

US DEFENSE STRATEGY: At the Nuclear Precipice  
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*Today I can declare my hope and declare it from the bottom of my heart that we will eventually see the time when the number of nuclear weapons is down to zero and the world is a much better place.*

— Colin Powell, US Secretary of State &  
Former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

ON September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, fifteen al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked three U.S. airliners laden with jet fuel and crashed them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon causing nearly three thousand civilian deaths. A fourth aircraft, delayed on departure from Newark, was also commandeered but crashed short of its target Washington D.C. during an in-flight struggle initiated by alerted passengers. U.S. government reaction was immediate: all civilian flights were grounded, the New York Stock Exchange closed; top level federal official went into hiding; and a worldwide war on terrorism was declared by the President. Was the United States of America, the world's only remaining superpower, really that afraid of a two dozen poorly armed terrorists? Or was there more to the threat than national authorities were telling?

Over the next six months, several factors emerged to clarify the situation. First, soon after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks a nuclear bomb threat was made against New York City. Intelligence official learned from a "credible source" that a 100-kiloton bomb was en route to Manhattan Island aboard an unnamed container ship. Second, a biological anthrax attack of unknown origin was carried out against leaders of congress and high profile news media figures. Finally, there was an implied threat, not explicitly acknowledged but leaked out over several months, that al-Qaeda leaders were seeking weapons of mass destruction for use against the United States in order to compel the latter's unilateral withdrawal from the Mideast. The combination of these phenomenon appear to have come as a shock to US leaders. They began describing September 11<sup>th</sup>, or 9-11 as it is popularly phrased, to be "the day the world changed forever."

Has the world really changed since 9-11? If so, how? Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda's leader, had publicly declared war on the U.S. more than five years before 9-11<sup>1</sup>; about the same time defense officials learned of his attempts to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Islamic terrorists had unsuccessfully bombed the WTC eight years earlier and had promised to return. None of what happened on 9-11 was really all that new. What was new was an acute sense of national vulnerability not felt since Pearl Harbor, or at least the Cuban Missile Crisis. More disturbing perhaps, was the realization that America's core defense policy, that of *Deterrence via Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)*, had failed in the greatest one-day loss of civilian life ever experienced by the 225-year-old nation. Despite an overwhelming superiority in almost every factor of military capability, and in particular weapons of mass destruction, the United States had been attacked by an adversary undeterred by threat of massive retaliation. America was at risk and would remain so until weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation was halted and international terrorism defeated, two seemingly impossible tasks. Had MAD failed? Did it ever work? Is it anachronistic? Are American citizens vulnerable to widespread destruction? This

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<sup>1</sup> Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York: Random House, 2001) p.186

<sup>2</sup> From author's personal knowledge as a foreign defense attaché' with the Dept of Defense.

paper looks at the precipice on which MAD has left the nation; its origins, its usefulness, and its costs and examines whether MAD is still a viable strategy after 9-11. It suggests answers to the question of how MAD could be replaced and WMD controlled. Through honest self-appraisal we may discover opportunities to improve national security that dogmatic adherence to 'tried and true' strategies miss. Yes, the world has changed. "We're not in Kansas anymore."

### **Mutually Assured Destruction: The Doctrine**

MAD is a national defense strategy based on the concept that no one will ever directly attack the United States for fear that the U.S. will retaliate massively and unacceptably with nuclear weapons. It is mutual in the sense that during the Cold War the U.S. mirror imaged a similar defense strategy to the Soviet Union. Both sides were believed to be deterred from attacking the other for fear of catastrophic reprisal. MAD evolved from the Eisenhower Administration doctrine of "massive retaliation" and has been the core U.S. defense policy for over five decades. It was copied by the USSR and resulted in arms racing that far outstripped the underlying assumptions. At its height, more than 25,000 strategic nuclear weapons were maintained on alert when a tenth that number would have completely destroyed either nation. Since the end of the Cold War, the total numbers have dropped by half and may decrease another two-thirds if the Treaty of Moscow is carried out. But these reductions are simply costs driven measures and will still leave some 4,000 warheads on alert, not counting the arsenals of the other declared nuclear weapons states. MAD is alive and well, make no mistake about it.

But MAD was developed during a time of unreliable technology and was based on a mortal fear of communism, aggravated by ignorance of an unknown enemy that lurked behind an iron curtain. Times have changed. Improved missile guidance has eliminated the need for multiple targeting by redundant weapon systems. More importantly, our enemies have changed, as have our fears about Marxist-Leninist domination. It is time to rethink our baseline defense strategy and the doctrine behind it.

The normal reaction to such a suggestion is the often heard: "Why tinker with something that has kept the peace for the past half-century?" That was the impression most Americans had before 9-11, having since lost much its creditability in the new War on Terrorism. Furthermore, nuclear weapons did not keep the peace in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, or Latin America, even though one side in those wars often possessed "the Bomb" and theoretically should have coerced the other side into submission. Well then, what about Western Europe? NATO's threat to use atomic weapons against invading Warsaw Pact forces is said to have preserved the peace in a region where two world wars broke out last century.

Not to take anything away from Soviet communism, it was German militarism that led to World Wars I & II. The Soviet Union did not even exist in 1914 and actually came about as a result of an antiwar revolution. After World War I, it was the Europeans whom invaded Soviet territory in an unsuccessful effort to suppress Bolshevism. Stalin was no peacemaker for sure, but neither he nor his despotic regime were the cause of World War II—a cataclysmic event that cost 27 million Soviet lives. It is naive to assert that the Soviets would have initiated a third major European war this century absent NATO's threat to use nuclear weapons. Wars simply do not go off at scheduled intervals; there is always a political objective at issue and it has yet to be defined what vital Soviet interest could have existed to cause the Soviets to bear the burden of even a conventionally fought World War III. During the heyday of communism's expansion the

Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff opined that, “Communism, when seeking a means to a political end is reluctant to use organized armed forces in an overt aggression except as a last resort,” and then only if “there is a reasonable chance of quick victory without — in the opinion of its leaders — appreciable world reaction.”<sup>3</sup> During the height of the Cold War, Michael Howard, Regis Professor of History at Oxford, pointed out, “It is a basic principle of Marxism-Leninism that the revolution cannot be carried abroad on the points of foreign bayonets. . . . It would be quite unrealistic to assume the Russians have been deterred from attacking us solely by their perception of the military costs involved or by fear of nuclear retaliation.”<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger put it more bluntly in his 1994 treatise *Diplomacy*: “The much advertised Soviet invasion of Western Europe was a fantasy” and “A fear widely recognized by posterity as chimerical.”<sup>5</sup>

Soviet military actions in Europe from 1945 to 1990 instead suggest more of a policy toward preservation of buffer states than of territorial expansion. Having been overrun twice in his lifetime, Stalin “intended to turn the countries conquered by Soviet armies into buffer zones to protect Russia against any future German aggressions.”<sup>6</sup> The hegemony subsequently imposed on the states of Central Europe by the Brezhnev Doctrine was thus understandable, if lamentable, in light of the unprecedented Soviet suffering at the hands of invading German, Italian, Hungarian, and Rumanian armies, all of whom fought on Hitler's side at Stalingrad. One wonders how Americans may have reacted had the Japanese invaded California after Pearl Harbor and destroyed everything west of the Mississippi. The United States lost a quarter million of its “greatest generation” in World War II; the Soviets lost one hundred times that number, including millions of women and children. It should not be difficult to understand the paranoia typified by the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall. Conversely, the Soviet’s postwar withdrawal and laissez-faire treatment of non-strategic Austria and Finland stands in the face of the popular notion of the Soviets as a monolithic leviathan bent on conquering the West through military aggression. To argue that nuclear weapons held the Soviets at bay is simply unfounded.

Nuclear weapons have, at best, only deterred nuclear war, and ironically, very nearly caused one in the process. Everyone remembers that it was Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s placement of short-range nuclear missiles on America’s doorstep that created the Cuban Missile Crisis, but few people are aware that it was a similar US move on the Soviet periphery that caused the Kremlin’s deployment decision in the first place. The American postwar policy of “containment,” which aimed at meeting the Marxists on their doorstep, had resulted in a network of US bases and naval fleets that ringed the communist empire with nuclear armed forces. Khrushchev had long objected to this threat and specifically berated the incoming American Ambassador about US missiles in Turkey just months prior to the October 1962 crisis. He was later to write in his memoirs, “The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointed at you.”<sup>7</sup> When Khrushchev matched the US deployment of missiles to

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking of the United States Air Force*, vol. 2, 1961–1984 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1989), p.431.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 77, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 443, 439.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.396.

<sup>7</sup> Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (New York, 1970) p. 494 as quoted in *Humanity* by John Glover (London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000) p. 205

Turkey by placing Soviet weapons in Cuba, the world came very close to catastrophe. The Soviets “blinked”, we are told, but the US also secretly agreed to remove its weapons astride the USSR’s southern flank. The world had gone to the brink of destruction over nothing more than nuclear posturing. The Russian loss of face, unfortunately, added fissionable fuel to an already aggressive arms race that either side could ill afford.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate the costs of the strategic arms race of the last 50 years. Not only are the bombs and delivery systems expensive to produce, crisscrossing numerous US departmental budgets, but survivability measures needed to insure their use during war are staggering, not to mention the environmental, psychological, and opportunity cost factors. A 1988 Department of Defense (DOD) study indicated that nuclear-club nations typically spent more than twice as much GDP on defense as did non-nuclear countries with similar defense requirements.<sup>8</sup> A 1992 Brookings Institution report put the costs of the 70,000 US nuclear weapons built to date at five and a half trillion dollars<sup>9</sup>; or more than the entire U.S. national debt at the time. The Defense Department spent \$25 billion per year in the 1990’s just maintaining the arsenal, bringing the total funds expended to over six trillion dollars by 9-11. While some analysts argue that those are economic, not security, considerations, the demise of the Soviet Union clearly showed that the two issues are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the historical response to a superior nuclear threat has been the adoption of city-busting counter-value strategies by the enemy. There has thus been an inverse relationship between national security gained and money spent.

The demise of the Cold War ended the arms race but the War on Terrorism seems to have revived it: The Bush Administration has asked congress to fund the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator Weapon (RNEP) and the Russians have recently tested a new improved strategic rocket. September 11th taught us, however, that more sophisticated weapons may not be the answer. If MAD ever had any validity it was against similar nation-states motivated by political realism’s basic instinct for survival. The emergence of suicidal non-state actors in a sea awash with WMD has greatly undermined MAD’s core assumption. The US and other nations like Israel are now threatened with nuclear attack by international terrorists that MAD does not deter. This is the security dilemma now facing the U.S. and the precipice on which it now seems lodged.

The Bush Administration’s answer to this threat seems to be threefold: accelerate Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD); develop a mini-MAD to deter would be proliferators; and, initiate war on rogue states to eliminate their WMD capabilities in their developmental stage. All of these options are fraught with danger. Proponents of (BMD) systems argue their systems will counter the emerging threat from nuclear proliferation of states like North Korea and Iran, but promised reliability appears farther and farther away. Even if some type of Star Wars were to succeed, it would only defend against delivery systems and not the bombs themselves. Any nation unable to secure its borders against drug-running cartels will remain vulnerable to weapons that can fit in a suitcase, diplomatic pouch, or Ryder rental truck. Moreover, the historical response to missile

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<sup>8</sup> Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense: A Report to the United States Congress (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 1988) p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> The Los Angeles Times, Nov 13, 1998 as reported by Chalmers Johnson, Blowback (New York; Henry Holt & Co, 2000), p.218, and “Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons, 1940–1995,” Preliminary Report of the US Nuclear Weapons Cost Study Project (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996).

defense has been to increase the size of the offensive arsenal in order to overwhelm defensive capabilities. The result of an accelerated BMD will be more systems aimed at America.

Regarding mini-MAD, it is hard to know what Administration officials were thinking in the September 2001 Report to the Congress. It was classified and only partially leaked to the public. At first blush it seemed to be a last grasp effort by Pentagon planners to salvage something out of MAD by threatening possible adversaries who might be inclined to share WMD with terrorists. RNEP seems to be its chief result but rogue states with known ties to international terrorism secretly pursuing weapons of mass destruction may not provide the necessary 'return address' that mini-MAD's deterrence premise can operate against. Neither world opinion nor congressional support has sided with this approach.

Conventionally attacking rogue states (a.k.a. "The Axis of Evil") may be an even riskier strategy than the two mentioned thus far, for it could trigger the very response MAD (and in turn mini-MAD) purportedly seeks to avoid. The surest way to find out if North Korea has nuclear weapons is to threaten the regime's survival, but we may not like the answer. Furthermore, attacking would be proliferators only accelerates other nation's desires to acquire WMD as the war the first war in Iraq did with India and the second seems to have done with Iran. The Bush Administration's policies are the proverbial little boy with his finger in the dike, oblivious to the Katrina size storm gathering steam a few miles off shore.

But it is not really the nuclear missiles or the warheads that are the cause of the problem. *It is the strategy behind the weapons that justifies civilians as legitimate targets, and in so doing makes all weapons of mass destruction so speciously attractive, that is the greatest threat to U.S. national security.* Most Americans will be surprised to learn that it was a fundamental shift in U.S. military strategy 75 years ago that has led to the world dilemma.

During the 1920s and 1930s, airmen in the United States and Europe became enamored with strategic bombing. They believed the stalemated trench warfare of World War I could be avoided by directly attacking and destroying the "enemy's center of gravity"—its population's will to resist.<sup>10</sup> "Instead of wearing down the morale of the enemy civilians through attrition of surface (military) operations, air power, its protagonists believed, would be able to attack and pulverize it completely." German Gotha bomber attacks against London in World War I caused localized panics and falsely led airmen to believe that any nation could be brought to its knees by simply attacking the industrial base and causing widespread fear. The populations, it was argued, would rise up against the enemy government and cause it to sue for peace. It was even postulated that the threat of strategic bombing would "deter" an enemy from ever starting a war.<sup>11</sup>

World War II put this hypothesis to the test. When it was over, strategic bombing proponents argued the destruction of German and Japanese industrial societies was "decisive." Independent analysts disagreed. The facts were that despite the heroic sacrifices of the aircrews involved, strategic bombing never came close to its prewar predictions, and the costs in manpower, material, and moral factors posed serious questions about its value.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the bombing of civilian areas was actually found to increase the enemy population's will to resist

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<sup>10</sup> James Lea Cate and Wesley Frank Craven, The Army Air Forces in World War II, vol. 1, Plans and Early Operations, January 1939 to August 1942 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp.42–43, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Overy, The Air War 1939–1945 (New York: Stein and Day, 1980) p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Kent Roberts Greenfield, American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 121; Williamson Murray, Strategy for Defeat: The Luftwaffe, 1933–1945 (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1983), 52–54; Overy, 102; and MacIsaac, 64.

rather than subduing it. It was widely acknowledged, for example, that the German Luftwaffe lost the Battle of Britain when it switched from attacking military targets to attacking London.<sup>13</sup> The German Blitz also angered many neutrals in the United States and eventually led to the entry of the United States into the war on Britain's side, a fatal mistake for the fascists. Still, many allied airmen remained unconvinced, clinging to their dogmatic beliefs that bombing alone could win a war against the Nazis. They were given their chance: German city after city was flattened, but the bombing had a negative impact in forcing a surrender. It may have even contributed to the climate that became ripe for genocide. After the war, airmen argued that development of the atomic bomb vindicated their claim that strategic bombing could at least deter future wars. But as we have seen, this has not been the case.

***The way to curtail the world's continued proliferation of nuclear weapons is to first recognize that strategic bombardment is counterproductive.*** Carl Von Clausewitz, the grandfather of contemporary political-military strategy, wrote that the objective of war is to force an opponent to accept one's political will. His statement that war is "an extension of political activity by other means" is widely, almost universally, accepted.<sup>14</sup> The means, however, have to support the ends. Professor Howard explains:

Clausewitz had described war as a "remarkable trinity" composed of its political objective, its practical instruments and of popular passions, the social forces it expressed. It was the latter, he pointed out, that made the wars of the French Revolution so different in kind from those of Frederick the Great and which would probably so distinguish war in the future. In this he was right.<sup>15</sup>

While strategic bombing may have some positive, usually indirect, effect on the enemy instruments of war, it is also known to have a decidedly negative and more immediate effect upon achieving the overarching political objective, for it inflames enemy social passions into militant, often irrational, resistance. One need only think of Pearl Harbor, the London Blitz, Stalingrad, or a similar strategic campaign to appreciate the effect of bombing on the national will to resist.

If the objective of war is, as Clausewitz states, to convert the enemy's political will, then attacking his home, his family, his means of existence—in other words, his passions—is clearly antithetical to the aim. There is, unfortunately, the popular myth that massive and unrestricted application of strategic air power, such as occurred in Japan in August 1945 or North Vietnam during Christmas 1972, can secure an honorable peace without the need for further action.<sup>16</sup> This is nothing more than wishful, perhaps dangerous, thinking that falls apart under examination.

### **Lessons from the Strategic Bombing of Japan**

While most historians recognize September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, the day that Adolph Hitler invaded Poland as the beginning of World War II, Americans remember December 7th, 1941, the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, "A day that will live in infamy!" as the start of their war. The

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<sup>13</sup> John Terraine, A Time for Courage: The Royal Air Force in the European War, 1939–1945 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1985) p. 218.

<sup>14</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Howard, p.103.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. William Momyer, USAF, Airpower in Three Wars (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, undated) p. 339.

Japanese had, in fact, been in battle for some time. They had been invading their East Asian neighbors uninterrupted for most of the previous century. Their attacks on Manchuria and China in the 1930s brought them into confrontation with the United States. As the decade progressed, relations grew tense. Embargoes and ultimatums finally brought the crisis to a head, but thoughts of war with the United States was not something Japanese leaders cherished.

Six months before the attack on Hawaii, Japanese military analysts concluded that if a war with the United States were to last more than 18 months, it could only end in defeat. The best the Japanese could hope for was for a series of rapid crushing blows against Allied forces in the Far East followed by a decisive naval battle against the remaining American fleet. Successive victories were to be followed by quick negotiations and settlement that ceded the Western Pacific to Japanese hegemony. A similar strategy had succeeded against the Russians in 1904.

For the first three months after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese strategy fell into place. The Philippines and Guam were conquered, Malaysia and Singapore were captured. A relieving British Royal Navy task force was quickly sent to the bottom and American forces were in retreat. Japanese codes had, however, been broken and the US Navy could not be lured into the deciding trap. By February, 1942 Emperor Hirohito instructed his ministers to “miss no chance for concluding an advantageous peace.”<sup>17</sup> But the attack on Hawaii had hit an unexpected nerve, and Americans were in no mood for compromise. The United States began to mobilize forces such as the world had never seen and the worst fears of Japanese war planners came to be realized. By the end of 1943, independent Japanese army and navy studies reported that the war had been irrevocably lost, the only factor yet to be determined being the terms of surrender.<sup>18</sup> Thus, long before the first strategic bomber came within range of Japanese shores in late 1944, its leaders were resigned to defeat. As one Japanese scholar wrote:

The majority of Japanese officials had long recognized the need to surrender but their will was frozen. They did not know how to admit to one another that they were beaten.

They only knew what they had done in their own conquests, and they feared vengeance in kind.<sup>19</sup>

When the strategic bombers did arrive in the winter of 1944–45, the effect was, as it had been in Europe, to add to the level of anxiety rather than to assuage it.

The US Army Air Forces saw in Japan a unique opportunity to redeem its prewar doctrine of victory through strategic bombing and spared no effort establishing Pacific island airfields for its new long-range B-29 bomber. Japan appeared the ideal strategic target, having no air defense to speak of with a highly urbanized population offering “vital centers” of commerce. At first, the B-29s struck industrial targets from high altitudes with apparent success, but with no appreciable effect on the governing body politic. Resistance increased sharply on Iwo Jima and other island fortresses with the advent of kamikaze and similar desperation tactics. American casualties grew in proportion with each passing month.

Having failed to produce any sign of capitulation, air force commanders changed tactics. In mid-March the B-29s came in low under the cover of darkness, dropping incendiaries on the densely populated urban districts of Tokyo as well as 58 other metropolitan districts.<sup>20</sup> Hundreds of thousands perished, but the Japanese will would not crack. War losses on Okinawa in April

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<sup>17</sup> David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: William Morrow, 1971) p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun* (New York: Free Press, 1985) pp.493-503.

reached record levels for both sides and for the first time, Japanese soldiers began to inflict more casualties than they suffered.<sup>21</sup> One scholar, citing the US Strategic Bombing Survey, wrote:

The (Tokyo) fire convinced the Japanese lower classes, as no propaganda ever could, that surrender was, indeed, out of the question and that Americans really were demons bent on exterminating all Japanese.<sup>22</sup>

The war dragged on throughout the summer of 1945 as Americans prepared for a much dreaded invasion of the Japanese home islands. Allied casualty estimates passed the million man mark but negotiations for Japanese surrender produced no positive results. At Potsdam in July, Allied leaders tried to soften fears of surrender by putting a liberal face on postwar occupation, but American public opinion wanted the emperor's head on a platter. Doubts about the status of the emperor continued to be the obstacle to peace. On the way home Truman issued the order to try shock Tokyo into submission but even the atomic bombs, dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August, were insufficient to convince the new Japanese Peace Cabinet, as American diplomats had dubbed it, to submit to "unconditional surrender." In vote after vote, they rejected the Allies' unconditional ultimatum as "a religious article of faith."<sup>23</sup> Only personal intervention by the emperor changed the calculus.

What finally convinced Hirohito to act was not the atomic bomb or the threat of a US invasion but an event more compelling than both. On August 8, 1945, two days after Hiroshima and on the eve of Nagasaki, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. The long-established foe of Japan in the Far East attacked across a broad frontier with a ruthless million-man Red Army in coordination with their Maoist Chinese comrades. Decades of humiliating Japanese triumph and aggression over its East Asian neighbors were coming to fruition. "The thought of a Russian invasion was terrifying enough, but the thought of a Chinese revenge raised cold sweat."<sup>24</sup> The Emperor, fully aware of what had happened to the Czar and his family at the hands of the Bolsheviks, wasted no time in coming to a decision.

Faced with the alternatives of either a US or Sino-Soviet occupation, Hirohito intervened and overruled the Peace Cabinet, directing the foreign minister to accept the Potsdam Ultimatum "with the understanding that the said declaration does not compromise any demand which prejudices the prerogatives of his majesty as a sovereign ruler." President Truman, frustrated by the fact that the atomic bombs had not moved the Japanese position as hoped, accepted in substance, if not in form, the conditional surrender proffered. The semi-deified emperor, his own neck having been spared, ordered his ministers and armed forces to lay down their weapons.

"Japan was beaten as thoroughly as any nation had ever been beaten in history."<sup>25</sup> The last aircraft carrier had been sunk, the last battleship sent to the bottom. Its air forces had long since sacrificed its pilot corps in kamikaze attacks, and its once proud army had retreated into fighting from island caves. The Japanese were not defeated by strategic bombing but by the cumulative weight of allied land, sea, and air power that had disarmed its military of its sinews and its government of its credibility. If anything, strategic bombing only delayed the surrender by

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<sup>21</sup> John Costello, *The Pacific War* (New York: Quill, 1982) pp. 566–79.

<sup>22</sup> Bergamini, p. 1039

<sup>23</sup> Robert Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1954), 4; and Spector 558–59.

<sup>24</sup> Bergamini, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* p.1041.

alienating diplomacy and causing fear and anxiety that were completely unwarranted. The atomic bombs were but a convenient scapegoat, for “in the unforeseen and unanswerable bomb, Hirohito saw a face-saving excuse for Japan’s fighting men, one which could be used to ease the humiliation of defeat and smooth the pathway to surrender.”<sup>26</sup> It also gave the American leaders an opportunity to paper over its failed policies. It was an opportunity never to be repeated.

### **Lessons from Strategic Bombing in Vietnam**

During the last 30 years, strategic bombing proponents have argued that the 1972 Christmas bombing of North Vietnam is what caused Ho Chi Minh to finally accept the American peace proposals to end the war in Vietnam. Again, the facts dispute the conclusion. The history of war in Vietnam is too well known to repeat here except to say that it began during the Japanese occupation in World War II and proceeded unabated until 1975 when North Vietnam overran the South. American involvement began in the 1950s, a consequence of the previously discussed US Cold War policy of containment. It peaked during the late 1960s with over a half-million US troops deployed throughout Southeast Asia, ending in the early 1970s following loss of public support.

Negotiations to end the American involvement began in Paris in the spring of 1972. By October of that year, a draft agreement had been reached with North Vietnam that called for an in-place cease-fire followed by a unilateral US withdrawal. “Peace is at hand” was the widely touted aphorism used to describe the situation leading up to the American presidential election that November. South Vietnam’s President Nguyen Van Thieu, who was not invited to the negotiations, subsequently let it be known that he would not sign any agreement that left 149,000 North Vietnamese regulars inside his country’s border ready to attack after the Americans left.<sup>27</sup> Back in Paris, US negotiators buoyed by the Nixon landslide electoral victory, tried to inject Thieu’s demands for a Communist withdrawal into the October agreement. The North Vietnamese balked and walked out of the talks. The agreement began to unravel. To pressure the North and reassure the South, Nixon ordered an unprecedented round-the-clock aerial bombardment on Hanoi termed Linebacker II, stating he would continue the attacks until the North showed a more constructive negotiating attitude. In the end, it was Thieu who was made to show flexibility. After 12 days of bombing with no communist concessions in sight, Thieu was told by Nixon to accept the October agreement backed up by a promise of future US air power, or else go it alone. South Vietnam had little choice but to accept the fait accompli. The Christmas bombing did not materially change Hanoi’s previous position, and according to the official Air Force History, at the January 1973 conference table it was the US negotiators who capitulated.<sup>28</sup>

No clearer statement of Hanoi’s intentions, or of strategic bombing’s limitations, need be found than in the North’s actions immediately following the signing of the Paris Accords. Before the United States had time to withdraw, the Communists began the buildup in the South for their final offensive in direct violation of the peace agreement and despite American threats to again

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America (New York: Free Press, 1984) p. 565.

<sup>28</sup> Futrell, vol. 2, pp. 271–72; and Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York: Viking Press, 1983) p. 654.

bring strategic air power to bear.<sup>29</sup> North Vietnam was never deterred by bombing, and the Christmas attack's only positive effect was to open a window for the United States to "leave with honor." As Professor Howard observes, "It was only an episode in a strategic defeat."<sup>30</sup>

### **Lessons from Strategic Bombing in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo**

Pundits have asserted that after 70 years of unfulfilled promises, air power finally came of age in the 1991 Persian Gulf War with Iraq and the 1999 NATO war with Yugoslavia. Certainly, if strategic bombing ever had the opportunity to prove itself, it was during Desert Storm and Operation Allied Force. War planners had six months and nearly limitless resources to prepare for each battle in what was clearly going to be a one-sided in terms of numbers, technology, intelligence, communications, airmanship, and geopolitical advantage. Allied air commanders also had the luxury of attacking from numerous directions in an environment of good flying weather. Furthermore, American aircrews had spent the last several decades conducting large-scale exercises over similar terrain in the southwest US and Canadian northwest. They were at the top of their Cold War form.

Desert Storm's chief objective was the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait but it also, "aimed at winning the war by destroying Iraq's governing infrastructure and causing Saddam Hussein's overthrow."<sup>31</sup> Targets included command and control, telecommunications, electric power production, oil refineries, railroads, and bridges. It also targeted suspected nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons facilities as well as Scud surface-to-surface capabilities. Air Force officials hoped to apply indirect pressure on Saddam by causing economic deprivations on the Iraqi population who would, in the words of the plan's chief architect, get the signal that "Hey, your lights will come back on as soon as you get rid of Saddam."<sup>32</sup> A similar sort of plan was drawn up for Yugoslavia. Its objective, like in Iraq, was multipurpose and included acceptance of NATO demands made at peace talks in Rambouillet including removal of Serbian forces from its southern province and acceptance of Kosovar desires for independence. It also targeted Yugoslav leader Slobodon Milosevic with view to his possible destruction or overthrow.

The 'thousand-hour air war' in Iraq began in mid January 1991 and continued unabated until late February, when the ground war commenced. During the six-week interval, most of Iraq's infrastructure was destroyed from the air and the nation was brought to its knees. But Iraqi troops were still in Kuwait and it took a 100-hour ground war to dislodge them. On the battlefield and along the lines of communication leading into it, tactical air power played a decisive role as it has in every major war of the 20th century. In fact, tacair "devastated the Iraqi army . . . and all but won the war."<sup>33</sup> But, in the strategic sense, in the ability to force a decision in and of its own accord, strategic air power was incapable of driving Saddam Hussein from power or his troops from Kuwait as bombing advocates first suggested. Nor was strategic bombing able to destroy Saddam's nuclear, biological, and chemical program as originally claimed. As before, strategic bombing failed in its stated objectives.

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<sup>29</sup> Futrell, vol. 2, pp.271-72; and Karnow, pp. 660-64.

<sup>30</sup> Howard, p.109

<sup>31</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995) p. 474.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 315.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 331.

In Kosovo, the results were little different. The air war that was suppose to take three days lasted eleven weeks and caused significant damage to Yugoslav infrastructure, but failed to produce the strategic results that NATO officials had sought. NATO allegedly started the war to protect the 1.8 million Kosovo Albanians from Serbian repression, but during the fighting over half of them were forced to flee for their lives to neighboring states. Over 5,000 Kosovar civilians were killed, the province was razed, tens of thousands of homes were destroyed and ethnic cleansing took place at war's end, albeit reversed in terms of nationalities. In the end, NATO achieved little more than it had negotiated for at the beginning and military occupation is the only factor keeping the war from restarting. MIT's Barry Posen summed it up:

Serbia's decision to end the war over Kosovo is treated by many a capitulation. The peace deal was however, very different from the Rambouillet draft accords, Yugoslavia's rejection of which in March had provided the occasion for NATO's attack. NATO officials do not like to acknowledge these differences. They have a natural proclivity to paint the outcome of the war as a complete victory - more than ample reward for the eleven weeks of military effort and political stress. And there is little doubt that NATO achieved more of its objectives in this war than did the Serbs. But the Serbs did not come away with nothing. The peace deal leaves open the possibility of a continued Serb political struggle for Kosovo. It attenuates the very real possibility opened by the terms of the Rambouillet accords that NATO would use its new presence in Kosovo to push for further demands on Serbia. Milosevic can claim credit for these changes with his nationalist supporters; he can also claim that he did not give in without a fight.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult, perhaps dangerous, to draw too many lessons from one-sided wars that in reality are not yet over. Yet if one axiom emerged, it was "rooted in the pervasive view that nuclear weapons, in any form, were politically unacceptable, except as an instrument of last resort."<sup>35</sup> Not only was the civilized world repulsed by Saddam's threat to use weapons of mass destruction, but coalition planners also rediscovered how politically explosive their own nuclear arsenals were in the context of a real war. Staff proposals to develop nuclear options were quickly shot down at every civilian level. In the political arena where war strategy is vetted, the multi-trillion dollar nuclear arsenals had little utility. Curiously, this important geopolitical lesson was lost on its way back to western capitals where war planners, NATO's chiefly among them (and Bush Administration officials today), dogmatically cling to Cold War nuclear doctrines as if, "The technological capabilities of nuclear arsenals are treated as being decisive in themselves, involving a calculation of risk and outcome so complete and discrete that neither the political motivation for the conflict nor the social factors involved in its conduct—nor indeed the military activity of fighting are taken into account at all."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," International Strategy 24:4 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Press, Spring 2000) p. 79-80.

<sup>35</sup> Gen Carl Vuono, Chief of Staff, USArmy, "Desert Storm and the Future of Conventional Forces," Foreign Affairs 70, no. 2 (Spring 1991) pp. 50-51

<sup>36</sup> Howard, p.109.

## Lessons from the Cold War

NATO's long-established threat to go nuclear if conventional defense fails has always been blustering at best, suicidal at worst, for it ignores the very social factors from whence it gathers its authority.<sup>37</sup> Can anyone seriously believe that the same nations who refuse to consider the use of nuclear weapons in a far-off desert scenario would initiate employment of the same weapons in their own communities? Put in another context, would the Allies have used atomic bombs to stop Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 or even France eight months later? Great Britain repeatedly threatened the massive use of chemical weapons against Germany prior to 1939 but quickly backed down when real war came.<sup>38</sup> France went so far as to declare Paris an open city to preclude its destruction when its territorial defenses crumbled.

Truman did authorize the use of atomic weapons to try to "shock and awe" (to borrow a contemporary adage) Japan into the unconditional surrender but would he have done so at the beginning of the war against an equally armed opponent given the perspective we have now? Truman fired Douglas MacArthur for publicly advocating their use in China and North Korea. Nuclear weapons threats have been no more useful in stopping war than the vaunted Maginot Line was at stopping Hitler.

***The danger in NATO's threat to use nuclear weapons if conventional defense fails is that it abandons 2500 years of philosophic teaching about how to ethically fight war (international law) and in the process encourages nuclear proliferation on the basis of legitimate self-defense.*** What appears good for the goose is equally attractive to the gander. Anyone who has ever spent time reading US Information Service translations of third world media will attest to this fact. On May 11, 1998 the Indian government shocked the world by setting off three atomic weapons and declaring itself the sixth nuclear weapons state. By coincidence the same day Admiral Stansfield Turner, the former CIA Director, was in London speaking on the release of his new book advocating nuclear disarmament. The Indian High Commissioner (Ambassador to the Court of St James) arrived amidst great fanfare, charged into the official reception, strode up to Turner, placed his finger in the admiral's chest and declared, "You see now, we've done it! We've showed you white people we brown people can have these things too!" The old admiral drew back, scrunched his deeply wrinkled eye brow, thought for a moment and replied, "I'm afraid your government will one day, like my own, come very much to regret its decision."<sup>39</sup> Three weeks later, Pakistan exploded its own nuclear bomb.

Neither India or Pakistan have a second strike capability, thought by many analysts to be the requisite stabilizing factor in MAD, the lack of which compels both towards a first-strike doctrine by way of a use-or-lose logic. Analogous to the irreversible mobilizations that led to World War I, nuclear war once started will prove almost impossible to stop and may spread far

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<sup>37</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Tactical Nuclear Weapons: European Perspectives (London: Taylor and Francis, Ltd., 1978) p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, leading airpower strategists such as Billy Mitchell and Giulio Douhet predicted the next war would be a short conflict fought from the skies using chemical bombs. When war appeared imminent in 1939, the British government issued gas masks to every man, woman, and child, much as the Israelis did after the Iraqi Scud attacks during 1991. The Royal Air Force possessed at the time the world's largest and most capable fleet of long-range bombers, capable of reaching most of Europe. Yet when the peace broke, the bombers dropped their strategy rather than their bombs and the widespread talk about chemical bombing never materialized. It was only a series of tactical errors that led to the start of strategic bombing campaigns that thrived on reprisals rather than war-winning strategy.

<sup>39</sup> Personal notes by Alan J. Parrington, US Air Attache', US Embassy, London May 1999

beyond the radioactive fallout pattern. As General Lee Butler, the former head of U.S. nuclear forces once put it, "Nuclear war is a raging, insatiable beast whose instincts and appetites we pretend to understand but cannot possibly control."<sup>40</sup>

The thousands of warheads now positioned on alert around the world create a tinderbox atmosphere unwarranted by current diplomatic relations. They sit there at the ready waiting for the spark that will send them on their suicidal way. In January 1996 they very nearly got it. Russian Strategic Rocket Forces, incorrectly interpreting a pre-announced launch of a Norwegian scientific rocket, went on full alert thinking they were under attack from a U.S. Submarine Launch Ballistic Missile (SLBM) in a possible decapitation strike to take out Russian leaders. Boris Yeltsin was alerted and is said to have activated "his nuclear briefcase" coming within minutes of a massive offensive response.<sup>41</sup> Fortunately, providence found the Russian President in full command of his faculties that day and lower ranking officers defused the situation before a command decision was required. It might have turned out otherwise. Lest any American take pride in the thought 'it could never happen here', US command and control authorities have had many similar near-disasters as highlighted by Stanford Professor Scott Sagan. In fact, during the Cuban Missile Crisis itself, there were a series of accidental test launches, false warnings, and inadvertent penetrations of Soviet airspace by U.S. strategic reconnaissance aircraft, any one of which could easily have initiated World War III. President Kennedy became so frustrated with command and control he complained to his staff, "There is always some son-of-a-bitch who doesn't get the word!"<sup>42</sup>

Ballistic Missile Defense Office officials in Washington acknowledged the 1996 Russian incident and placed the threat of a MAD-driven Russian response at three percent – 1 in 33. Kennedy reflected that with all the mistakes that were made in the Cuban crisis, the chances of nuclear war had been "somewhere between one out of three and even."<sup>43</sup> Should Bin Laden get his hands on any weapons, odds will approach certainty. For many Americans any risk of nuclear war is unacceptable, particularly in today's post-Cold War regime. ***Thus, the second step toward national nuclear security should be a negotiated removal of all, not just obsolete or redundant, strategic weapons from their immediate launch postures.*** This is not as difficult or destabilizing as it may sound. It is the position adopted by the International Generals and Admirals, a group of 56 distinguished flag officers from around the globe including 20 Americans, 18 Russians and 17 nations in all. Wars do not simply occur like some unpredictable natural phenomena; they are the last event in a long string of failed diplomatic and economic ties. Warning time is integral to the process to which military preparedness can and should be correlated. But the scope of readiness cannot be from a 'knee-jerk' reaction in peace to a 'finger on the trigger' postures in crisis if we intend for political diplomacy to prevail over military necessity. Stability comes from the former, not the latter. It should be remembered that World War I was not caused by the determined decisions of rational political leaders, but was instead the result of military mobilization schedules that could not be stopped once started. Kennedy gave copies of Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August to his entire staff for that very reason.

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<sup>40</sup> Gen Lee Butler, USAF, Retired, Former Commander US Strategic Air Command 1991-1994, Address to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 4 December 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph C. Anselmo, "Russian Threat Still Massive," Aviation Week & Space Technology 146, no. 8 (24 February 1997) p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Scott Sagan, The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993) p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy (NY: Harper and Row, 1965) p.705 as quoted in Sagan.

We cannot “dis-invent” atomic weapons, but we can holster their potential to drive events rather than respond to them. Verifiable measures could be instituted over time to the point where nuclear weapons could be removed from their threatening missile silos and submarine launch tubes to be safely stored in survivable locations for recall if ever needed. In 1991, President George Bush (the elder) took a positive step in this direction by ordering tactical weapons taken off US surface fleet ships and the stand-down of the strategic bomber alert force. Since then, little progress has been made despite the Clinton and Bush (the younger) Administrations’ claim that Russian missiles are no longer targeted at the United States, a false assertion that galls many critics.<sup>44</sup>

To accomplish such a fundamental change in strategy, we must first dislodge the institutional inertia that relegates the Triad (the three-layered redundancy of land, sea, and air nuclear forces) to off-limits, closed-door discussions. Too many politicians, afraid to be labeled as weak on defense, hide behind the dual shield of secrecy and arms talks, abrogating their constitutional responsibility to publicly debate and set war fighting policy. Many senior military leaders, concerned with day-to-day operations against a mirror-imaged foe, have similarly taken a “not on my watch” hard line, describing as destabilizing anything but the same old doctrine. Some boldly suggest that what supposedly worked against secular Soviets will work against radical religious fundamentalists. It is as if MAD were theology and the Triad sacrosanct. But this is not the 1960s.

The factors that generated MAD and its doctrines no longer exist, if they ever did. They certainly have little in common with what motivates terrorists today. The perennial argument that the U.S. must maintain and improve its capability because others will do so ignores the crucial fact that it was the United States that was first to develop or conceive every major innovation in the nuclear arms race. We developed the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, the neutron bomb, and multiple independently targeted reentry vehicle (MIRV) warhead. We were the first to deploy long-range strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and cruise missiles. We continue to innovate with the B-2 Stealth bomber and its new weapons the W-88. If the rest of the world has done anything, it is to try to play catch-up ball in a game that cannot be won. The notion that the Soviets tried to acquire nuclear superiority and in the process accelerated the demise of their economy is a Pyrrhic victory given the missile threat we still face, the national debt we have incurred, the environmental damage we have wreaked, and the terrorism threat we now face.

To foreclose the possibility of terrorists acquiring nuclear devices, we need to strengthen and enforce, not ignore or abandon, international laws regarding the use of all weapons of mass destruction. Militaries, both here and abroad, already categorized nuclear bombs with other unconventional ordnance using the common label of “NBC” for nuclear, biological, and chemical devices. The term *unconventional* belies the characteristics of the class, which, as a rule, are inhumane and cause severe and lasting collateral damage. Strategists have been confounded for eight decades to define any set of circumstances where these weapons can rationally be justified. Civilized nations have thus established treaties to outlaw the latter two elements of the NBC set as an unacceptable means of defense.

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<sup>44</sup> Scott Lindlaw, Assoc Press, [The Denver Post](#), March 11, 2002, p14A. It is widely reported and yet to be denied that the US and Russian 1994 decision to de-target each others homeland was accomplished by a simple computer instruction that can be overridden in a few seconds time, thereby returning affected systems to their immediate launch postures.

*Nuclear weapons, like chemical and biological devices before them, should be banned from warfare as envisioned by Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which the U.S. is the principal signatory.* We need not wait until some Third World nation decimates its enemy's capital (or Bin Laden destroys Washington D.C.), before we collectively label the development and/or use of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons a criminal act of war punishable by intervention, arrest and prosecution by international tribunal.

Of course, this may require that we abandon strategic warfare altogether, for it goes to the very heart of the question of what war is really all about. The truth is, we would be better off militarily and economically, for MAD and its underlying strategic doctrine are counterproductive in the short-term and self-defeating in the long-run. There are far more effective ways of convincing opponents to accept our political will than by attacking their social passions. We might even find it more civilized.

We must in the end, recognize that it was the United States that has led the world down the nuclear warfare path, and it is only the United States that can lead from the precipice upon which we are now lodged. The United States developed atomic weapons not in response to a military need but as a hedge against Nazi terror. The Soviets developed their arsenal in response to the United States; the Chinese in response to the Soviets; the Indians the Chinese; the Pakistanis the Indians; and so on down the proliferation path to Armageddon. It is fruitless for the great powers to continue to decry the nuclear proliferation of third world while simultaneously maintaining and improving their own arsenals. If the United States, the world's only remaining superpower, provides the leadership, other nations will follow, for it is in their primary interests to do so. To continue in the same direction is to tempt the forces of evil.

Since the Seventeenth Century, wars have progressively become more destructive and inhuman, the result of political and industrial revolutions that put a weapon in every angry peasant's hand. Democracy has been no cure, and in fact has added to the inhumanity by fomenting intense nationalism and particularism as in the American Civil War when six hundred thousand countrymen lost their lives over the democratic question of freedom vs. states' rights . World War I saw 10 million men killed in the trenches of a senseless stalemate egged on by nationalistic pride. World War II saw another 50 or 60 million perish, most of them civilians, in bombed-out cities and concentration camps, justified in the name of "total war", all started by a democratically elected chancellor of the German Third Reich, Adolph Hitler. A Department of Defense study conducted during the Johnson Administration estimated that if MAD failed between 360 million and 450 million people would die in the first few hours alone.

If the world is to reverse the tide of history and survive the atomic age, we must soon recognize the incompatibility of weapons of mass destruction with the political nature of warfare. Only then will we have the moral authority, wisdom and political ascendancy to change the counter-productive strategies that have abandoned international law and now threaten us all.

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