

# Restoring Deterrence

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by Elbridge Colby

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***Abstract:** While the strategy of deterrence has faced considerable criticism since September 11, it needs to be reexamined. This article addresses serious challenges to the deterrence strategy. It also considers the deterrence strategy as it relates to states such as Iraq, North Korea, Iran and others. Ultimately, it argues that deterrence is a security policy offering a way forward for the United States that is not only more effective because more tailored, but is also more moral than its alternatives.*

“**T**he strategy of deterrence, which served us so well during the decades of the Cold War, will no longer do. Our terrorist enemy has no country to defend, no assets to destroy in order to discourage an attack. . . . There is only one way to protect ourselves against catastrophic terrorist violence, and that is to destroy the terrorists before they can launch further attacks against the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney spoke these words in October 2003 at the Heritage Foundation, in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. The last Cold War Defense Secretary was laying the wreath over a doctrine that, though much abused from both left and right, for decades had played a central role in defending the West against Soviet and Communist attack. The policy of credible threat had given way to that of decisive preventive action.

The vice president’s eulogy for deterrence was not the only push to lay the old theory to rest. The president, in his speech at West Point in 2002, said, “Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide

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<sup>1</sup>Remarks by Vice President Cheney to the Heritage Foundation, Oct. 10, 2003. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031010-1.html>.

them to terrorist allies.”<sup>2</sup> The White House’s National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006 downplayed deterrence in favor of prevention and preemption. On editorial pages, influential neoconservative voices such as the *Wall Street Journal’s* editorial staff and Charles Krauthammer have dismissed deterrence as of no use against terrorists and hostile regimes. On the liberal side, various voices have attacked deterrence as inhuman and called for the shrinking, if not outright dismantling, of the American nuclear force.

At the same time, the question of the role of deterrence has taken on renewed salience abroad. In the Middle East, Iran appears to be proceeding full bore towards developing a nuclear weapons capability, shielded by the smoke and mirrors of its talented negotiators. In the Far East, the truculent North Korean regime has called the American bluff and tested a nuclear weapon, becoming the world’s most recent member of the (public) nuclear club. The threat of massive WMD terrorist attacks against the United States continues, with new revelations of terrorist plots in Britain and elsewhere only reaffirming the peril Al Qaeda and its brood pose. And, of course, the United States continues to face strategic challenges of a lesser magnitude worldwide, from China’s developing military through Russia’s threat to lower its nuclear threshold in the event of war to Venezuelan potentate Hugo Chavez’ blustery pledges to become Latin America’s first nuclear power. Familiar voices, including the Vice President’s and much of the neoconservative commentariat, continue to intone that deterrence will not work and that America must take preventive action to eradicate the most extreme of these gathering threats. But there are new players, too. Even a well-respected technocrat like former Secretary of Defense William Perry has called for preventive strikes against North Korea weapons sites.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, that deterrence is no longer a reliable policy for the United States seems to have become almost conventional wisdom.

As it happens, however, the conventional wisdom in this case is wrong: reports of the demise of deterrence are greatly exaggerated. In truth, the policy of deterrence remains today the best strategic posture for the United States. As an overarching strategy for our nation’s defense, the United States should adhere to the policy of the tailored credible threat backed by real force and will. This is the proper policy of a confident great power that is satisfied with its place in the global order. We should not place our hopes for security in the futile effort to stamp out every trace of hostility to the United States. We will never be able to “drain the swamp” of anti-American feeling, and overheated efforts to do so will only rile up the snakes within. We should, instead, focus our nation’s power on deterring those who might think to cross our

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by President Bush at West Point, June 1, 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, “If Necessary, Strike and Destroy,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2006.

“red lines”—and unleashing our unparalleled fury on those with the bad judgment to do so. In this, the United States will return to the great American tradition, best exemplified by the Federal armies of the Civil War and particularly by Generals Sherman and Grant. It is this policy that guided us safely through the Cold War and can, if wisely and resolutely applied, guide us still today.

### Deterrence as the Strategy of the Satisfied Power

First, a definition and a little background.<sup>4</sup> Though not a precise concept, deterrence is a theory of defense that uses the threat of force to deter or prevent another party from doing something.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that the search for perfect security is a fool’s errand in a world inherently beset by conflict and contingency, deterrence seeks to build security on the firmer foothold of a probabilistic view of human nature. This is one that sees that the most reliable human motive is the preservation of beloved things—particularly one’s own life. Contrary to the oft-repeated criticism, deterrence is not blind to opponents’ willingness to lay down their lives for a cause; but it understands that *something* is always valued, and it is that which is valued which must be threatened. In all cases, then, the method of deterrence is to understand what the enemy values most—whether it be life or clan or party—and to place whatever that may be at risk. In a world in which perfect security is a chimera, deterrence is a theory that privileges probability over aspirations for perfection.<sup>6</sup> In this it differs from the idealistic programs for peace of Immanuel Kant or the economic peace plan of Karl Marx or the imperial peace policy of a Rome or a Louis XIV France.

While deterrence requires taking advantage of others’ fears to accomplish given ends, it is fundamentally defensive. It should be distinguished from its more brazen cousin, coercion (or compellance), which is the use of threats of violence to accomplish positive ends.<sup>7</sup> This is why deterrence, if workable, has always been an appealing posture for those without aggrandizing aims. Through the threat of overwhelming force it enforces peace, founding it on the firmer ground of respect and fear rather than the shiftier ground of ideology or affection. Conservatively saving its blows for those situations when angered

<sup>4</sup>For a recent analysis of the concept, see Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004). For a classic exposition by one of the concept’s principal propounders, see Bernard Brodie, *The Anatomy of Deterrence* (RAND, 1958).

<sup>5</sup>“Deterrence” is taken here as a kind of subspecies of what Clausewitz was describing in his discussion of “defense.” As in Clausewitz’ definition, deterrence is not pure passivity, but is rather a posture that by definition involves the use of offense within its broad parameters. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>For the paradigmatic statement of this point, see von Clausewitz, *On War*, e.g., pp. 89–90 and p. 130.

<sup>7</sup>See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

angered, it promises to save lives and resources. And only striking when provoked, it has on its side the presumption of justice. It is, in other words, the policy of the satisfied power.

### **The Arguments Against Deterrence**

One would think that, as the world's richest and most powerful nation, the United States would think and act like a satisfied power. Yet discussions about national strategy seem to presume otherwise. For instance, the central charge against deterrence today is that, in an age of suicide terrorism, rogue states, and nuclear weapons, the United States cannot afford to rely on a strategy that is fundamentally defensive. As President Bush argued in his seminal West Point speech of 2002, the intertwined threats of terrorism, proliferation, and errant state behavior constitute such a grave threat to American security that only active measures can keep this country safe. The "risk calculus," he and other critics of deterrence allege, has changed. From a bipolar Cold War world of relative rationality and stability, we have entered a far more unpredictable world full of irrational actors. As then CIA director Jim Woolsey put it, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have slain the big dragon, but a myriad of little serpents have sprung up in its place.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the anti-deterrence argument rests on three conceptual pillars: First, that deterrence is unrealistic, because the enemies the United States faces today cannot be deterred; second, that deterrence (or its sister, containment) is too passive and, therefore, provides the wrong strategic superstructure to guide American action in today's world; finally, that deterrence is immoral, either because it rules out military force to foster humanitarianism or democracy abroad or because of its reliance on threatening overwhelming force to convince potential enemies to back down.

It was precisely these arguments that powered the drive for war against Iraq. The administration and its supporters argued that Iraq and Saddam Hussein were fundamentally irrational actors who could not be deterred and contained. War proponents dismissed deterrence as too passive and noted that Baghdad's development of WMD would have permitted one of "the world's most dangerous regimes . . . to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."<sup>9</sup> A WMD-armed Saddam would have, in their view, broken out of his containment box and then threatened vital American interests. Finally, war supporters chastised those advocating deterrence as immoral, blind to the terrible suffering of the Iraqi people under the tyrannical Baathist regime, and unwilling to use American power to spread democracy to a country groaning under oppression.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Bruce W. Nelan, "A New World for Spies," *Time*, July 5, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> President Bush, State of the Union, Jan. 29, 2002.

In recent months, these anti-deterrence arguments have been revived, this time regarding Iran. As they did in making the case for the Iraq war, deterrence opponents contend that Iran is an undeterrable power. The country, they point out, is led by a fanatical millenarian president who threatens to vaporize Israel, a coterie of zealot mullahs, and a leadership class fired by a revolutionary ideology. Iran has ties to terrorist groups with histories of anti-American activity, above all Hezbollah. Iran itself has held American officials hostage and bombed the U.S. barracks at Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Considering deterrence too passive an option against this reputedly undeterrable threat, the President has stated that the United States will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. Such a power, it is argued, cannot be trusted to behave rationally. In addition, war advocates have chastised containment proponents as immoral for turning a deaf ear to the Iranian people's suffering under the mullah regime, and to their desire to live under a democracy instead.

There is a seductive logic to these arguments. Certainly, the Saddam Husseins and Mahmoud Ahmadinejads—not to mention Muammar Qaddafi, Bashar al-Assads, and Kim Jong-Ils—of the world are hardly model cosmopolitan citizens. They kill their own countrymen, start wars and authorize terrorist attacks, and routinely buck the will of the United States, our allies, and the United Nations. In a perfect world, it would be far better if they were prevented from developing WMD. Those arguing for active measures against proliferation, rogue states, and terrorism appear to hold out the alluring prospect of just such a solution—a world at peace, without the threat of WMD in enemy hands. What's not to like?

A great deal. Such arguments rest on a fundamentally flawed understanding of America's risk calculus today—of what is possible, of what the country needs to do to defend itself, and what it should indeed do. The truth is that deterrence is a strategy that can work in virtually all cases, even against bitter foes. It can provide the logic to guide American policymaking in an uncertain world; and it is ultimately a far more moral system of defense either than one that seeks monsters to destroy or one that withdraws from the world entirely.<sup>10</sup>

## Deterrence Works

The leading charge made against the deterrence strategy is that America's modern enemies cannot be deterred. Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, and the rest of the rogue states' gallery are, in this view, actors bent on hostile action against the United States, our interests, and our allies. The risk of

<sup>10</sup> For a statement of the intellectual underpinnings implied here, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.).

allowing these powers to obtain WMD—particularly nuclear weapons—is so great that it outweighs the costs of initiating preventive steps up to and including war. Advocates of this position point wistfully to the “easier” days of the Cold War, when the West faced only the “rational” Soviets and, to a lesser extent, Chinese.

Why this argument has achieved such dominance is a mystery. There is no reason to think that America’s enemies cannot in significant respects be deterred. There is plenty that each of these rogue states holds dear that the United States can threaten. Though little is known of the “Hermit Kingdom,” it is certainly clear that North Korea’s Kim Jong-Il and his family very much value his place as the great leader. Indeed, the brooding specter of American nuclear and conventional forces striking down the Kim regime was enough to end the war in 1953 and maintain a very cold peace for half a century.<sup>11</sup> Syria’s weak Assad family dictatorship is probably even more susceptible to threats to its hold on power than the Kims. Iran’s mullahcracy and revolutionary leadership are deeply committed to maintaining their regime (probably the reason they are developing their nuclear capability in the first place). All of these perverse dictators share a common devotion to their own power, a devotion that the United States can easily exploit.

Nor is the United States limited only to threatening the ruling clique’s hold on power. These regimes exhibit a host of other vulnerabilities. America can, for instance, target things that high officials, military officers, and other important decision makers hold dear. This strategy has been underway in our activities against the North Korean regime’s ability to garner money, luxuries, and other goods from abroad. Similar ideas have been discussed as ways to influence members of the Iranian nuclear community. James Baker famously issued a stern threat to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz before the Persian Gulf War, making clear the terrible consequences should the Iraqis use WMD against Coalition forces—and the threat worked.<sup>12</sup> During the second Iraq war, and tacking against the very logic of the invasion, the U.S. apparently issued grave and personal warnings to military leaders in the Iraqi Army not to use WMD against Coalition forces.

All these suggestions derive from the simple intuition central to deterrence theory: that your opponents value something and that holding that valued thing or things at risk is the best way to ensure security. Security—not necessarily dominance. Deterrence is not a silver bullet; it will not ensure

<sup>11</sup> See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years, Vol. I: Mandate for Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 178–81.

<sup>12</sup> For Tariq Aziz’ account of why Iraq did not use chemical weapons, see his 1996 interview with *Frontline*, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/aziz/3.html>. “Q: Why didn’t you use your chemical weapons? Aziz: Well, we didn’t think it wise to use them. Q: Can you tell me in more detail . . . ? Aziz: That’s all I can say. It was not wise to use such kind of weapons in such kind of war, with such an enemy. Q: Because they had nuclear weapons? Aziz: You can . . . make your own conclusions.”

others' compliance with our every whim. But if a demand is reasonable and a threat credible, the system is likely to work.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if we demand that no rogue state launch or enable through third parties (i.e., terrorists) a WMD strike against the United States or its allies—a reasonable, defensive demand—and back that provision up with a threat—clearly credible—to respond with crushing force, there is every reason to believe that such a policy will work. No regime, no matter how aggressive and risk-inclined, would be so foolish as to attack the United States, a move that would yield little advantage, and thereby incur an attack's clear consequence—utter destruction.

There is important evidence to this effect. The Cold War experience shows that such defensive demands backed by believable threats can stave off attacks by even the most aggressive foes. It is amusing today to hear the Soviet Union referred to as a rational and reliable power, a tagline that would have been news to the Western officials who had to deal with the USSR during those years. This was, after all, the power that threatened to “bury” the West, brandished its awesome military forces with little restraint, developed an enormous nuclear arsenal that peaked at something on the order of 45,000 nuclear warheads (including over 10,000 “strategic” warheads), and tried to cow Western Europe into submission. Without the threat of American nuclear retaliation, the Soviets likely would either have intimidated the Western Europeans into fealty or invaded to make it so. Only the threat of U.S. nuclear strikes placated this ideological behemoth, destined by its holy book to spread Marxism worldwide, from starting the third world war. If the United States was able to deter perhaps the most aggressive, most powerful force in human history, why can't we deter Iran or North Korea or Syria?<sup>14</sup>

The Cold War also illuminates the limits of a coercive or compellence strategy. The failure of the Eisenhower-Dulles “rollback” policy shows that coercion—the offensive use of threat—is far more difficult to pull off than defense. Deterrence works, by contrast, because its fundamental aim is a conservative one, the preservation of an existing system. If the United States and its allies see themselves as conservators of the current international order, as they should, then deterrence is a workable strategy. Of course, this may require accommodating proliferation and changes in the balances of power, but these developments are unlikely to alter the underlying dynamics of the current order. What the United States demands of its rogue state irritants is simple: that they not strike or enable a strike at the United States or its allies, at pain of massive

<sup>13</sup>For an interesting historical discussion of this point, see Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 283. Parker cites Barbara Farnham, ed., *Avoiding Losses/Taking Risks: Prospect Theory in International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup>For discussions of the proper nuclear posture for the United States today, see, inter alia, Glenn C. Buchan, et al., *Future Roles of U.S. Nuclear Forces: Implications for U.S. Strategy* (RAND, 2003); David S. McDonough, *Nuclear Superiority: The “New Triad” and the Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2006).

American response. If the threat of a devastating American response is sufficiently credible, then neither can these powers bluff and bludgeon themselves into regional dominance. Such a policy on our part would allow the continuation of the peaceful, profitable, and promising international system.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, if the United States' objective is to be more grandiose—hegemony—then perhaps deterrence is not the best fit. Deterrence will not force regime change. But the inadvisability of such a policy should be clear by now.

### **Deterrence is a Better Blueprint for Action**

The second charge leveled against deterrence is that it is too passive in today's threatening world, particularly in the face of terrorism. In this view, deterrence imbues our defense with a too sluggish and reactive *modus operandi*. In the wake of 9/11, and in the face of the proliferation of WMD, it is contended that deterrence is not proactive enough and is too accepting of terrorism as a way of war. The current administration, backed by vocal commentators, has outlined a much different strategy—a “war on terror.” This strategy, seeing terrorism *as such* as a threat to America and its interests, seeks to combat it wherever it may be found. The objective of the policy is, in principle, to suppress the very practice of terrorism.

It is clear that the problem of radical catastrophic terrorism demands an active defense and that the struggle against Al Qaeda is and should be viewed as in key respects a war. But critics err in arguing that a deterrence strategy does not provide a suitable superstructure for such policies. While deterrence is a policy that seeks to use the threat of violence to avoid violence, it is also a policy that is prepared to—and indeed must—use force if challenged. It is a defensive policy, but not a passive one. When “red lines” are crossed, it demands severe and thoroughgoing retaliation.<sup>16</sup> The current struggle against Al Qaeda falls on the reactive side of the deterrence divide.

Both the neoconservatives and the liberal internationalists on the other stray from this sensible policy. On the one hand, we should not confuse our strategy by declaring war on terror as a *tactic*, because such a war can never be won. There is no reason to think that the use of terror—the perennial weapon of the weak—can be ended.

<sup>15</sup> A system expertly described by William Odom and Robert Dujarric in their masterful book *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> “For the sake of deterrence before hostilities, the enemy must expect us to be vindictive and irrational if he attacks us.” Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959). See also p. 295. See also: “The idea of retaliation is fundamental to all defense.” *On War*, p. 454. For a depiction of the Romans' deep appreciation for the importance of retaliation in a deterrence system, see Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 3–4.

On the other hand, liberal critics of the struggle against Al Qaeda would bind America's hands based on unrealistic views of international law and implausible humanitarian aspirations. They decry detention, interrogation methods, cooperation with unpleasant regimes, and so forth—the very steps that are central to a successful struggle against a fanatically dedicated enemy. They would cripple our response, leaving us more at peril, without justice, and with a fangless deterrent.

Deterrence provides a saner understanding of how to combat Al Qaeda than either the open-ended war on terror or the liberal model of hoping for security through seeking to solve “root cause” problems. In line with this understanding, the United States should convey a clear policy in which strikes by terrorist groups against the American homeland will result in, at the very least, the destruction of those groups and those complicit with them. The logic of our response to 9/11 is therefore clear. Al Qaeda clearly crossed our “red line.” Atop the demands of justice and our future security, deterrence requires that the United States take every step to destroy Al Qaeda in order for our deterrent against terrorists to be credible. The United States must show to all other terrorist groups—such as Hezbollah—that catastrophic attacks against Americans will result in their destruction. The American focus should be single-minded. While we may detest other groups, it was Al Qaeda that struck us, and so Al Qaeda must be destroyed. Even if the Pakistanis are devious and the Afghans truculent, we must push to unearth and punish bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, no matter how arduous the search.

Furthermore, deterrence is a valuable concept at the operational level as well. A counterterrorism strategy animated by deterrence theory would take advantage of all the vulnerabilities and pressure points in the terrorist system. Suicide bombers might not value their lives, but they likely value their cause, their homes, and so forth. The United States could, therefore, focus on each of these value points: causes and groups can be singled out for hostile attention, both “kinetic” and diplomatic; homes can be seized or even bulldozed, as the Israelis do with the homes of Palestinian suicide bombers; allies can be pressured or otherwise inconvenienced. Nor does America need to limit its view only to those who carry the bombs themselves. The same rationales can be applied outwardly, throughout the terrorist network, to the faceless men of the organization, individuals no doubt more easily intimidated than the bombers themselves. Such a campaign's objective would be to spread fear about the American response to complicity in terrorist activity against our nation.<sup>17</sup>

Such a strategy would also be an object lesson to other terrorist groups. It would certainly send the message that attacks against Americans or complicity in such attacks is gravely dangerous and costly. Given that it is quixotic

<sup>17</sup> Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins outline a theory of this kind in an excellent 2002 RAND report, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on Al Qaeda* (RAND, 2002).

for the United States to seek to eliminate all terrorist groups that potentially threaten us, a counterterrorism strategy of deterrence is a far more proportional, effective, cost efficient, and sane policy.

### **The Problem of an Anonymous Strike**

What, critics might ask, would we do if the perpetrator of a strike tried to remain anonymous? This is a difficult question, but not an irresolvable one. Under a deterrence strategy, the United States would announce to the world that possession of WMD incurs certain responsibilities and that one of these would be the duty for countries possessing the relevant types of weapons to be entirely transparent with us in the event of an attack. Should a group detonate a nuclear weapon (or comparably powerful weapon of mass destruction) in the United States, the appropriate response would be to demand an accounting from all those suspected of complicity, to be willing to play hardball with those recalcitrant, and to strike, of course, at those found to be responsible for the attack. Such a policy is a hard one, no doubt, but it is, in practice, little more difficult than the situation we find ourselves in today.

To elaborate, the chief problem presented by an anonymous strike would be determining who struck us; if we are resolute in our willingness to retaliate, as we must be, time would not be a problem. The focus of our effort in such a situation would, therefore, be a methodical, reliable investigation of the attack's origin, followed by a ferocious response. Given the United States' resources, the obvious incentive for us to find out who was responsible, the moral strength of our position, and the forensic capabilities available to this country, the problem is not excessively difficult. Can anyone imagine that a United States that had been struck by a nuclear weapon would not turn over every stone to discover who was responsible?

This approach would best be preceded by a public clarification of our policy. The principal point would be to put all countries on alert that, in the event of a nuclear or comparable WMD strike against the United States, we would expect full cooperation and all appropriate transparency in investigating the source of the attack. There should be no foot dragging along the lines of the Saudi response to the Khobar Towers bombing, for instance. Our allies and other major powers, such as Russia, accustomed to the rigors of verification regimes, would have good reason to sign on to such a system that would benefit them just as much as it would us. And for any recalcitrant countries, such as Pakistan or North Korea, we would make clear that their refusal to cooperate would, to borrow a legal term, establish a "presumption of guilt" (or, more properly, "complicity") on their part. (In legal terms, a presumption of guilt does not entail a conviction on the charge, but puts the burden on the party to disprove the accusation.) Even bad actors such as these countries, however, would be incentivized to participate, since such a system would both allow them to preserve their weapons for their stated purposes—strategic

deterrence—while satisfying the chief concern of the United States—their use by third parties in a terrorist strike. And if these countries had the poor sense not to cooperate with us in the wake of a serious attack, then we would be well-justified in judging them to be at least complicit in the strike and, therefore, subject to whatever punishment we deem fit. This eventuality would be precisely the situation in which the policy of “those who are not with us are against us” would appropriately apply.

In the wake of a strike, therefore, the United States would embark on an exhaustive investigative effort, aided where necessary by cooperating nations. And, when the perpetrator had been uncovered, the normal response to such aggression called for by a deterrence strategy would be the next step: a ferocious employment of “the flashing sword of vengeance”<sup>18</sup> against all those involved, from the bombers themselves to their controllers, their abettors, and any state actors complicit in the attack. Just as in an open strike, the twin demands of justice and example-setting would require severe retaliation.

Of course the possibility that a group could escape responsibility cannot be wholly dismissed, but it is extremely unlikely, given the vast resources the United States and other cooperating nations and organizations can call upon. Furthermore, whatever possibility of enduring clandestinity exists for such strikes remains just as, if not more, true for other strategies such as the current one. Finally, given the strengths of the system proposed, any terrorist group would have to presume that it would be found out, adding a further disincentive for those organizations that can be deterred on these grounds.

Such a policy would not be immune from failure. It is possible that an anonymous attacker could escape identification and punishment. But no system can honestly offer perfect security, for war is inalterably the realm of insecurity and chance.<sup>19</sup> The policy offered, however, provides the best means of dissuading attackers and those who might work with them and, in the case of failure, of identifying and punishing those involved.

### **Deterrence is More Moral**

One might ask: If deterrence is so effective at providing security, then why has there been a rush to abandon it in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse and 9/11? Shouldn’t such a successful policy have earned greater loyalty? The answer to these questions illuminates the serious divisions among Americans about what the purpose of our foreign policy should be.

Deterrence was not a policy that won out in the Cold War because it was the most loved. It was, instead, the best of a menu of bad options. Hard right anti-Communists thought deterrence weak, a concession of Soviet

<sup>18</sup> *On War*, p. 443.

<sup>19</sup> *On War*, p. 117.

hegemony in Eastern Europe and a failure of Western will. They called for the rollback of Communist suzerainty, even going so far as to advocate preventive strikes against the Soviet Union and China before they were able to field nuclear weapons. The left, meanwhile, detested deterrence as an immoral use of terror as a threat, a reliance on weapons whose very existence they decried. Believing that no state objective could justify the use of nuclear weapons, the left advocated reducing our strategic forces, moving towards abolition, and a conciliatory policy towards the Soviets. Since neither the right nor the left could win out—fortunately—deterrence arose as an option few liked but all responsible parties could endorse.<sup>20</sup>

With the collapse of the Soviet threat, this agreement lost its *raison d'être*. Interventionists left and right broke free of the restrictive bonds a deterrence and containment strategy had put in place. For hard-edged advocates for U.S. primacy, like Donald Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney, a deterrence posture would prevent the United States from exercising regional hegemony in the Middle East or East Asia. For neoconservative and liberal interventionists like Paul Wolfowitz, Tony Blair, or Michael Ignatieff, anxious to spread democracy, halt genocide and other humanitarian crises, and “end tyranny in our world,”<sup>21</sup> deterrence was too hesitant about such interventions. And for pacifist leftists—and even a few old hawks—deterrence was a system of terror itself, one that could be discarded at the end of history. They, therefore, called for abolishing nuclear weapons, the end of using threats for security, and internationalizing security responsibility. Deterrence was left with few friends.

Its erstwhile friends should now consider returning. Contrary to the arguments of the pacifist-inclined left, a strategy of disarmament and conciliation is morally irresponsible in the face of Al Qaeda and its like. Despite what the neo-conservatives and the liberal interventionists had hoped, the high moral rhetoric of liberating Iraq has yielded to a grimmer sense of the moral duties of considering consequences, necessity, and proportion. We have relearned the truth of the critiques of revolutionary France and of Woodrow Wilson—that even the honest pursuit of high-minded liberal aspirations can yield death and chaos. History has its own ways and means and we should moderate our hope for its coming with a reverential fear of its wrath.

In between these two extremes, deterrence is a security policy that offers a way forward for the United States that is not only more effective because more tailored, but is also more moral. It is more moral because a deterrent posture would entail a strategy that is more proportionate, more necessary, more responsive, and, ultimately, more just. Indeed, deterrence comports with the fundamental human intuition that it is generally only moral

<sup>20</sup> For a classic history of this development, see Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> President Bush, Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2005.

to fight when attacked. In this it complies with the classical conception of just war, which mandates that wars only be conducted when one's cause is just, waged by a legitimate authority, motivated by a right intent, fought with a real prospect of success, conducted proportionately, and undertaken only as a last resort. Deterrence satisfies these criteria. It is a defensive strategy that responds to invasions or attacks, and is therefore just; it sets out relatively clear guidelines for when it mandates that the government fight, and, therefore, is governed by legitimate authority. It is driven by a desire to protect, deter, and avenge, and is therefore motivated by right intent; its realistic red lines and threats are backed up by the awesome power of the United States, and therefore likely to succeed; and it responds when attacked and asks from the rest of the international community only respect for its marked out positions rather than revolutionary transformation, and is therefore proportional.<sup>22</sup> Finally, by its nature it is undertaken as a last resort rather than preventively.<sup>23</sup> It was the fundamental moral attractiveness of this position that continually frustrated both Soviet efforts to decouple Europe from the American nuclear umbrella during the Cold War *and* occasional American efforts to roll back the Soviet empire.

But theorizing about war and peace cannot remain at the level of abstraction. It must bear moral responsibility for actual consequence and the power of contingency, as Max Weber pointed out.<sup>24</sup> And deterrence, defense by calculation, uniquely satisfies the moral requirement that leaders, whatever their benevolent intentions, are basically responsible for the consequences that contingency produces from their actions. This it does by grounding a nation's security on its own credible threats—not on either changing the world through force, as neo-conservatives advocate, nor by hoping that a more peaceful world will emerge, as the left proposes. Both of these extremes ground security on radical changes in the way the world operates, and, therefore, necessarily enmesh us in the rest of the world's affairs, thereby exponentially expanding our vulnerability to all the permutations that chance and contingency may produce. Deterrence, rather, narrows our profile, and thereby reduces our exposure to risk.

<sup>22</sup> “Any international moral order must rest on some hegemony of power. But this hegemony, like the supremacy of a ruling class within the state, is in itself a challenge to those who do not share it; and it must, if it is to survive, contain an element of give-and-take, of self-sacrifice on the part of those who have, which will render it tolerable to the other members of the world community. It is through this process of give-and-take, of willingness not to insist on all the prerogatives of power, that morality finds its surest foothold in international – and perhaps also in national – politics.” E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964, reprint), p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> For a typical statement of just war criteria, see “The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace,” Statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*. Originally a speech given at Munich University in 1918. (Munich: Duncker & Humboldt, 1919.)

A deterrent posture follows John Quincy Adams' adage that America should not go seeking monsters to destroy and the ancient dictum that a moral act is a proportional one.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the greatest sin of the recent strategy is its disproportion, its confusion of the necessary with the desirable. It may be desirable to "end tyranny" and distribute the blessings of liberty worldwide, but its desirability must be carefully balanced against the costs of its enactment. If Iraq teaches us anything, it must be that a moral policy is not only one guided by the best of intentions, but one that is realistic.

### **There is No Other Option**

Reasonable minds may differ on points in deterrence's favor. The strategy is no panacea, after all. It could fail. But at least it is based on reality. Indeed, perhaps the strongest argument in favor of deterrence is that no other option is really plausible.

Critics of deterrence inevitably point to the possibility of WMD falling into the hands of hostile rogue states or terrorists as proof that this strategy is unworkable. Friends of deterrence may retort, as laid out above, that the policy actually can work, if rigorously applied. But understanding the argument on these grounds alone misses a major point in deterrence's favor: proliferation of WMD is inevitable.

Critics argue against deterrence and for a prevention policy as if the diffusion of deadly technologies can be halted. Nothing in human history gives grounds for such a hope. The reality is that technology, as it becomes cheaper and more abundant, will inevitably flow outwards, to smaller and weaker states, and downwards, to sub-state actors. Consider the rapid proliferation of computer technology, inconceivable only several decades ago; the average personal computer, for example, has considerably more computing power than the Apollo missions of the 1960s. Weapons are no different, especially those that have asymmetric properties—these include increasingly powerful explosives, surface to air missiles, anti-computing weapons, and, of course, WMD. Biological weaponry, initially the preserve of the great powers, can now be developed in small labs at relatively modest cost and, with some work, tailored to do enormous damage.<sup>26</sup> There is little that the United States or any other power can do to alter this fundamental reality. It is the logical underside of the much-heralded advent of incredibly powerful technologies—the Pandora's Box effect.

We see this dynamic playing out in the Iran and North Korea contexts. While it remains difficult to develop nuclear weapons, North Korea and (apparently) Iran are showing that today even the most marginal states can

<sup>25</sup> Secretary of State John Quincy Adams address to the House of Representatives, July 4, 1821.

<sup>26</sup> For a disturbing discussion of these possibilities, see Richard A. Posner, *Catastrophe: Risk and Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

do so if sufficiently dedicated. India, Pakistan, South Africa, and Israel showed it a generation earlier, and today a number of states could do so very quickly if they desired.<sup>27</sup>

This leaves us a bit like King Canute ordering the incoming tide to recede. The United States may threaten action against Iran and North Korea based on the justification that rogue states cannot be trusted with the world's most dangerous weapons. Yet are we ready to accept the logic of that proposition? Would that not commit us to warfare against any number of undesirable states that are pursuing or possess WMD? Given that a nuclear weapon is within the reach of most states and that biological and chemical weapons are much easier to produce or obtain, is our threat to stand between nasty states and these weapons advisable, let alone credible? Furthermore, doesn't our intensely public focus on these weapons actually *incentivize* countries out of our graces to develop them? In other words, if the United States might invade you if you *might* be developing WMD and if you know that possessing them *actually does* give you important leverage over the United States, isn't it rational to assemble the bomb or cook up the biological agent?

This logic's bottom line seems clear. If the proliferation of weapons technology is inevitable, then it hardly makes sense to embark on a quixotic crusade to prevent it. Better to accept the new reality and deal with it as best we can. Seen in this light, deterrence is quite appealing. Such a posture, accepting the inevitability of proliferation, would state as a policy only that the use (or allowance of use) of such weapons against the United States or its allies would provoke a devastating response. Countries could, if they wanted, develop these weapons, but the United States would take little strategic cognizance of them. There would be some strategic downside—regime change, for instance, would lose luster as a policy. But, overall, the weapons would have little effect if America maintained a basically status quo posture, defending its established interests and allies. If, for instance, Iran rattled its nuclear saber and insisted the United States withdraw from Saudi Arabia, we would have to play the brinkmanship game and not back down—but what would be new about that? And would Iran be so foolish as to do something to call down the wrath of the American retaliatory capability? Those who say so need do more than point to the rantings of Ahmadinejad. History has shown many enemies who poured scorn on a nuclear-armed United States, but none who were foolish enough actually to act on their bluster and thereby incur its full wrath. Further, Iran is hardly the Soviet Union of the Khrushchev era, bristling with nuclear and conventional weapons.

Indeed, a deterrent posture would, through not placing as much value on WMD, help the cause of disarmament by positively disincentivizing

<sup>27</sup> For a history of proliferation despite American efforts to stem it, see Jeffrey T. Richelson, *Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

countries from developing them. If the U.S. took an agnostic position on the development of unconventional weapons, but maintained its same status quo red lines while demanding strict accountability for the use or loss of such weapons, why would countries want to build them? If North Korea's nuclear weapons, in other words, will not affect the American commitment to South Korea (if the South Koreans don't wreck it themselves in the meantime) and Japan, and if the United States holds the North Koreans responsible for whatever uses their nuclear weapons are put to, then is not the danger of possessing them greater than their benefit? After all, these rogue states are not building these weapons to win a war against us. Instead, they are developing them either as last-ditch weapons—in which case we have no reason to push them into a corner anyway—or as cards to bluff with—in which case we simply need to call that bluff.

It is, admittedly, a dangerous game. But a policy of preventive war is far more dangerous. The weapons we have invented, the dark underside of an insatiable and ever-expanding society's creations, cannot be uninvented. We must live with them.

## Conclusion

After witnessing the outcome of his work to harness atomic energy for violent purposes, Robert Oppenheimer is reported to have said, "It is perfectly obvious that the whole world is going to hell. The only possible chance that it might not is that we do not attempt to prevent it from doing so." If Oppenheimer's prediction that the world was headed for perdition has been proved wrong—so far—it is principally because American decision makers during the Cold War followed his advice. They did so by accepting, as one dangerous power after another obtained nuclear weapons, that the United States would have to learn to live with the specter of destruction. A country that had once stood immune behind two great oceans was, after the Soviets deployed nuclear-capped intercontinental ballistic missiles, vulnerable to utter annihilation. Wise policymakers accepted this, by necessity, as the inevitable price human beings would have to pay for living in the Age of Technology.

For a variety of reasons, a substantial part of our policymaker class seems to have abandoned this prudent resignation over the last decade and a half, lured too much perhaps by the siren song of an end to history, in the hope of escaping from the shadow of the weapons we have invented. We need to abandon this false hope. Living with destructive technologies is our lot, the modest punishment we must bear for stealing the gods' fire. The bomb is with us to stay and we should learn to accept it. It is, after all, the ultimate guardian of our safety.

