deterrence helped to check the attitude of those who did not recognize the need for cultural adaptation — those who wanted to use the device as though it had not profoundly changed the culture of war and international politics. We should be thankful.

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In his seminal book on social change written in the early part of the twentieth century, William Ogburn assessed how American culture had adapted to the changes in material conditions wrought by the Industrial Revolution in the later half of the nineteenth century. He argued that the rapid change in material conditions had resulted in numerous examples of what he termed "cultural lag". Ogburn noted that although changes were occasioned in the adaptive culture when new technologies were introduced, the changes "do not synchronize exactly with the change in the material culture." Instead, he observed, "There is a lag which may last for varying lengths of time, sometimes indeed, for many years." During this period of maladjustment, Ogburn also noted that "the old adaptive culture ... hung over after the material conditions had changed," and that even though "it was being modified some as time went on" the modification was never sufficient "to meet the new conditions even approximately."

The process of adaptation to nuclear weapons has been going on now for over fifty years, but the old adaptive culture — "pre-atomic thinking", Bernard Brodie called it — still hangs on. To their credit, Bernard Baruch, Brodie and others rather quickly realized that nuclear weapons were going to require cultural adaptation. They did their best to prevent catastrophe of the sort that LeMay would have induced from his inability to see that nuclear weapons required such a profound adaptation — that they were not rifles and cannons. However, their efforts were at best half-measures. They forestalled catastrophe, but we are still lingering on the brink because deterrence did not allow a fundamental cultural adjustment to nuclear weapons.

Although it may have saved us from the hubris of LeMay and others, deterrence has brought about only a modification in the old adaptive culture. It therefore has been inadequate in helping us to adjust to the fundamentally new conditions that the introduction of nuclear weapons has wrought and, it can be argued, deterrence has now created an additional obstacle to that adjustment. Deterrence unfortunately continues to treat nuclear weapons like rifles and cannons, albeit powerful ones that we consequently keep locked up in the cupboard but still threaten to use if any one steps on the front porch.

Challenges to deterrence

A sampling of the diverse challenges that deterrence has faced over the years provide evidence that it is not adequate to overcoming the significant cultural lag nuclear weapons have engendered. Despite the web of rationality that Brodie and other analysts tried to weave in their elaboration of

strategic deterrence, its status as a transitional theory meant that it would be subject to attack both from those who wanted to return to the culture of the past, as well as those who saw it as forestalling a more complete cultural adaptation. In the 1950s, for example, deterrence as expressed in the policy of massive retaliation was attacked from within its own system of logic by the strategic analyst William Kaufmann. Kaufmann suggested that the policy lacked credibility since it could not deter small-scale aggression. The result of his and Maxwell Taylor's critique in *Uncertain Trumpet* was the build-up in conventional forces that ultimately went to ground in Viet Nam.

Similarly, deterrence inevitably led to destabilization of the very equilibrium in weapons that it was supposed to maintain because it meant "repeated stabilizations at increasingly higher levels", as Theodore Draper noted, thus fostering an arms race. The American shift to counterforce strategy in the mid-1970s provides an example of this paradox at work. Essentially, the argument that was made was that while the United States had been committed to deterrence as equilibrium, the Soviet Union was then seeking overwhelming superiority. Although the argument might have been that the Soviets were merely seeking to make their own deterrent credible, the subsequent American move toward counterforce weapons was justified as an effort to again make the American deterrent credible.

In a similar vein, Kenneth Waltz, again following the logic inherent in deterrence, has argued that nuclear proliferation may be a positive advance. "Peace," Waltz states, "has become the privilege of states having nuclear weapons, while wars have been fought mainly by those who lack them." Therefore, "the gradual spread of nuclear weapons is better than either no spread or rapid spread." If you accept the fundamental premise of nuclear deterrence, Waltz' position makes eminent sense.

Jonathan Schell, who is among those who think that deterrence has forestalled a more thorough cultural adaptation, plays out the logic of deterrence in a manner similar to Waltz, but with an opposite conclusion. Schell argues that deterrence is an obstacle to the abolition of nuclear weapons because it fosters proliferation. So much so that he thinks deterrence is a misnomer — it should instead be called "proliferance."

The continuing challenge of the American Catholic Bishops over the past twenty years lies in the fact that the bishops, unlike many others, did recognize that deterrence could only be justified as a transitional theory. In their 1983 pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace", the bishops quoted Pope John Paul II to the effect that, "In current conditions 'deterrence' based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable." Ten years later the bishops reaffirmed that "progressive disarmament" meant "a commitment to the elimination of nuclear weapons, not simply as an ideal, but as a concrete policy goal." In 1998 in response to the Clinton Administration's further institutionalization and reliance upon deterrence, as articulated by Walter Slocombe and others, seventy-five of the American bishops denounced deterrence unequivocally. In a public letter they stated, "Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further development of these horrendous weapons."

Choices: deterrence, defence and abolition

Given the many contentious responses to deterrence over the years, it is little wonder that policy-makers have regularly turned their attention to defence. The ABM initiative of the late 1960s and early 1970s, SDI, and now NMD have in varying ways held out hope of escaping from the conundrums associated with nuclear deterrence. If we want to overcome the profound cultural lag that remains evident in current policies surrounding nuclear weapons, it would seem clear that a

strong defensive posture brings us much closer to accomplishing that. However, and this is a big qualifier, if defence is chosen, deterrence must be scrapped and nuclear weapons eliminated as part of the arsenals of the states that possess them. Under no circumstances can "pre-atomic thinking" be reinforced by allowing nuclear deterrence to coexist with defensive systems. Extraordinary political will on the part of the nuclear weapon states' political elite will be necessary. There will have to be discussions of the missile defence "haves and have-nots", the implications of a partial defence system, the problems of decoys, etc. Deterrence advocates will use every possible theoretical weakness to justify continued adherence to the policy. We must be clear that those who maintain an attachment to nuclear weapons will use every excuse to hold on to as many as they can — and will be terrified to relinquish them completely, we should therefore expect ever more desperate claims as to why they are still needed.

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Undoubtedly, even if the United States were to give up nuclear weapons and deterrence and focus its strategic policy solely around defence, nuclear weapons will maintain a lingering presence in other parts of the world. Many of the other nuclear weapon states are sure to demonstrate their reluctance to give up this magnificent destructive power. On the international front, the United States will therefore need to engage in unprecedented diplomatic efforts to bring about compliance to a new treaty regime that bans the production, deployment and use of new systems, as well as the elimination of existing weapons. Sharing defensive systems will undoubtedly be part of such an agenda, and will be especially applicable to the potential nuclear hot spots in the Middle East and North East Asia, as well of course, in the continuing confrontation between India and Pakistan. We must remember that, even in a regional context, deterrence fosters proliferation.

The longer term goal must be to demonstrate the disutility of the current international security regime and the weapons that inform that regime. The lag in the culture of security must be overcome — in this regard, deterrence in the present, as well as missile defence in the future, is inadequate to that task. The likely threats in the medium term will not come from nuclear-tipped missiles, but from new weapons of mass destruction. As Richard Betts noted nearly three years ago, "Traditional deterrence will not stop a disgruntled group with no identifiable address from striking out at America," or anywhere else for that matter—the attack on the USS Cole is a profound example. The deeper lesson from groups such as Japan's Aum Shinrikyo, as Robert Lifton has argued, is that "weapons-centred projects take on an illusion of sanity" even in the hands of so-called 'stable' leaders when in fact it is merely a deep illusion.

It often seems that there is little hope that we will rid the world of nuclear weapons, but if we really want to step back from the brink, we all know that we cannot simply wish them away. Many of the political elites in the nuclear weapon states will continue to cling to the bomb — they really don't want to give it up. If missile defence can loosen that attachment, it makes sense to discuss it. At the same time however, we must recommit ourselves to the more profound adaptation necessary. As Freeman Dyson said in the concluding paragraph of *Weapons and Hope*, we need "a worldwide awakening of moral indignation pushing the governments and their military establishments to get rid of these weapons which in the long run endanger everybody and protect nobody."

Note

[1] Some of the perspectives in this article reflect a further development of ideas that Hugh Mehan, Charles Nathanson and I articulated in several previous works. These include "Nuclear discourse in the 1980s: the unravelling conventions

of the Cold War", of which we were all authors, published in *Discourse & Society*, 1990 (SAGE, London, Newbury Park and New Delhi) vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 133–65; "Reykjavik: The breach and repair of the Pure War Script", by Mehan and Skelly, published in *Multilingua*, 1988 (Mouton de Gruyter, Amsterdam) vol. 7, no. 1/2, pp. 35–66; and J Skelly, "Power/Knowledge: The Problems of Peace Research and the Peace Movement", published in *A Just Peace Through Global Transformation*, Chadwick Alger and Michael Stohl, eds., 1988 (Westview Press, Boulder, CO).