

PRESIDENTIAL CONTROL OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN LIMITED WAR SITUATIONS

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Since 6 August 1945, when the United States employed the first atomic device in warfare, President Truman's decision to employ that weapon has been both roundly praised and thoroughly condemned. It has been the subject of apologia by participants in the wartime decisionmaking process; it has been elucidated by the members of the scientific advisory committee appointed by President Roosevelt; and it has been defended by the most prominent statesmen of the century.¹

President Truman in his *Memoirs* has unequivocally claimed responsibility for the decision on the use of the bomb in these words: "The final decision to use the bomb was up to me. Let there be no mistake about it."²

Two decades later an interesting but somewhat alarming study contended that the decision to bomb Hiroshima

and Nagasaki was not really Harry Truman's. Writing in *Political Studies*, Daniel Snowman argued forcefully that a reasonable alternative was denied the Commander in Chief, that many limiting decisions had preceded the death of Franklin Roosevelt, that with only one exception all of the President's advisers favored use of the new weapon against Japanese cities, and that the circumstances and goals of the war and the investment of \$2 billion and 3 years of work—including that of some of the most talented scientists in the world—compelled an affirmative decision.³

In implying that Truman's political life demanded acquiescence in a decision which was in fact outside of his control, Mr. Snowman postulates a combination of circumstances which only the character of a Lincoln could defy. But the most disquieting element of

Snowman's monograph is his assertion that the factors which helped to produce the compliance of 1945 still prevail.⁴

The United States today continues to fight its longest war, enduring some of the most restrictive rules of engagement ever voluntarily endured by a major power. In our second major war since Hiroshima, the leaders of the Armed Forces of the United States find that their political superiors have done what General MacArthur said could not be done: instead of seeking complete victory, they have pursued limited goals.⁵ Some military leaders now believe our nuclear weapons have been needlessly but tightly shackled, with great detriment to our national interests. Prominent among these men is Gen. Curtis E. Lemay, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force.⁶

While both Mr. Snowman's contention and the fears of General Lemay may well be far from the truth of the situation today, they point up the need for investigation of the Presidential decisionmaking process regarding the use of nuclear weapons. Our Chief Executive should neither be so restricted by the lack of feasible options on the battlefield that he is forced to abandon the caution prescribed by his own judgment nor so limited by extraneous factors that he cannot authorize the use of nuclear weapons when he feels they must be employed.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the Presidential decisionmaking process in order to identify those forces which restrict the President's freedom of action on the nuclear question and, further, to determine whether or not freedom of choice actually remains with the Commander in Chief.

In this decade the element of choice for the use or nonuse of nuclear weapons does not demand close examination in the context of general nuclear war so much as in the limited or local war environment, for there has been

worldwide recognition of the irrationality of unrestricted thermonuclear bombardment under any circumstances. Many nuclear strategists and ordinary citizens alike doubt the wisdom of any bilateral or multilateral use of nuclear weapons. It is a common fear on both sides of the "Iron Curtain" that any employment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe will introduce an element of instability which could rapidly escalate to the intercontinental nuclear conflict equally feared by all. Thus it would appear more important to examine the more tempting decision to employ tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars outside the NATO/Warsaw Pact area. This is the decision which the President of the United States will most likely face in the periodic crises and protracted local wars likely to occur in the last third of the 20th century.

Before proceeding further, it would be useful to define the term "limited war." A number of recent books have provided excellent definitions of the "limited war" concept, one of which is Robert Osgood's, published in 1957:

... [a war] in which the belligerents restrict the purposes for which they fight to concrete, well-defined objectives that do not demand the utmost effort of which the belligerents are capable and that can be accommodated in a negotiated settlement. Generally speaking, a limited war actively involves only two (or very few) major belligerents in the fighting. The battle is confined to a local geographic area and directed against selected targets—primarily those of direct military importance. It demands of the belligerents only a fractional commitment of their human and physical resources. It permits their economic, social, and political patterns of existence to continue without serious disruption.⁷

This definition adequately describes the concept of limited war for the purposes of this paper.

Tactical nuclear weapons are more defiant of accurate description. Indeed, it has been said that it appears impossible to draw a sharp line between the two classes.⁸ This difficulty is not unrelated to the larger problem of escalation once nuclear weapons have been introduced to the battlefield. Neither the Joint Chiefs of Staff nor some of the best authors on nuclear warfare attempt to precisely define tactical nuclear weapons. Bernard Brodie maintains that even their employment does not clearly distinguish between the two categories. He has claimed that the weapons dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were as much tactical bombs as strategic, "since their yields were of a size now regarded as falling entirely within the tactical range."⁹

Any attempt at quantification of the parameters of tactical nuclear weapons can only be a very rough approximation and may be quickly rendered obsolete by virtue of another generation of weaponry. Therefore, at the risk of arbitrariness and in disagreement with Brodie, the following functional definition by Glenn H. Snyder will be accepted: "... tactical nuclear weapons are short-range weapons of relatively low explosive power, deployed on or near the battlefield area, to be used for striking at military targets in the combat area or directly behind it."¹⁰

While the above definitions are general enough to apply to most competitive situations between a major nuclear power and the agent or proxy of another major nuclear power, direct confrontations of two major nuclear powers simply cannot be categorized in this manner. By a process of formal alliance and repeated diplomatic pronouncements, the United States has defined our interest in NATO as "vital." An attack by the Warsaw Pact nations upon our European allies would be

regarded almost as an attack upon the United States itself. This presently unique situation thus defies the definitions and considerations of this paper. A different set of rules applies. The ability of either side to restrict any battlefield in Europe to "limited war" or to avoid rapid escalation to general nuclear war, following the use of tactical nuclear weapons is seriously questioned by even the most optimistic strategists. In the future, confrontations with another growing nuclear force, that of the People's Republic of China, may also defy the stipulations of limited war. But for now, the one exception contrary to the "rules" of limited war and which, therefore, is not considered within the purview of this paper, is the NATO/Warsaw Pact competition in Europe. With that single exception we will proceed to look at the forces which impinge upon the President in arriving at his decision on the use of nuclear weapons.

Advisers, Consenters and Dissenters.

A European, commenting on nuclear strategy and deterrence in NATO, once claimed that what really mattered was not so much to have a finger on the nuclear trigger, but rather "to participate fully in the formulation of ideas, policy and strategy that together make up the doctrine on which the decision of the American President must depend."¹¹ It is this process of the formulation of nuclear doctrine which we shall now examine in order to determine if the President is a captive of the political system which he heads or a free agent with full power to employ or not employ nuclear weapons.

Any President's decision on the use of nuclear weapons should be conditioned by many years of experience in Government. Hopefully, the individual strategic lenses he wears will be carefully ground by extensive contact with the more relevant theories of deterrence and with an intimate knowledge of the

game of practical international politics. Even our more well-prepared Presidents, however, have usually been better trained for the domestic arena through many years of campaigning and politicking. Further, there are practical limits to any one man's preparation for all the decisions referred to a President for final resolution. The Commander in Chief must rely to some extent, on the decisions of his predecessors and the options presented by his advisers.

One might possibly assume that preeminent among these advisers would be the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the large staffs supporting them. However, this is not true. The most significant structural evidence of the existing lack of appreciation for the military viewpoint is the absence of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs from the statutory membership of the National Security Council. Although his opinions may be presented personally upon invitation to NSC meetings or through the membership on the NSC of the Secretary of Defense, his presence is not required by law.

One need only examine the recent literature on Presidential politics and foreign affairs to find repeated references to Presidential mistrust of military advice on the use of nuclear weapons since 1945. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson in recalling the outspoken, public advice from the Defense Establishment on employment of the atomic bomb during the Korean war wrote:

In August, Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews in a speech in Boston called for preventive war. He was made Ambassador to Ireland. Then General Orville Anderson, Commandant of the Air War College, announced that the Air Force, equipped and ready, only awaited orders to drop its bombs on Moscow. He was retired.¹²

The doubts of another administration in another decade were reflected in Bobby Kennedy's book on the Cuban missile crisis published after his own death. In *Thirteen Days*, he wrote of JFK's impressions on the military advice received:

But he was distressed that the representatives with whom he met, with the notable exception of General Taylor, seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of the steps they suggested. . . . On that fateful Sunday morning when the Russians answered they were withdrawing their missiles, it was suggested by one high military advisor that we attack Monday in any case. . . . President Kennedy was disturbed by this inability to look beyond the limited military field. When we talked about this later he said we had to remember they were trained to fight and wage war—that was their life. Perhaps we would feel more concerned if they were always opposed to using arms or military means—for if they would not be willing, who would be? But this experience pointed out for us all the importance of civilian direction and control and the importance of raising probing questions to military recommendations.¹³

While this last statement demonstrates the basic skepticism among political leaders for military solutions, at the same time it also reveals a respect for the duty of the Joint Chiefs to "tell it like it is," to report the military situation as military men, and after that for the political leaders to make the political decisions and stand responsible for them.

On the nuclear issue many conflicting positions have been taken by high-ranking men in uniform. For every

one who would recommend the use of nuclear weapons in limited war, there has been another like Vice Adm. Charles E. "Cat" Brown, former Commander, 6th Fleet, who publicly stated: "I have no faith in so-called controlled use of atomic weapons. . . . I would not recommend the use of atomic weapons, no matter how small, when both sides have the power to destroy the world." Admiral Brown added that he did not believe there was any dependable distinction between tactical, or localized and restricted targets or situations, and strategic or unlimited situations.¹⁴

It often happens that Presidents will, in times of crisis, turn for advice not to the military, but to a group of Americans not always respectfully referred to as "the intellectuals." Since World War II the number of people outside the Military Establishment professionally engaged in the study of defense policy has grown from a handful to hundreds.¹⁵ The President of the United States can now choose among defense intellectuals from research corporations and campuses for alternative sources of advice. The growth of "think tanks," such as the Rand Corporation, the Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Hudson Institute, has been more than matched by the growth of self-styled institutes that have appeared on the campuses of the finest universities in the country. These academicians have had a strong impact on the formulation of policy in Washington through their writings and consultative services.

The "McNamara phenomenon" introduced a group of these intellectuals called "the whiz kids," and it would be politically naive not to recognize that this element is here to stay. The military services should carefully note—as one professional White House observer has noted—that the young Ph.D.'s who compose this group have been found quite useful. They still hold key positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense

and the burgeoning staff of the National Security Council.¹⁶

It is very important to remember the influence of such advisers on the formulation of strategy and in crisis management. Their background briefings and policy papers provide the intellectual blinders through which any President will view a crisis.

Although these "defense intellectuals" can be found in any number of agencies from OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense) to OEP (Office of Emergency Preparedness), those who are closest to the President will have greatest influence. The "President's Men" serve a most valuable function. Their ability to advise the President without reference to bureaucratic procedures or competitions will always encourage Presidential trust in a small group of able men. From one administration to another, their collective name may change—for example JFK's "EXCOM" and LBJ's "Tuesday Lunch"—but their function will remain the same. The composition of this group may be virtually the same as the National Security Council or may include few of those positions, depending on the style of the President. He can use the NSC as little or as much as he wishes. He is solely responsible for determining what policy matters will be handled within its framework.¹⁷ It is for this reason that the President can and should be held accountable for his decisions. Though the system he uses may limit the options or advice that are presented to him, it is the President himself who determines his working environment.¹⁸ This dominance of the personality of one man disturbed political scientists in the years before nuclear power and now generates even more concern. In 1941 Edwin Corwin of Princeton expressed fear that the Presidency had become dangerously personalized in two ways:

... first, that the leadership which it affords is dependent altogether on the accident of personality against which our haphazard method of selecting presidents offers no guarantee; and, secondly, that there is no governmental body which can be relied upon to give the President independent advice and which he is nevertheless bound to consult.¹⁹

More recently, Henry Steele Commager expressed his views on Presidential power from a different aspect:

... the possession of power encourages and even creates conditions which seem to require its use, and ... the greater and more conclusive the power the stronger the argument for its use. Those who possess authority want to exercise it: children, teachers, bosses, bureaucrats, even soldiers and statesmen. ... Men who possess power think it a shame to let power go to waste and sometimes, perhaps unconsciously, they manufacture situations in which it must be used. ... All this was dangerous but not intolerable in the pre-atomic age; it is no longer tolerable.²⁰

All the foregoing might suggest that the President has complete freedom, after all the advice is in, to use or not to use the nuclear weapons under his command. Such a conclusion would be erroneous. For as one experienced White House adviser has commented, "[it] is clear ... that a President's authority is not as great as his responsibility and that what is desirable is always limited by what is possible or permissible."²¹

It would be foolish for a President to ignore the opposition and limitations he faces outside the executive branch. The greatest check on the President's power

is the Congress. Yet it has been in the field of foreign affairs and strategy-making where Congress, at least until the late 1960's, showed its greatest weakness. The few Congressmen who have been experts in defense policy have acted chiefly as lobbyists with the executive branch. Instead of seeking strength in Congress for their point of view, most have used their resources to get a hearing with the President.²²

One study, by James Robinson, in which he tabulates foreign policy and defense issues from the late 1930's to 1961, shows dominant influence by Congress in only one case out of seven, the 1954 decision not to intervene with armed force (some say including nuclear weapons) in Indochina.²³ That one decision symbolizes for Congress today a state of affairs which it hopes to achieve in the near future.

According to Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post*, certain congressional leaders were invited in 1954 to the State Department to consider a joint resolution to be presented to Congress which would permit the use of air and naval power in Indochina. Two Senators are reported to have asked questions of the briefers. First, Senator Clements asked whether the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had the support of his colleagues and was told that none of the other chiefs approved. Then Senator Lyndon B. Johnson asked whether any U.S. allies had been consulted and was told they had not been. Both answers were unsatisfactory, and the resolution was never referred to the full Congress for consideration.²⁴ It is significant even in this one case of effective congressional persuasion that, of the military, Admiral Radford stood alone in defense of the proposed course of action, and our allies had not yet concurred.

Parenthetically, General Ridgway's comments on this episode, written in 1956, include, among other things, this relevant statement:

... that same old delusive idea was advanced—that we could do things the cheap and easy way, by going into Indo-China with air and naval forces alone. To me this had an ominous ring. For I felt sure that if we committed air and naval power to that area, we would have to follow them immediately with ground forces in support.

I also knew that none of those advocating such a step had any accurate idea what such an operation would cost in blood and money and national effort.²⁵

It is also interesting to look back at the Cuban missile crisis to find Senators Richard B. Russell and J. William Fulbright arguing forcefully, after being briefed on the action contemplated by the administration, that blockade was not a strong enough course.²⁶

Other instances of congressional weakness could be recited, ad nauseum. The situation has not changed in Vietnam. Congress and congressional committees have been singularly ineffective in either forcing the administration to apply "the force that is required" to the bombing of the North "to see the job through," or to require the rapid withdrawal of our troops by any specific deadline.²⁷ When the executive branch makes up its collective and individual mind to do something in international affairs, it still appears that Congress is unable to successfully oppose it.

Domestic public opinion does have some effect on the decision to use nuclear weapons. Although the executive branch, especially during the Eisenhower years, has on occasion threatened their use rather subtly without suffering at the polls, the irreparable damage incurred when a candidate is effectively labeled "nuke-happy" is a lesson which will not be forgotten by presidential candidates for years to come. This political fact of life was

recognized early in the 1964 campaign. Said *Time* magazine: "While Goldwater vehemently protests that he is not nuke-happy, it is this reputation that is ruining his chances for election. Unless and until he can rid himself of the image, he hasn't a hope of entering the White House."²⁸ Whether such a campaign prohibition appreciably affects Presidential decisions once in office is probably known only by the office-holders themselves. Certainly there have been outstanding demonstrations of political independence by Presidents not faced with reelection. Harry Truman faced a strong reaction in his handling of General MacArthur and his acceptance of limited goals in Korea; Lyndon Johnson is said to have acquiesced in a "process of national impeachment" in deciding not to run for reelection.²⁹ While pressures from American public opinion would not restrain an American President in a sudden and serious emergency, certainly they would have some restrictive effect on the decision for a first use of nuclear weapons against a nonnuclear enemy, such as we have opposed in Korea and Vietnam.

The words of Jefferson's caution to pay "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," still is valid today. Our allies will certainly influence any decision to use or not use nuclear weapons. World public opinion also will have some measure of influence on the President.

In late 1950 there occurred a demonstration of close interaction among the members of the NATO alliance upon the U.S. prosecution of the Korean war. When Harry Truman hinted on 30 November that, if necessary, the atomic bomb would be used in Korea, not even a tactful "clarification" in a press release later the same day could muffle the reaction in Europe. Two days later the Prime Ministers of France and Great Britain left for Washington to communicate their concern.³⁰

President Eisenhower also responded to British pressures on the matter of

Quemoy and Matsu in 1957. When artillery pieces capable of firing nuclear weapons were transported to Quemoy, the message was not lost on the mainland Chinese. Their shelling of the island dropped off precipitously.³¹ But the message was also received in Great Britain, and Harold Macmillan was quick to point out, quoting Winston Churchill's statement during the 1954-1955 crisis: "A war to keep the coastal islands for Chiang would not be defensible" in Britain.³² Eisenhower also noted in his memoirs: "The use of even small atomic bombs could scarcely fail to result, for a while, in a worldwide feeling of revulsion against the United States, a feeling which might be lessened if these relatively small weapons were used solely against military installations minimizing fallout and civilian casualties."³³

From the foregoing it is reasonable to conclude that, on the nuclear issue, the President is responsive to many pressures from many quarters: Congress, public opinion, our allies, and different voices within the administration. He can undoubtedly be influenced in his decision, but that is not the same as controlling it. He may have less than perfect freedom because of these pressures, but they by no means preempt his authority. He will always have two options: to use or not to use nuclear weapons. In a crisis situation, when the need for such weapons is greatest, he will have the ability to choose either option.

The Influence of Strategy. "The attractiveness of limited war as an alternative to total war," Brodie has written, "starts from the fact that as a matter of national policy we have conclusively forsworn preventive war."³⁴ This policy may be questioned by some of our more extreme "hawks," but we should consider briefly the comment of General Ridgway on the efficacy of the bomb as a tool of war on the Asian Continent:

On this enormous land mass true victory in war could only be obtained by defeating the enemy's armed forces, destroying his hope for victory and his will to resist, and establishing control over his land and people. Mass destruction of his industrial resources is only one way to neutralize his capacity to wage war. Such destruction may not destroy his will to resist; it may strengthen his determination. It may have but little effect initially on his forces in the field. It establishes no ultimate control over his land.

Furthermore, to my mind, such mass destruction is repugnant to the ideals of a Christian nation. It is incompatible with the basic aim of the free world in war which is to win a just and lasting peace. Lasting peace can only be won by changing the defeated aggressor into a constructive member of the society of free nations.³⁵

It is to be hoped that these feelings are shared not only by our own national leaders, but also by the national leaders of our opponents. If the enemy first resorts to the use of nuclear weapons, our option to refrain from similar use is almost certainly foreclosed. It is inconceivable to this writer that any President could resist the imperative to retaliate.

Several circumstances might encourage a President to consider the use of nuclear weapons when his own better judgment dictated otherwise. Any man faced with responsibility for a large-scale local defeat, a loss of "face," prestige, national honor, and the lives of "American boys" may well conclude that the attendant risks of escalation are now less important. This situation is not without historical precedent. In late 1950 American troops in Korea were threatened with expulsion from the

peninsula unless reinforcements soon arrived to bolster their defenses or a political settlement could be achieved with the North Koreans. Here the demands of military necessity could have forcefully argued for the use of nuclear weapons. A Pusan evacuation might have ended a disastrous campaign. Yet the extremity of that situation still did not guarantee that nuclear authorization would be forthcoming.

We may not necessarily be correct in assuming the enemy will again recklessly push us to the wall in the future. In this regard we must heed the example of President Kennedy who, in the events of October 1962, cautioned: "We don't want to push [Khrushchev] to a precipitous action—give him time to consider. I don't want to put him in a corner from which he cannot escape."³⁶ Likewise, the autocrats of Soviet Russia and Cuba may have learned an important lesson from the same experience. As Schelling has pointed out, they may have come to realize, in the wake of their underestimation of the U.S. reaction to the crisis, that "however peaceable the President may want to be, there were political limits to his patience."³⁷

Another common reason favoring the use of tactical nuclear weapons is their "cost effectiveness." By now the price of nuclear weapons is less than the cost of high explosive weapons of equivalent yield and effectiveness.³⁸ More relevant is the fact that tens of thousands of tactical nuclear devices are already "paid for" and stockpiled. American generals have claimed that this reason alone dictates the use of such economical means.³⁹ Any such urging ignores the considerations of the increased costs in human and material resources resulting from the higher levels of destruction obtainable through nuclear warfare. The availability of the cheap nuclear weapons to many states argues against a cost-effective nuclear strategy.

There is no question of the necessity for tactical nuclear weapons in our

arsenal. They will always serve, just as our strategic ICBM's do, as deterrents to blackmail by any nuclear-armed enemy. They have been and are being used to physically define our most vital interests in Europe. They will always provide the nuclear umbrella under which we can meet limited aggressions with conventional force.

There are many valid reasons for refraining from the first use of nuclear weapons. Perhaps the most obvious brake is acknowledgment that "the moment we start visualizing them being used reciprocally, their use ceases to look overwhelmingly advantageous to us."⁴⁰ Nuclear capabilities may proliferate, and it is not inconceivable that nuclear arms will someday be made available to many smaller states. In these circumstances it would be unwise to "break the ice" by employing nuclear weapons for a nonvital purpose.

In *The Year 2000*, Herman Kahn contends that as many as 50 countries may have access to nuclear weapons.⁴¹ Long before that time the Chinese People's Republic will develop and brandish tactical nuclear weapons. Their behavior with respect to their small neighbors on the "rim of Asia" will be in part conditioned by the previous performance of other nuclear powers.

An observation of "local wars" indicates that fanatical local leaders often are determined to achieve their own political goals with little regard for the controls and agreements of the Great Powers. The very obvious conclusion is that "indigenous self-restraint cannot always be counted on to keep local conflicts either local or limited."⁴² The dangers that will accrue when and if these leaders possess crude nuclear weapons are obvious.

Also restraining the President is the tradition of nonuse which has grown and is growing. Each year the "fire-break" between conventional and nuclear weapons becomes more difficult to cross. One proponent of the

“firebreak” theory, Thomas Schelling, maintains that upon the first use of nuclears the participants will have moved out of the realm of the “tactical” into the highest levels of strategic bargaining.⁴³ He cautions:

This is not an event to be squandered on an unworthy military objective. The first nuclear detonation can convey a message of utmost seriousness; it may be a unique means of communication in a moment of unusual gravity. To degrade the signal in advance, to depreciate the currency, to erode gradually a tradition that might someday be shattered with diplomatic effect, to vulgarize weapons that have acquired a transcendent status, and to demote nuclear weapons to the status of merely efficient artillery, may be to waste an enormous asset of last resort.⁴⁴

The restrictive factors listed above would seem to weigh more heavily on the President than the factors which encourage tactical nuclear warfare. The capital investment and cost-effectiveness arguments have been set aside in both major limited wars in which we have been engaged, as well as in numerous lesser engagements. During this time, the nuclear capabilities of both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China have grown. Now the hazards of engaging the proxies of these two Communist powers in a bipolar nuclear confrontation are increased. If the reasons for avoiding the use of nuclear weapons were compelling in the past, they are, therefore, even more compelling now.

Past Presidential Decisions. Strategic planners have voiced concern over the question of whether political leaders would have the necessary will and determination to use nuclear weapons in

situations where they were required. One man who confounds such blanket indictments is Harry Truman. With no well-defined nuclear strategy to consult and little time for reflection on the subject, he made the decision to drop atomic weapons on two Japanese cities. Yet, when American troops were committed to combat in Korea, the same man used the utmost restraint even when his forces were being badly beaten.

In criticizing the theory of “massive retaliation,” General Taylor reviews this decision, noting that, even though the United States had a virtual monopoly of nuclear weapons, “for reasons sufficient unto our responsible leaders at the time,” the United States chose to fight a limited war for limited objectives. He also commented that “this was, and still is, a hard fact for many military polemicists to swallow.”⁴⁵

Among them was Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin, who wrote in retirement:

... when the Korean situation broke and the prospects of the defeat of the 8th Army were real and compelling, General Nichols and I... urged... that we use nuclear weapons against the North Korean Forces. It would have been militarily inexcusable to allow the 8th Army to be destroyed without even using the most powerful weapons in our arsenal. Yet we almost did so!... The situation in the summer of 1950 offered us a number of well worthwhile tactical nuclear targets if we had the moral courage to make the decision to use them.⁴⁶

Harry Truman had certainly demonstrated the requisite “moral courage” in the past. And in a careful analysis of the Korean case, Bernard Brodie documented four good reasons why Truman declined their use this time. They were: (1) the Joint Chiefs of Staff and civilian

policymakers believed that the Korean war was a feint by the Soviets for the principal threat which would come later in Europe; (2) local Air Force commanders reported that there were no suitable targets for atomic weapons in Korea; (3) our allies were strongly opposed to the use of atomic weapons in Korea; and (4) we also feared the retaliation of the Soviets, with their small stock of atomic weapons, against Pusan or targets in Japan.⁴⁷

When we consider the public sentiment in favor of the "old soldier," MacArthur, it might be said that the Man from Independence earned that title and demonstrated greater moral courage by desisting from the use of the atomic bomb in Korea. The full measure of his fortitude can only be appreciated when one considers the restraint the administration was contemplating. General Collins writes of the concern of the British in the conference of December 1950, previously referred to, and the resulting agreement:

In the final conclusions of the conferees it was agreed that a cease-fire and peaceful solution of the conflict were desirable in the immediate future, if they could be secured on honorable terms. However, such a solution would not be bartered with the Chinese Communists in exchange for our withdrawing protection from Formosa or Indo-China. If no solution could be obtained, the American and British troops would fight on in Korea *unless they were forced out*. The Secretary of State so informed General MacArthur. (Emphasis added)⁴⁸

In the famous press statement which prompted the allied conference, Truman had hinted that, now that the Communist Chinese were in the Korean war, he might use nuclear weapons. In the uproar that followed, the White House

released a second statement designed to correct the situation: "... by law, only the President can authorize the use of the atom bomb and no such authorization has been given."⁴⁹

President Truman had revealed his attitude toward nuclear weapons in previous statements. "You have to understand that this isn't a military weapon" he said firmly, "so we have got to treat this differently from rifles and cannon. . . ."⁵⁰

President Eisenhower, on the other hand, has been held up as an adherent to the philosophy that nuclear weapons ought to be used like artillery, on the basis of efficiency.⁵¹ Some would doubt, however, that these were his true feelings and cite his willingness to negotiate the suspension of nuclear testing as clear evidence that he was influenced by the psychological and symbolic status of nuclear weapons.⁵²

But it was in this basic difference of attitudes, real or posed, that the nuclear issue first became a political football in the 1952 election. Prior to the Republican Convention, Ike had seen no easy way to end the war. On 5 June he declared: "I do not believe that in the present situation there is any clean-cut answer to bringing the Korean War to a successful conclusion."⁵³ Two weeks later, when meeting with the delegations from Oregon and Arizona, he refused to advocate escalation of the war. He warned the delegates that seeking a military victory on the peninsula would mean risking a general war.⁵⁴ In thus stating his position, General Eisenhower broke publicly with the MacArthur-Taft strategy and that wing of the Republican Party which had been berating the Democratic administration's limited war philosophy.⁵⁵

Yet when he became President, Ike's threat to widen the war and use atomic weapons was credited with being the most important element in improving armistice negotiations.⁵⁶ It was this willingness to threaten the use of

nuclear weapons which also turned the tide at Quemoy in 1958. After three nuclear-capable 8-inch howitzers were brought ashore on the coastal island, the Chinese rescinded their test of the will of the United States.⁵⁷ Likewise in Korea in 1958, after similar capabilities were introduced there by the U.S. Army, Chinese troops withdrew from North Korea.⁵⁸

To point to such successes is not to impute recklessness to the Eisenhower-Dulles game of brinkmanship. While Ike threatened the use of nuclear weapons, he was fully aware of the asymmetry of his adversary's arsenal. And his other moves demonstrated a healthy respect for the essential difference between conventional and nuclear weapons. It is significant that during the Lebanon landing in 1958 the U.S. Army had an Honest John rocket aloft off Beirut but was not allowed to land it because it could fire an atomic warhead as well as a conventional one.⁵⁹

In the struggle over Quemoy, Ike and Dulles had prepared a memo for the record which considered the options short of tactical nuclear weapons. In part, it read:

If the Communists, acting on the supposition that we will not actively intervene, seek to take Quemoy by assault... there might be a period between the beginning of assault and irrevocable commitment when prompt and substantial U.S. intervention with conventional weapons might lead the Chicoms to withhold or reverse their assault effort. Otherwise our intervention would probably not be effective if it were limited to the use of conventional weapons.⁶⁰

Further, in considering the challenge to Formosa by Chairman Mao in the late summer of 1958, Ike noted the change of circumstances since the previous threats of 1955.

For one thing, the Soviets had used the intervening years to build up their nuclear strike force, which now included a more formidable arsenal of hydrogen weapons. I did not doubt our total superiority, but any large-scale conflict stimulated here was now less likely to remain limited to a conventional use of power.⁶¹

If the Eisenhower administration had learned that nuclear weapons could be purchased with rubles as well as dollars, subsequent Presidents would have to acknowledge in their strategies that they also can be purchased for francs, yen, and undoubtedly many other currencies.

The distinctive philosophy of the Eisenhower years was first introduced by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles when he used the term "massive retaliation" in a speech before the Council of Foreign Relations in January 1954.⁶²

Dulles emphasized that the policy was a new one, resulting from some basic policy decisions made by the National Security Council. "The basic decision," he said, "was to depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, and by means and at places of our own choosing." The benefit was to be "more basic security at less cost."⁶³

This philosophy was to come under fire from an Army man, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, in his writings published between his term as Army Chief of Staff for Eisenhower and later service as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for Kennedy. But the first official and public break in the application of this philosophy came from within the ranks of the active-service military serving the Eisenhower administration. On 12 November 1957, in Cincinnati, Ohio, General Lauris Norstad, then Supreme Commander of NATO forces in Europe, delivered a speech in which he stated:

"If . . . we have means to meet less-than-ultimate threats with a decisive, but less-than-ultimate response, the very possession of this ability would discourage the threat, and would thereby provide us with essential political and military maneuverability."⁶⁴

This was not then called the "strategy of flexible response," but it did include the basic philosophy of a paper entitled "A National Military Program" which General Taylor had prepared for the JCS in 1956.⁶⁵ This strategy was to become the hallmark of the Kennedy/McNamara years.

Before he took office, President Kennedy had read and was impressed by Taylor's book *The Uncertain Trumpet*. He had campaigned on the so-called "missile gap," and once in office he initiated a review of U.S. and Soviet ICBM capabilities. Before the results of this survey were known, JFK, in four separate passages of his first defense message to Congress on 28 March 1961, renounced any intention to exercise a first-strike option.⁶⁶ It was a speech intended as much for Russian ears as any others. And it, like future policy statements and actions, was calculated to remove much of the instability of the nuclear arms race.

On tactical nuclear weapons the message was clear. Maxwell Taylor's outlook had been clearly stated in his proposed "New National Military Program." "The question of using atomic weapons in limited wars would be met by accepting the fact that primary dependence must be placed on conventional weapons while retaining readiness to use tactical atomic weapons in the comparatively rare cases where their use would be to our national interest."⁶⁷

The same attitudes were pervasive in the Defense Establishment. Deputy Secretary Roswell Gilpatric said on 6 June 1961 that he, for one, had "never believed in a so-called limited nuclear war. I just don't know," he continued, "how you build a limit into it once you

start using any kind of nuclear bang."⁶⁸

And there was concern in Defense that we might not have adequate conventional defense to refrain from using nuclear weapons when we would have preferred to limit our response to aggression. "The decision to employ tactical nuclear weapons," testified Secretary McNamara before the House Armed Services Committee in January 1963, "should not be forced upon us simply because we have no other way to cope with a particular situation."⁶⁹ Another "defense intellectual," Alain Enthoven, stressed the same view in a major statement later the same year:

We will have no sensible alternative to building up our conventional forces to the point at which they can safely resist all forms of non-nuclear aggression. Our forces will be adequate if we can never be forced because of weakness to be the first to have to resort to nuclear weapons.⁷⁰

After leaving the Defense Department in 1968, McNamara recalled:

. . . strategic nuclear forces in themselves no longer constituted a credible deterrent to the broad range of aggression, if indeed they ever had in the past. . . . we could not substitute tactical nuclear weapons for conventional forces in the types of conflicts that were most likely to involve us in the period of the 1960s.

We agreed, of course, that an effective tactical nuclear capability was essential to our over-all strategy. But we also felt very strongly that the decision to employ such nuclear weapons should not be forced upon us simply because we had no other means to cope with conflict. We recognized then what has become so obvious

now, that there would inevitably be many situations in which it would be neither feasible nor advisable to use tactical nuclear weapons.⁷¹

When faced with the tough decision, President Kennedy was not at all inclined to use the nuclear weapon except in dire circumstances. In 1961, when considering intervention in Laos, the question of the possible alternatives for rescuing a contingent trapped in the landlocked country was raised. The response from the military was that Hanoi would have to be destroyed, probably using nuclear weapons. President Kennedy opted for diplomatic measures.⁷² Again, during the Cuban missile crisis, a member of the Joint Chiefs argued that the United States could use nuclear weapons on the basis that our adversaries would use theirs against us in an attack. To this Bobby Kennedy would comment: "I thought, as I listened, of the many times that I had heard the military take positions which, if wrong, had the advantage that no one would be around at the end to know."⁷³ The diplomatic-military combination was used instead.

The Johnson administration continued in the same nuclear strategy. In opening his campaign on Labor Day, 1964, LBJ criticized his opponent by implication in the most important element of his speech:

... Make no mistake, there is no such thing as a conventional nuclear weapon. For 19 peril-filled years no nation has loosed the atom against another. To do so now is a political decision of the highest order, and it would lead us down an uncertain path of blows and counterblows whose outcome none may know. No President of the United States can divest himself of the responsibility for such a decision.⁷⁴

He criticized Senator Goldwater throughout the 1964 campaign, repeating his theme on this most sensitive subject. He obviously subscribed to the theory of a nuclear firebreak when he added later in the campaign: "Let no one think atomic weapons are simply bigger and more destructive than other weapons. . . ."⁷⁵

Secretary of State Rusk reiterated the administration's fear of nuclear escalation when he commented that once you introduce nuclear weapons for tactical purposes, "you begin to move promptly and very fast into a general nuclear exchange."⁷⁶

For 20 years, then, the United States has ruled out of its options the use of nuclear weapons, save to protect those nations the loss of which would drastically revise the world balance of power.

The continuing tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons in limited war, which we have traced above, is widening the nuclear "firebreak" each year. And there are no signs at present which would indicate any administration in the near future would resort to nuclear weapons to guarantee "victory" in such a war. While there may be subtle or overt brandishments of nuclear armaments in definition of our most vital frontiers with militant Communists, even there the circumstances and timing of their employment remain subject to serious debate.

Conclusions. The American political process has been described as a struggle between clusters cutting across governmental structure, political parties, and interest groups and forming and reforming around various causes or specific proposals.⁷⁷ The decision for use or nonuse of nuclear weapons in limited war is fully exposed to this process. Indeed it is, and should be, primarily a political decision. The "military necessity" for nuclear weapons in limited conflicts has been and will be secondary

in importance to many overriding considerations of domestic and international politics, as well as other considerations of our overall national strategy.

But as important as the influences of the domestic political scene and the opinions of our allies and friends may be, they can be controlled or overruled by a strong President convinced of the necessity for employment of tactical nuclear weapons.

Our nuclear strategy, however, is conditioned by many factors not as easily manipulated in the executive branch of our Government. The growing capabilities of our enemies, the known weaknesses of other free nations, the potentialities of the yet undeveloped nuclear arsenals of medium and minor powers—all these elements must be weighed carefully by a President about to release authority for the employment of nuclear weapons. They all tend to discourage his selection of the nuclear option.

The historical precedents and advice of five Presidents will undoubtedly have substantial influence on the decisions of future Presidents. Their restraint over the last 25 years will make it more difficult for any successor to choose nuclear weapons as a means of gaining our objectives in limited war.

The impact of all these factors, foreign and domestic, on this decision-making process must be understood by our military leaders. At least in the higher levels of command, our generals and admirals must know under just what circumstances they can expect to be permitted the use of nuclear weapons. The case for this clear definition was made by Mort Halperin at the time of the Berlin crisis in 1961.

If we do intend to rule out the use of tactical nuclear weapons in

certain situations, we need to make that clear to the military long before the time arises when the nuclear weapons might be used. The military needs to understand the kinds of pressures which the civilian leaders must take into consideration in determining the proper role of military force.⁷⁸

The intelligent formulation and effective execution of our worldwide strategy depend on mutual understanding of our nuclear intentions by both military and civilian leaders.

Realization of all these facts of politics and war does not, however, exclude the effective use of Presidential judgment on the employment of tactical nuclear weapons. As long as we remain within the context of limited war, the foreseeable circumstances which could compel the President to authorize the first use of nuclear weapons are very difficult to project. Even the possibility of defeat in limited war would not sway a strong President if he felt other factors recommended abstention rather than employment. The clamor and cries at home might be stronger than those in the MacArthur episode. But the requirements of our national strategy and considerations of international politics would sustain a President convinced of the correctness of his decision.

On the other hand, when the stakes are raised, when the threat is redefined as a serious and unfavorable readjustment of the world balance of power, only overriding elements of our worldwide strategic posture could restrain the President from employing tactical nuclear weapons. Such a threat could grow out of a war begun as a local aggression employing only conventional weapons. It might well end with the first nuclear detonation in combat since Nagasaki.

FOOTNOTES

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