

TERMINATION: THE MYTH OF THE SHORT, DECISIVE NUCLEAR WAR

by

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Let us never be elated by the fatal hope of the war being quickly ended by the devastation of their lands. I fear rather that we may leave it as a legacy to our children, so improbable is it that the Athenian spirit will be the slave of their land, or Athenian experience be cowed by war.

—Archidamus
King of the Lacedaemonians

At a time when most US strategic discussion revolves around the implications of a theoretical American ICBM force vulnerability or Soviet acceptance of the concept of mutual assured destruction, it seems appropriate to probe beyond these “urgent” issues and explore some of the basic tenets of US thought about nuclear war. Of particular interest is the widespread belief that a nuclear war would be rapidly decisive, in that a nuclear exchange would either cause one side to sue for peace immediately or so devastate both sides that it would be impossible to carry on the war. This belief is of long standing in the United States, and it is fundamental to arguments about deterrence based on “assumed destruction” as well as theories of limited strategic nuclear attacks. However, it is probable that neither assumption is correct.

The initial stages of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union would indeed be horrifyingly destructive, but they would neither drive one side rapidly out of the conflict nor result in the immediate inability of either side to continue the war. Indeed, it is far more likely that a nuclear war between the superpowers would involve an inconclusive and destructive

search for decisive results by both sides: a difficult, highly uncertain search far different from anything postulated by planners before the conflict.¹ It would be a search to terminate a war which many presently seem to believe would somehow end of its own accord.

Although this article addresses American beliefs particularly, it should be noted that the United States is not the only nation afflicted with a belief in the probability of rapid decisive results in war. Such a goal has been the dream of all military commanders. Sun Tzu extolled the virtues of short wars, warning that long wars blunt both weapons and morale. Clausewitz similarly argued for quick violent action. He noted that war in the abstract allowed the simultaneous employment of all forces and actions, but that it might be confined to a single decisive act or set of acts. However, well aware of the “friction” of war, Clausewitz concluded that such simultaneity was impossible in the real world. He compromised, accommodating theory to reality, by arguing for the maximum possible initial effort, but acknowledging that a nation’s greatest efforts would hardly be attained at the outset of a conflict.

In this century, the Germans were deluded in both World Wars by the prospect of rapid decisive results, as were the British and French (in World War I if not in World War II). Even the Russians fell victim to this line of thought with regard to Finland. Each was wrong, ultimately incurring losses that brought into question their initial war justifications and aims.

Current US nuclear deterrence doctrine emphasizes a strategy that will insure the destruction of any aggressor, even after sustaining an initial surprise nuclear attack. This capability is to be reinforced by additional, flexible forces allowing for limited nuclear exchanges short of a final counter-city holocaust. Planners argue that the capability of assured destruction will either deter a rational opponent or be so destructive as to insure that nuclear war will have no victor. The nuclear options provide deterrence at lower levels of potential nuclear conflict and might enable a limited nuclear exchange to result in lower levels of overall damage.

In these circumstances, discussion of the adequacy of the US nuclear deterrent force centers on postulated nuclear exchanges between the two superpowers, almost always considered to be rapidly decisive, that will terminate the war. Such discussions raise questions. Has the technology of thermonuclear weapons, missiles, and systems analysis made pre-war predictions of military outcomes more certain? Will vast nuclear arsenals necessarily produce rapidly decisive results? Is a short war now assured? To answer such questions it is necessary to examine the nature of war—in particular, current beliefs about nuclear engagements—and to explore the requirements for a decisive engagement and war termination.

CAUSES AND OBJECTIVES OF WAR

An obvious point to be made, although it is ignored in most strategic discourse, is that no war begins in a vacuum. The causes of a conflict are important because there is a connection, however tenuous, between the

cause of a war and the effort a nation will expend. Clausewitz noted this relationship in asserting that “the political object—the original motive for the war—will . . . determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”² This has been a particularly difficult point for Americans to grasp; we have viewed most wars as aberrations. Those that are not aberrations are seen as crusades.

The relationship between cause and effort raises significant questions about the decisiveness of a nuclear conflict and the quick termination of such a war. Specifically, one must ask, What indeed are those issues that might drive a nation to use nuclear weapons—yet still allow that nation to accept the less-than-victorious outcome of a relatively short, though extremely destructive, conflict?

It has been argued, for example, that a country might employ a limited nuclear attack, not threatening an opponent’s “vital interests,” but forcing a rational choice of war termination. While such a possibility cannot be dismissed, such speculation ignores the role of human emotion in war. Will the emotions that incited such a conflict be easily or rapidly harnessed by rational thought?

Emotion’s effect on battle is the subject of much discussion by military philosophers. Even Clausewitz, who sought to organize and rationalize war, stressed the role of emotion, as well as that of chance. Both, he concluded, helped make war a most uncertain endeavor. John Keegan’s fine book, *The Face of Battle* (1976), provides a penetrating insight. “Why men fight” has much to do with “why men quit.” And in an age characterized by a potential global battlefield rather than “theaters of operation,” the emotions of decisionmakers may be more, rather than less, important.³

Not only are wars’ causes important, but so too is war’s objective. Clausewitz put it most succinctly in observing that war is an attempt to impose one’s will on an enemy. In the terminology of modern psychology, it is a “power relationship” at the international level. It is the failure to acknowledge the

objective of war that often obscures discussions of nuclear strategy. For acknowledgement of the objective links potential effort to the political goals of a nation, moving war from an abstract concept to reality.

If it is accepted that the objective of war between sovereign entities is the imposition of one nation's will upon another, then there is a basis for discussion of the factors needed to achieve a decision in conflict.

CONDITIONS FOR TERMINATION

The most severe test of the US nuclear force would no doubt be a surprise first strike by the Soviet Union. The scenario currently in vogue envisions a nuclear strike resulting from escalation rather than a "bolt-from-the-blue" attack. Such an attack might involve a single nuclear exchange (for example, General Hackett's postulated reciprocal attacks on Birmingham and Minsk),⁴ or a major attack on the US land-based deterrent (take your pick of the authorities for this ubiquitous scenario), or the ultimate devastation associated with a counter-city attack. Current strategic nuclear folklore postulates that such exchanges would be rapidly decisive, ending the war in the first case owing to internal revolt (Hackett); in the second to rational strategic surrender (Paul Nitze); and in the third to utter devastation and the inability to continue the war (almost everyone else).

However, for an attack to be decisive and capable of terminating a war, several conditions will have to be met. Not all of the five conditions addressed in the following paragraphs will be required in all possible scenarios, but consideration of each condition is fundamental to understanding the essence of decisive nuclear action.

- *First*, the post-attack situation must be so clearly defined that one side can be determined to be in a markedly inferior position relative to the other, and it must be obvious that the conditions cannot be reversed. In the recent past, this situation obtained only after a protracted period of warfare. Even then, there was much internal

resistance to surrender by the defeated power and a good deal of indecision and uncertainty by both the vanquished and the victor as to the true status of each country. Three questions were uppermost in the minds of the decisionmakers of the vanquished power. Was there hope of redressing the situation? Would continued fighting result in better terms? Should the conflict be terminated?

Warfare is an extremely uncertain proposition. Military fortunes, like the tide, can ebb and flow. This uncertainty has increased with the advent of nuclear weapons. For while nuclear weapons have enhanced the potential of a surprise attack in war, they also have increased the possibility (at least in theory) of rapidly redressing a serious military disadvantage. In a stressful situation, they represent a reserve force that might "snatch victory from the jaws of defeat." Unlike conventional reserves, they do not tire, do not suffer loss of morale, and, more importantly, are readily available for use. While many possible uses of nuclear weapons seem unlikely or irrational when discussed in the peacetime comfort of the military analyst's office, they will surely be considered in the sweaty, panic-ridden environment of potential capitulation. Powerful surviving nuclear forces will elicit proposals for actions aimed at "prevailing" even under acknowledged adversity. Governments will be tempted to act, even though their actions will bring increased

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risks. With awareness of home damage and destruction almost surely lagging reality, erroneous perceptions will reinforce a commitment to continue the battle.

One can argue that neither the loss of the land-based ICBM force, nor the loss of one or a few cities, will present an obvious reason for surrender. Nor will a full city exchange necessarily bring immediate termination since cities, with their populations and productive capacities, are not necessary to the continuation of a nuclear war fought with large initial forces. At the current stage of nuclear development, cities and populations are superfluous to nuclear warfighting. And their function as hostages in an actual nuclear war must be questioned. Thus, in the chaotic aftermath of a nuclear exchange, neither a clearly defined situation nor constraints on escalation seem probable.

• *Second*, the alternatives confronting the inferior power after the completion of a military action must be such that conforming to its opponent's desires is the obvious choice. This is a necessary if not sufficient condition for termination. However, the institutional and cultural differences between warring nations make it most difficult to design such an obvious option before war begins. And to design it in wartime will require both time and luck.

What are those factors insuring that a nation will understand and accept the reality of its defeat? Can these factors be generalized? If not, can governments be certain that they so understand the opposition as to insure its rapid acceptance of terms? History does not make one sanguine about the possibilities.

Further, such alternatives must be communicated—a task potentially impossible in nuclear conflict—and then evaluated. The latter work requires belligerents to assess the situation accurately in terms of both the strength of forces and the possible behavior of actors, to judge realistically the outcomes of alternatives, and to make correct decisions. In short, the situation probably requires better information-gathering and decisionmaking after an intense engagement than were present before the battle.⁵

• *Third*, even if a nation is blessed with the continued capability of accurately evaluating its alternatives, its government must also be capable of internal communications and control adequate to insure compliance with its policies. Good communications and control are particularly critical in nuclear war termination. In the pre-nuclear era, the damage that could be done by small isolated units was relatively insignificant. But in a nuclear war, even small military forces, either unaware of the decision to end the fighting or refusing to acquiesce, can heavily damage an opponent; they may even convince him that a surrender proposal is merely a ruse, in which case the war may be resumed with increased violence.⁶

Those responsible for internal command must be able to both transmit decisions to all military elements and enforce decisions on dissident elements. The possibility of a breakdown in communications—not to mention noncompliance or revolution—will be particularly great when trying to achieve an early end to a nuclear conflict, especially without consensus on the true military situation and the need to terminate the conflict at a decided disadvantage. Elements resistant to any compromise are unlikely to be persuaded of its necessity in a short campaign.

• *Fourth*, the idea of a decisive battle leading to a rapid termination of the conflict makes special demands on the concept of rational decisionmaking in stressful situations. This concept requires that belligerents act within the cold, calm framework postulated in the literature of the game theorist. Yet, in the real world that may not be the case. In the stress of nuclear war, choices may not be made strictly on the basis of theoretical rationality, but may be influenced by emotion, misperceptions, and behavior that falls outside peacetime norms. Although it is possible that governments will be able to make proper evaluations and “rational” decisions based on those evaluations, it is probable that they will make very bad decisions. True, we have no direct experience to support such conclusions with regard to nuclear war, but the possibility of

incorrect, irrational decisions on the part of decisionmakers under unimaginable mental and emotional stress, and faced with sickeningly brief periods in which to react, is certainly plausible.⁷

• *Fifth*, implicit in the conditions already stated is that for decisive action and war termination to occur, some level of disarmament must take place.

This requirement to disarm is often disputed. Some argue, for example, that limited nuclear attacks might be fashioned to avoid either disarming the enemy or threatening his "vital interests." Such arguments fail to consider the nuances of "disarming the enemy." Clausewitz argued that such disarmament can be either physical, destroying the enemy's forces, or moral, destroying his will to fight. Further, it can be total or partial. Thus, hostilities or even the threat of hostilities will result in the disarmament of one or both belligerents, either physically, morally, or in some combination, and in some degree, varying from slight to total.

Noting these kinds and levels of disarmament, Clausewitz acknowledged that peace often occurred before either "antagonist could be called powerless—even before the balance of power had been seriously altered." However, some disarmament must take place to achieve war termination; the degree, in Clausewitz's view, is related to the causes and aims of the conflict.⁸

Given the current high levels of nuclear forces, the ability to disarm an opponent physically seems limited. The ability to attack his "will to battle" may be greater, but it is limited by ignorance of what provides his moral strength. The uncertainty on this score is evident in the contrary American views of nuclear deterrence: there are great disputes over what deters.

The threat of utter destruction of an aggressor nation, regardless of the size of its initial attack, is thought to deter any attack (in a sense, morally disarming). But while concentrating on moral disarmament to rationalize US nuclear strategy (countervalue attacks for assured destruction), much of the

US strategic targeting has been counterforce, aimed at the Soviet military forces and industries necessary to support a modern war. Actual US force structuring has drawn from both countervalue and counterforce concepts, a realistic evaluation of the need to disarm an opponent both physically and morally. While this may be realistic, it does underscore the dichotomy between how the US justifies its force development and doctrine and how it actually plans for war.⁹

Soviet attitudes are unclear. Whether they actually believe in assured destruction (moral disarming) or are unreconstructed counterforce adherents is a matter for debate in military, academic, and government circles. The discourse to date, however, provides little reason to believe that Americans really understand present Soviet motivations and intentions, or can predict how they might change in the exigency of nuclear conflict. The arguments seem to disclose far more about our own attitudes and hopes than about those of the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSIONS

As was noted earlier, the limited nuclear attack is often cited as a possible means of achieving rapid decisive results. Although the theory of decisive action requires application of the principle of mass, such mass might be applied at a limited but vital and hence decisive point, rather than more broadly. For example, the US land-based ICBMs are an important part of the American strategic nuclear force and seem to constitute such a "vital" point. A limited strike against the Minuteman force is possible, but the prospects for such a strike, and particularly the causes that would prompt it, demand careful examination. Limited attacks following a "deep crisis" imply issues that make escalation more likely than war termination, while limited attacks not associated with a "deep crisis" would be too risky to be plausible, even though possible.

How would such limited strikes prove decisive? As US nuclear forces are presently structured, a limited Soviet strike would indeed eliminate certain counterforce

options, but it would not physically disarm the country. The argument that it would prove decisive must therefore rest on the belief that the strike would morally disarm. But this is unlikely to occur rapidly. The lag in perception of the destruction and the temptation to use the immense power remaining would result in tremendous pressures to "fire one more volley."

Considering the extent of destruction that would be associated with a nuclear war, one can question whether the conflict's anticipated length is important. However, it will doubtless have an important effect on war plans, influencing, for example, how belligerents might conduct the conflict. The World War I example of a short war which grew into a conflict no one could bring to a close illustrates the problem. The length of a conflict is also important in terms of structuring military forces. Planning for an early decision results in forces that have little or no endurance. While some may believe this is a good thing, such a structure provides incentives to "use or lose" the forces on hand. Finally, the belief in a short war can obscure the threat that faces the country. For example, enemy forces not suitable for a short war—such as missiles in storage—may seem irrelevant. Such assessments may be totally incorrect.

Thus, the "knockout blow" that has enticed airpower enthusiasts and haunted arms control advocates for so many years comes finally to partake of myth; and if a short nuclear war is not assured, then present

assumptions must be reexamined.¹⁰ Doing so can lead to better understanding of war termination problems and improved planning. An applicable adage might be that "Planners pray for no war, hope for a short war, but must be prepared to meet and deal with a long one."

NOTES

1. For a perceptive study of the problem, see Fred Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971). See also Stuart Albert and Edward C. Luck, eds., *On the Endings of Wars* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980), particularly pp. 25-43.

2. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 81.

3. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976).

4. John Hackett, *The Third World War: August 1985* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

5. Paul Kecskemeti makes a cogent argument on this point using case studies from World War II in *Strategic Surrender* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 9.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

7. Michael Handel outlines what he terms "The Rational Model for War Termination" in the general case, making an excellent argument for why rational war termination is unlikely ("The Study of War Termination," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1 [May 1978], 51-75).

8. Clausewitz, pp. 90-99; Handel also illustrates this disarming in graphic form, arguing not only that the ability to wage war must be reduced by some level in order to attain termination, but also making the point that countries will be unable to terminate at an optimal point (he theorizes it as the point of equal ability to wage war) because of misperceptions on both sides.

9. I am indebted to Dr. George Rathjens, Professor of Political Science at MIT, for his comments on this particular issue.

10. The recent promulgation of Presidential Directive 59 appears to represent verbal acknowledgement of advances in military technology. However, rhetoric about nuclear options is hardly new. Whether the plans reported in the press will be supported by necessary structural changes remains to be seen.

