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REVIEW ESSAYS

IS DETERRENCE THE ONLY OPTION?

James J. Wirtz

Payne, Keith B. *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*. Fairfax, Va.: National Institute Press, 2008. 471pp. \$19

With a few brief exceptions, the concept of deterrence has guided U.S. nuclear policy since 1946, the year that Bernard Brodie noted that the purpose of militaries had changed from fighting to deterring wars. Nevertheless, a small but persistent group of deterrence pessimists remain skeptical about many of the policies prompted by this so-called nuclear revolution, especially the U.S. decision in the 1960s to abandon any serious effort at damage limitation by forgoing a missile-defense program. In their view, deterrence is an incredibly risky way to guarantee national survival, because it ultimately turns over decisions about national existence to one's opponents, who are assumed to be both rational and risk averse. In their view, it would be better to have the capacity to deny one's opponents the ability to attack in the first place than to rely on the threat of punishment in retaliation for aggressive behavior.

Written by the leading deterrence pessimist of our day, *The Great American Gamble* is the quintessential description of the downside of deterrence, especially efforts at nuclear deterrence undertaken when both parties in a conflict are

vulnerable to retaliation—a situation that came to be known during the Cold War as “mutual assured destruction.” Keith Payne remains an adherent of Herman Kahn's conception of deterrence—that a deterrent threat, especially one involving extended deterrence, is inherently more credible when it is based on a war-winning strategy and force structure,

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generally described as an extremely favorable advantage in damage-limitation capabilities. The most credible form of nuclear deterrence would amount to an ability to fight and win a nuclear war, in the sense that damage-limitation capabilities would keep the amount of death and destruction suffered in a nuclear exchange to acceptable levels. A robust, prompt hard-target-kill capability, backed up with active (missile) defenses and passive (civil) defenses, thus becomes critical to effective deterrence.

By contrast, Payne is critical of Thomas Schelling's notion of stable deterrence, based as it is on such notions as "the threat that leaves something to chance" and the merits of learning to live with mutual vulnerability. Schelling believed that mutual societal vulnerability (i.e., forgoing damage-limitation strategies) would increase arms-race and crisis stability, eliminating what he considered to be likely pathways to nuclear war. Although Payne's description of Schelling's work is disparaging more in tone than substance, his primary complaint about the Nobel laureate's effort is that it does not address the problem of deterrence failure. While Kahn holds out the prospect of damage limitation in the aftermath of a failure of deterrence, Schelling can only hope for the unlikely prospect that the ensuing nuclear exchange will end before Armageddon.

It is difficult to argue with Payne's logic: a war-winning arsenal is the best deterrent threat, and a robust damage-limitation capability would of course be good to have if deterrence failed. But advocacy of these sorts of strategies during the Cold War was an oddly nonstrategic way of looking at the Soviet-American nuclear standoff. U.S. policy makers decided they had to learn to live with societal vulnerability, because they believed that a meaningful damage-limitation capability was beyond their grasp once the Soviet arsenal reached a certain size. No one actually chose mutual vulnerability; it was a situation that emerged after U.S. officials abandoned the notion of preventive war to head off the Soviet nuclear menace. One thus might be forgiven for thinking that Schelling's Nobel Prize in economics was actually in *home* economics—that is, for devising a recipe for turning the sourest of all lemons into lemonade.

The Cold War is now over. Mutual assured destruction no longer characterizes the "nuclear balance" that exists between the United States and other governments and nonstate actors. In other words, Kahn's conception of deterrence is now more relevant to the strategic setting than it once was. It is therefore not surprising that Payne was a leading architect of the George W. Bush administration's response to this new threat—the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). The NPR proposed a new "strategic deterrent" that combined conventional precision-strike capabilities, new "boutique" nuclear weapons (e.g., low-yield earth-penetrating nuclear warheads), and missile defenses to deter, and if necessary defeat, these new opponents. Payne's advocacy of the NPR has gone hand in

hand with his repeated statements about the weaknesses of deterrence as a preferred strategy when facing today's rogues' gallery of terrorists, millenarians, dictators, and associated miscreants intent on arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, criticism of the NPR was immediate and overwhelming, if shallow—critics never admitted that its logic was sound and its policies coherent, or that concerns about arms-race and crisis instability were overblown when it came to deterring Iran, North Korea, or al-Qa'ida. Truth be told, Schelling's ideas had become accepted wisdom. Critics did not understand that the changing strategic setting had actually created the possibility for new strategic options.

The Great American Gamble is thus part manifesto, part history. It is a call to remember that deterrence is not the only option available to policy makers when they contemplate nuclear strategy, that a war-winning capability is the best deterrent, and that a robust damage-limitation capability will come in handy if deterrence fails. It also is a history of an idea that will not die, despite the fact that it has been twice defeated: first by Soviet capabilities and Schelling's ideas, and second by the total absence of any congressional or public support for the 2001 NPR.

Today, disarmament is the dominant trend in U.S. nuclear policy; nuclear modernization programs are virtually nonexistent, as operational forces suffer "glitches" produced by general inattention to detail. Payne's ideas are thus likely to strike contemporary readers as anachronistic. One can only hope the future confirms that judgment.