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Gary L. Sojka

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The Strategic Thought of Paul H. Nitze¹

Gary L. Sojka

Of the many individuals who have helped shape the theory and practice of American national security policy in the post-World War II era, few have had as continuing an influence as Paul H. Nitze. Even a partial listing of his achievements is enough to demonstrate the degree of his importance:

- The principal author of the 1946 *Summary Report (Pacific War)* to the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), he produced one of the seminal works on the strategic implications of nuclear weapons.²

- As head of the 1950 State-Defense Policy Review Group, Nitze was the primary author of NSC-68, the first truly comprehensive statement of American national strategy.³ His most famous work, NSC-68, provided the blueprint for the Truman administration's defense buildup. In addition, the postulates about the Soviet Union and about the nature of the world articulated in NSC-68 have to one degree or another governed American national security programs for the last 30 years.

- A principal participant in the Gaither Committee's 1957 report *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age* and the Senate Foreign Relation Committee's 1959 study *Developments in Military Technology and Their Impact on U.S. Strategy and Foreign Policy*, Nitze helped provide the rationale for the nuclear defense buildup that occurred during the Kennedy/Johnson administrations.⁴ The reports signaled a major shift in strategic thinking. They helped overturn the assumption that the nuclear balance between the United States and the Soviet Union was inherently stable. Rather, they advanced the view that the balance required careful management to ensure stability.

- Having served as John Kennedy's chief campaign advisor on defense during the 1960 presidential campaign, Nitze was appointed Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He subsequently became Secretary of the Navy, and finally Deputy Secretary of Defense. During these years, he played key roles in developing the policy of flexible response, refocusing the Navy on the mission of sea control, and introducing MIRVed SLBMs.

- As a senior representative to the SALT I negotiations, Nitze was the primary American author of the ABM treaty, widely regarded among arms

Mr. Sojka is a defense analyst with the Office of Naval Intelligence.

control experts as one of the most significant and successful arms control agreements reached between the Soviet Union and the United States.

- Out of government service during the late seventies, and as Director of Policy Studies for the Committee on the Present Danger, Nitze successfully led the fight against ratification of Salt II and against the overall defense policies of the Carter administration. His writings during this period again provided a rationale for an American defense buildup, the one now occurring under the Reagan administration.

- At this writing, as Ambassador to the Intermediate Range Nuclear Force (INF) Talks, Nitze is again a key participant in a major United States' arms control negotiation.

- Perhaps most important is Nitze's imprint on the overall political process. Throughout the last 35 years, he has been the leading and most influential figure of that group of advocates who have called for a strong US military posture in order to contain Soviet influence. More than any other figure in the postwar era, it is Nitze who has provided the intellectual rationale and fiber for such a posture.

Despite Nitze's continuous and powerful influence on national security policy, no systematic study of his strategic thought exists. This essay outlines Nitze's thinking and identifies those areas—deterrence and crisis stability—in which he has had a truly original and important impact on American strategic theory. The focus is strictly political-military; that is, it looks at Nitze's views on what type of defense posture the United States should seek and why. It only tangentially addresses Nitze's thinking on arms control, as this is a subject worthy of a separate study. Nevertheless, since Nitze believes that arms control complements a strong defense, the views outlined in this paper are essential if one wishes to gain an insight into his method of evaluating arms control proposals.

This writer argues that the two most important concepts for understanding how Nitze looks at defense questions are *flexible response* and *crisis stability*. Further, that these concepts rest upon his views on the more fundamental question of national strategy, and that Nitze's strategic thought is a product of his value system and his understanding of the world. Thus, this study traces Nitze's views from his most basic postulates of reality—the roots of his strategic thinking—to his most refined strategic concepts, the ones which guide his policy preferences.

The Roots of National Strategy

A Theory of International Relations. Nitze began to articulate his views on the nature of international relations in the late 1950s, while associated as a lecturer and scholar with The Johns Hopkins University. Having already

served in key government positions, his objective was to test his actions in light of theory and to test theory in light of his actions—the goal was to produce conceptual guidelines for the practitioner. In 1959, he published the “Necessary and Sufficient Elements of a General Theory of International Relations” in T.R. Fox’s book *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations*.⁵ The article is Nitze’s reasoned synthetic, statement about the nature of international politics, and it continues to be a valid reflection of his thinking on the subject.

Nitze identifies three concepts as necessary and sufficient to the understanding of international relations: structure, purpose, and situation.⁶ He defines structure as the myriad political groups which exist at a given period of time, and loosely defines purpose as the hierarchy of values (i.e., a value system) to which each of these political groups subscribes. Situation is the context (e.g., physical, economic, and technical) in which purpose and structure interact.

Nitze suggests that the policymaker in scanning the international horizon at any given moment should give primacy to structure, simply because it is a useful starting point to determine what is going on. “My suggestion is that even before one talks about purpose one has to be clear about whose purpose it is one is referring to and on whose behalf the purpose is directed—and that this requires an analysis of political structure.”⁷ Later he writes: “In almost every problem of international politics, the first question to be asked is, in the particular context, who is to be regarded as the ‘we’ and who is to be regarded as the ‘they.’”⁸

But giving primacy to structure in a heuristic sense does not mean that Nitze thinks situation or purpose are any less important to the practitioner. Situation—the physical, technological, and economic reality—is obviously important. And, in Nitze’s view, purpose is integral to both group and individual behavior. In a recent seminar on strategy he stated, “Purpose is the central question of action, and much of strategy depends upon what one’s purpose is.”⁹ This last sentence is an important recognition by Nitze, because in all except the previously mentioned heuristic application, it is purpose—not structure—which he sees as the motive force in international politics. His writings over the past 35 years have continually focused on purpose, and it is his sense of purpose which largely defines the strategy he believes the United States should follow.

A Philosophy of Political Morality. Nitze’s own sense of purpose and his recognition of the importance of purpose to international behavior are crucial to understanding his strategic thinking; but even these fundamentals rest on a deeper one. According to Nitze, a method is needed to evaluate competing purposes. He states: “How one judges purpose is important. It makes a lot of difference whether or not Western culture is superior to Communism.”¹⁰

A student of Thomas Aquinas since his college days, Nitze's evaluation relies heavily upon Thomistic philosophy and, in particular, on its premise that there is an irreducible ethical framework which can be approximately realized. In his 1960 Church Peace Union article, "The Recovery of Ethics," he writes, "There exists an ethical framework which has objective reality, to which men can aspire to have some degree of understanding not perfect, but approximate—and which can give a measure of guidance to those who seek it."¹¹ More recently, in answer to the logical follow-up question of whether a society conforming to such an ethical framework can be approximated in reality, he cites Spengler: "The main point that struck me about Spengler was that he seemed to me to offer a solution to the problem of [moral, cultural, historical] relativity. Even though things were different in each era, you could take the view that, whereas every man's viewpoint was very much molded by the particular generation in which he happened to be born and the possibilities very much limited by that generation, still there was a distinction between what was a better development for that era and what was a worse development—and that it is, therefore, worth concerning oneself with things that were in the realm of the possible, even though these things might differ vastly from what was within the realm of the possible in a different generation."¹²

The proposition of an objective morality which can be perceived and realized is certainly interesting and important, so much so that moral philosophers continue to debate both its validity and its implications. But leaving aside a discussion of the merits and demerits of this proposition, it is crucial to understanding Nitze. The point is that national security policy-makers deal with problems of great complexity, ambiguity, drama, and importance, and with all the consequent moral and psychological stress associated. Particularly in the present era—with the existence of nuclear weapons and ever more devastating conventional ones—it is very difficult, though certainly not impossible, to support policies of deterrence and defense if value systems are relative, with no system superior to another. But if value systems can be placed on a superior-inferior hierarchy and one is certain that his society subscribes to a high quality system, then he is on much more solid ground in arguing for the military means to protect it. It is largely because Nitze's views are lodged in the belief of an objective morality and in the belief that such a morality can be approximately perceived and realized by society that he promotes his national security views with the certainty and energy ascribed to him.

Political Purpose: Nitze's Criteria of Evaluation and His Conclusions. Nitze's criteria for appraising a value system are its ability to optimize the potentialities of man and its ability to stay within the realm of the possible.¹³ The closer a system satisfies these criteria, the better it is. Nitze has never systematically listed the values to which a society must adhere to optimize

man's potentialities, but he has offered some hints and does cite the preamble of the Constitution as the succinct answer to the question.¹⁴ He suggests that such a society would sustain and promote the intangible qualities of freedom, tolerance, diversity, and inquiry; support a high degree of individual excellence; and reduce unjustifiable economic inequalities while maintaining a decent standard of living. Nitze's second criterion—the realm of the possible—is his caveat against too rigid an adherence to the first. The realm of the possible can be expanded, but not infinitely. The attempt to create the perfect man (utopia), he believes, paradoxically but inevitably leads to a high degree of centralization of power, conformity, control, and corruption, which destroys those intangibles that are the bases upon which man's development rests. Focusing on these considerations, Nitze has continually favored the mixed economies and democratic forms of government which characterize the Western industrial state, rather than the centralized, statist economies and governments of totalitarian systems.

National Security Policy: The Roots of Internationalism and Containment

In the *Political Aspects of a National Strategy*, published by Johns Hopkins in 1957, Nitze writes that the purpose of such a strategy “. . . is to promote and secure conditions in the world under which a nation with such purposes as ours can live and prosper. U.S. interests and U.S. security are thus dependent upon the existence, or the creation and maintenance, of some form of world order compatible with our values and interests.”¹⁵

For the last 35 years, Nitze's constant refrain has been that the Soviet Union's imperial and hegemonic aspirations pose a threat to the postwar order, an order which has been basically compatible with America's values. NSC-68 states: “. . . the Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.”¹⁶ Some 30 years later the theme remains unchanged: “The Kremlin leaders do not want war; they want the world.”¹⁷

It is not only Nitze's perception of the Soviet Union, but also his past experiences—the fact that he has lived through two world wars—which have turned him into an internationalist. Prior to World War II in particular, he witnessed and shared the growing feelings of insecurity among the American people towards regimes whose ambitions seemed boundless and whose fundamental purposes were clearly antithetical to those of the United States. This combination of past experience and perception of the Soviet Union has led him to accept the type of speculative but prudent considerations bearing on the rejection of isolationism in NSC-68:

“With the United States in an isolated position, we would have to face the probability that the Soviet Union would quickly dominate most of Eurasia, probably without meeting armed resistance. It would thus acquire a potential far superior to our own, and would promptly proceed to develop this potential with the purpose of eliminating our power, which would, even in isolationism, remain as a challenge to it and as an obstacle to the imposition of its kind of order in the world. There is no way to make ourselves inoffensive to the Kremlin except by complete submission to its will.

“. . . As the Soviet Union mobilized the resources of Eurasia, increased its relative military capabilities, and heightened its threat to our security, some would be tempted to accept ‘peace’ on its terms, while many would seek to defend the United States by creating a regimented system which would permit the assignment of a tremendous part of our resources to defense. Under such a state of affairs our national morale would be corrupted and the integrity and vitality of our system subverted

“. . . It is possible that at some point in the course of isolation many Americans would come to favor a surprise attack on the Soviet Union and the area under its control, in a desperate attempt to alter decisively the balance of power by an overwhelming blow with modern weapons of mass destruction. It appears unlikely that the Soviet Union would wait for such an attack before launching one of its own. But even if it did and even if our attack were successful, it is clear that the United States would face appalling tasks in establishing a tolerable state of order among nations after such a war and after Soviet occupation of all or most of Eurasia for some years. These tasks appear so enormous and success so unlikely that reason dictates an attempt to achieve our objective by other means.”¹⁸

The “other means” which the authors of NSC-68 had in mind is known as the policy of containment; and the specifics of this policy, according to Nitze, need to be tailored to the exact nature of the threat. One concept essential to understanding the nature of the Soviet threat, he continues, is the correlation of forces—that is, the evolving political, military, economic, and psychological situation, all of which the Soviets seek to alter in their favor. “When the correlation of forces has evolved significantly in the Soviets’ favor, their doctrine calls upon them to exploit that change to nail down permanent gains for their side,” he states.¹⁹ This is a cautious policy, though perhaps no less dangerous because it is. But Nitze ends on an even more ominous note: “They believe it unlikely, however, that the West will let them have the world without a fight; therefore, they are prepared for the undesirable—to fight and win a nuclear war.”²⁰

Nitze believes that a multifaceted Soviet threat requires a multifaceted American response. His various writings suggest that the United States must deal with the problem of an unwinnable general nuclear war; military defeat in a conventional or limited nuclear war; political defeat, in the sense of the

Soviet Union acquiring power by exploiting contradictions in the noncommunist world; and the contradictions themselves (which may, of course, give rise to other serious threats to American security—for instance, nuclear proliferation).²¹ The American policy of containment must therefore entail economic, political, and military measures. It is the political and, especially, the military measures which have absorbed most of Nitze's energy and attention.

The Political Component of Containment: An Alliance of Free States. In 1950 and 1951, Paul Nitze and other members of the Policy Planning Staff evaluated four alternative future worlds, and America's position within them, after a hypothetical US military victory over the Soviet Union.²² At first glance, such an exercise might seem of little immediate value to the problems of American national security in the real world. In fact, given America's basically predominant worldwide position vis-à-vis the Soviets for the immediate postwar era, an analogy exists between the basic assumption of the exercise and reality, and Nitze was fully aware of this. Moreover, the conclusions of the exercise articulated views Nitze had only partially developed before, and they have played a large role in Nitze's thinking ever since.

The study began with an analysis of *Pax Americana*, in which the United States would be the only world power. The authors rejected such a structure as not feasible. They felt that the American people were not disposed towards it, especially since the very existence of a dominant power usually causes it to be the object of worldwide opposition. Nitze states:

"... everybody around the world would press against the central power. We would have the hatred of at least the opposition and the potential opposition of everybody. Could you visualize the United States doing what was necessary to maintain a *Pax Americana*? At least we could not foresee, even after a war, that the American spirit would be thus oriented. A consensus in the United States didn't exist for that kind of world; and so, therefore, that wasn't a solution."²³

The second possible solution was world government. But, according to Nitze, nation states would probably still hold vastly different conceptions about what constitutes a moral international order, and therefore the requisite consensus and ability to compromise for the proper functioning of world government would not exist.

The third possible solution, a balance of power system, in which the United States pursued its own narrow interests, was also not feasible. The United States might not exercise formal control over other countries but, not unlike *Pax Americana*, it would be the predominant power and the alignment of alliance structures would consequently be oriented against it.

The solution the authors sought was a modified *Pax Americana*. They acknowledged that, if the United States defeated the Soviet Union, it would

be the predominant power, a reality which would simply not go away. The American strategy would be to stress the commonality of purpose the United States had with other democracies and to cooperate with them and others to form a world order compatible with the purposes of democracies. The United States would also work to strengthen the United Nations to make it as useful and as helpful as possible in the support of democratic societies.

To the extent that the real world corresponds to this hypothetical world, American responses have to some degree also corresponded. The Atlantic Alliance may be seen as one embodiment of the type of thinking found in this study and of similar stated and unstated beliefs on the part of many Americans about the nature of the world during these years, and about what they thought the United States should do about it. Even until today, Nitze has not given up on the vision of a Free World or, perhaps more broadly, a free association of states, preferably democratic, but at least independent of Soviet domination and respectful of other forms of government. As he sees it, America's commitment to the welfare of this association has great symbolic importance: "If the United States were to focus strictly on narrow national interests rather than maintenance of a system under which it and other nations with comparable values could survive and prosper, then these nations would begin to advance their own narrow interests. The British would advance primarily British interests, the French would advance French national interests. Hostility among like-minded states could ensue and ultimately considerable apathy to the defense of a system in which narrow interests were constantly advanced, no matter how independent and free the states and the people within these states."²⁴

Nitze's belief that the United States must be committed to supporting an association of noncommunist states has its limits. For reasons outlined in the "War Aims" study, he has never believed that the United States has been capable of sustaining a containment policy which included defending every noncommunist state from communist encroachment, even if, in the particular instance, the result were to be close ties with the Soviet Union. In the late 1940s, he concurred with the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the defense of Taiwan and South Korea were not vital to the security of the United States; that American military forces could not be prudently made available for their defense; and that, therefore, the United States should not do so.²⁵ In both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he cautioned about the dangers of escalating the Vietnam War.²⁶ The presumable insight into Nitze's sense of priorities from these examples is that, while the United States must actively participate throughout the noncommunist world in resisting communism, the military defense of the Free World (i.e., interpreted here to mean roughly Japan, North America, and Western Europe) is clearly vital, but not the military defense of every single noncommunist state.

The Role of Defense in Containment. One reason for Nitze's continual focus on defense issues is because these include some of the most pressing and central problems facing the postwar generations (e.g., the problems associated with nuclear war). Another is his assessment of Soviet strategy to which America must respond: "In the correlation of forces . . . the balance in military factors plays a particular and fundamental role in their [the Soviets'] appraisal."²⁷ Equally important, he believes that only in the military sphere could America win or lose the struggle in a short period of time. In this belief, the experiences of his life are again apparent. The beginning of NSC-68 states: "Within the past thirty-five years the world has experienced two global wars of tremendous violence. . . . It has also seen the collapse of five empires—the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, German, Italian and Japanese—and the drastic decline of two major imperial systems, the British and the French. During the span of one generation, the international distribution of power has been fundamentally altered."²⁸ Reflecting on this passage recently, Nitze commented, "These [structures] can go very fast."²⁹

In dealing with the threat posed by the Soviet Union, one important policy option rejected by Nitze and the other authors of NSC-68 was preventive war. Aside from the calculation that, given US capabilities at that time, such a war would be protracted and difficult to fight, the authors concluded that it would be "morally repugnant to many Americans."³⁰ They continued that ". . . the shock of responsibility for a surprise attack would be morally corrosive. Many would doubt that it was a 'just war' and that all reasonable possibilities for a peaceful settlement had been explored in good faith. Victory in such a war would have brought us little if at all closer to victory in the fundamental ideological conflict."³¹

There is considerable strategic and symbolic significance to the rejection of preventive war. If the United States had ever been in a position to win such a war, it was in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, the authors argued that a military victory would not have resolved the more fundamental ideological conflict. If the authors were correct, then such a war would have made no sense. But if they were wrong, then the United States' decision not to penetrate the Soviet Union militarily meant that it probably relinquished its only real chance to penetrate the Soviet Union ideologically and economically, thereby altering in a short period of time its fundamental intentions.

The American decision against the option of preventive war goes a long way towards explaining why American responses to Soviet activities have almost always been encapsulated in the overall, defensive policy of containment—a policy which requires the continuous resolve of the American people. Paralleling the strategic significance is the symbolic; that is, the calculations which led to the rejection of preventive war symbolize

how this country's sense of identity and of purpose affects its strategy. In particular, it symbolizes how the American just war ethos contributed in a major way to the elimination of a strategic option.

Nitze's specific views on military strategy have their origins in his participation in the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) conducted at the end of World War II. Nitze worked on both the European and Pacific sections of the USSBS; the conclusions he developed from the survey's study of airpower are presented in the *Summary Report (Pacific War)*, of which he was the principal author.

One conclusion which was stressed emphatically in the *Summary Report* was that control of the air was not easily achieved and that it required a sustained national effort.³² Air superiority, once obtained, suffered from certain limitations, two of which are particularly relevant to the theory of nuclear deterrence: (1) complete air control vis-à-vis Japan was never possible, and (2) well-protected ground targets were difficult to destroy. Despite these problems, the report concludes that air control provided effective protection against enemy surface vessels; permitted amphibious landings; aided ground forces, often decisively; isolated Japan from its sources of overseas supply; and, when applied in a heavy, sustained, and accurate manner against industrial targets and population centers, could obtain decisive results, another conclusion important to nuclear deterrence theory.

In the *Summary Report* Nitze also presents his initial views, crude and unrefined, about the impact of nuclear weapons on strategy. The themes he articulates basically parallel those of Brodie's in *The Absolute Weapon*, which appeared in print about the same time.³³ But the report probably had a bigger influence on government circles than did Brodie's book. In addition, it became a reference source for Brodie's later writings on nuclear strategy.³⁴ Thus, the *Summary Report* has a legitimate claim to be considered along with *The Absolute Weapon* as the origin of modern day deterrence theory.

Nitze's view of the role of nuclear weapons in future wars rests upon three underlying conclusions: they are by several orders of magnitude more destructive than conventional weapons; no effective defense (including air superiority) is likely to be established that will prevent penetration by enemy planes or guided missiles; and some retaliatory force will survive a nuclear attack.³⁵ (Note the parallel of these last two conclusions with Nitze's previous ones about the limits of air control against Japan.) It is these conditions which give rise to deterrence born out of a mutual hostage relationship: "The threat of immediate retaliation with a striking force of our own should deter any aggressor from attacking."³⁶

Though this last passage suggests otherwise, it is worth noting that Nitze's doctrine of deterrence, unlike Brodie's, is not an imperative springing from the destructive nature of nuclear weapons. According to Brodie, the doctrine of deterrence was the logical response to a weapon whose destructive power

made using it a less and less viable policy option. In a now famous passage from his seminal book, Brodie writes: "Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose."³⁷

Certainly, Nitze would not deny a strong relationship between the destructiveness of nuclear weapons and deterrence, but he gives it less value. In a passage from the *Summary Report* clearly contrary to the thrust of Brodie's view, Nitze argues: ". . . the basic principles of war, when applied to include the field of the new weapon, will be found to remain. If such be the case, atomic weapons will not have eliminated the need for ground troops, for surface vessels, for air weapons, or for full coordination among them, the support services and the civilian effort, but will have changed the context in which they are employed to such a degree that radically changed equipment, training, and tactics will be required."³⁸

To Nitze, then, deterrence springs ultimately from other sources—strength and the appearance of strength. For Nitze, this is the lesson learned from the failure of the policy of appeasement prior to the outbreak of World War II; he writes: "Prevention of war will not be furthered by neglect of strength or lack of foresight or alertness on our part. Those who contemplate evil and aggression find encouragement in such neglect. Hitler relied heavily upon it."³⁹

The difference in emphasis between Nitze and Brodie in terms of their understanding of the meaning of nuclear weapons and of what is important to deterrence helps to explain why they have often advocated such divergent policies. These differences explain why Nitze has continually advocated a much more powerful defensive structure than Brodie and why he continues to study scenarios of winnable nuclear wars.

Refinement of Views: Crisis Stability and Flexible Response. In the *Summary Report*, Nitze saw a role for nuclear and conventional weapons in deterrence and defense. Since then, he has expanded and refined his thoughts by analyzing them according to various criteria. One of the most important is the doctrine of just war. His formulation is that no war is justified unless it serves some rational political objective and unless the use of force is proportional to the objective, although he probably finds acceptable the use of a greater amount of force than most just war theorists. The importance of this doctrine in relation to Nitze is that he has almost certainly ruled out, probably since the mid-1950s, a massive, all-out countervalue attack as a response to aggression, whatever its magnitude. Such is this writer's conclusion; for, despite all the scenarios he has envisioned in his numerous writings, not once has he listed one in which he considers massive countervalue retaliation worth executing. In fact, he has strongly implied the

contrary, arguing that such an attack makes "victory worthless in political terms" and that sole reliance on massive retaliation for deterrence leads to a "politically disastrous and immoral kind of nuclear strategy."⁴⁰

If Nitze has never explicitly ruled out all-out countervalue retaliation, it is because of his belief that deterrence is enhanced by the threat of such an attack and that public statements rejecting such a strategy depreciates its value. To those who believe in an objective morality based on natural law as Nitze does, this line of reasoning faces a serious moral problem. A long-standing principle of this branch of moral philosophy is that a person should never threaten to do something which he actually considers immoral to do. Nitze no doubt sees the defense of Western values as justifying an exception to this rule; still, as with most exceptions, tensions remain (e.g., whether or not the exception is a valid one). Perhaps this, too, helps to explain why Nitze continues to try to escape from heavy reliance on countervalue forces for deterrence, supporting instead a level of military forces in being along with a diversity of capabilities well beyond what many think necessary for deterrence.

Even if the above interpretation of Nitze's view of massive retaliation is fallacious, the thrust of his writings leaves no possible doubt that he considers all-out nuclear war the worst of all possible wars and believes, consequently, that America must advance its objectives in a manner that it virtually negates such an outcome.

Crisis Stability. Does all this mean that Nitze sees no military value to strategic nuclear forces? At the strategic counterforce level, he believes that nuclear forces do have such value. The appropriate implementation of active and passive civilian and military defensive measures, along with warheads that are highly accurate and have yields adequate for their purpose, could make a strategic counterforce attack a viable option for one side, if the other were to fail to do many of the same things. In his 1977 *International Security* article, "The Relationship of Strategic and Theater Nuclear Forces," Nitze argues: "If probable casualties and damage to one side would be three, five or ten times the probable casualties and damage to the other, and if the absolute number of casualties on the stronger side would be a small percentage of the total population, it is not clear that the weaker side should or would meaningfully respond to a counterforce attack."⁴¹

Nitze attributes this type of thinking to Soviet strategists; he also believes that many Western strategists have failed to take it seriously: "It is because Soviet leaders believe that such one-sided ratios may be achievable that they concentrate so heavily on all aspects of level two [strategic counterforce] and on the civil defense aspects of level one [strategic countervalue]."⁴² He argues that the American response should be "a nuclear posture such that, even if the other side attacked first and sought to destroy one's own strategic

striking power, the result of such a counterforce exchange would be sufficiently even and inconclusive that the duel would be extremely unattractive to the other side."⁴³ Such a posture entails an effective civil defense program; highly redundant command, control, and communications (C³); but, at the very least, highly survivable land, sea, and air based nuclear delivery systems.

It remains unclear whether Nitze thinks that even such a strategic counterforce war is ever worth fighting; but probably he does, believing that the defense of Western values is of sufficient importance to justify it. Obviously, he would feel more comfortable waging it if the American defense posture included an effective civil defense program and highly redundant C³, rather than just highly survivable delivery systems. In any case, it is the deterrent value of the posture which he always emphasizes: ". . . to minimize the risks of nuclear war, it would seem to me wise to assure that no enemy could believe he could profit from such a war."⁴⁴

Nitze believes that this type of posture makes the Soviets less likely to challenge American security interests in a major way. But if a crisis should occur, this posture should be sufficient to deter Soviet attacks on American and allied forces and population centers. In strategic lexicon, this is crisis stability; it means an avoidance of nuclear war *without* compromising Western security interests to a Soviet challenge. In his writings, Nitze continually refers to the need for crisis stability and cites examples of it at work: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet-American confrontation over the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the successive Berlin crises of the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁴⁵ In all cases, the United States enjoyed either strategic superiority or equivalence to the Soviet Union. The Soviets would have gained nothing from escalating the crises and, therefore, he believes, the United States was able to resist their pressures with confidence.

The concept of crisis stability is central to understanding Nitze and to recognizing his impact on the history of strategic thought. The origins of the concept can be traced back to the writings of both Nitze and Wholstetter in the late 1950s. Both men argued that the nuclear balance between the superpowers was not inherently stable, but rather required maintenance of an adequate second strike capability to insure stability. Wholstetter's 1959 *Foreign Affairs* article "The Delicate Balance of Terror" had its primary impact on members of the foreign policy establishment not in government service.⁴⁶ Nitze's 1957 study *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age* and his 1959 study *Developments in Military Technology and Their Impact on U.S. Strategy and Foreign Policy* had their primary impact within government circles.⁴⁷ This is especially true since Nitze held high level Defense Department positions throughout the 1960s and used his influence to make the concept a guiding theme for the development of US strategic nuclear forces. Interestingly, twenty years later, the concept in good

measure guided Nitze's criticisms of the unratified SALT II treaty and, as Fred Kaplan notes, ". . . Nitze dominated the debate."⁴⁸

Flexible Response. Because of the political and ethical problems associated with the massive use of strategic nuclear weapons, one of Nitze's important goals over the years has been to move as far away as possible from reliance on such weapons for deterrence and defense. He believes that against aggression below the strategic nuclear level, the threat of the massive use of strategic weapons may not appear a credible deterrent strategy because it fails to relate ends to means. As a military strategy, it also fails to relate means to ends. Against a strong opponent it invites retaliation; against a weak opponent, it probably is not necessary and, if employed, risks undermining America's image abroad and its morale at home.

In seeking an alternative to massive retaliation, Nitze, as early as NSC-68 and well before it was fashionable, endorsed the doctrine which later came to be called flexible response.⁴⁹ He later reaffirmed his support of this doctrine in NSC-141 and in his critique of Dulles' massive retaliation speech.⁵⁰ Though other theorists such as William Kaufmann and Henry Kissinger refined the doctrine and provided its most compelling rationales, Nitze was always comfortable with it and worked on implementing it as a policy during the 1960s while he was at the Department of Defense.⁵¹

The objective of flexible response is to have sufficient conventional capabilities to stop a conventional attack at that level. Only if this is not possible should nuclear weapons be employed; in this case, the goal is to limit the nuclear war to the use of tactical weapons. Only as a last resort should theater and strategic nuclear forces be used.

Nitze acknowledges that like massive retaliation, flexible response has its problems. Neither the United States nor its Western European allies have ever developed sufficient conventional strength to be reasonably certain of containing a Soviet attack on Western Europe at the conventional level. In order to overcome this possible conventional weakness, the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) have plans for use of tactical nuclear weapons. Yet at this level, too, there are problems, as Nato does not seem to have adequate active and passive defenses, C³, and troops well trained for the successful conduct of tactical nuclear war.

Despite these problems, Nitze believes that flexible response is compatible with deterrence and, if deterrence should fail, with the prospect of defending America's interests at the lowest levels of violence. To the extent that it has developed forces to support a flexible response doctrine, the United States has a policy that relates ends to means and is therefore credible to deter aggression across the spectrum from conventional war to strategic nuclear war. If low-level violence does occur, the United States has the military capability to defend its interests at that level without escalating and has

sufficient reserve force at higher levels to deter an enemy from escalating the violence. At the highest level of violence, this requires a stable strategic nuclear posture, and thus crisis stability and flexible response are intrinsically related. They are Nitze's concepts of merit, the sinews upon which aggression is deterred and violence is limited.

Conclusion

Paul H. Nitze's strategic thinking is rooted in the American world view, in historical experience, and in certain analytical exercises. The values he seeks to protect, such as democracy, civil liberties, and a mixed economy, are quintessentially American values; his use of religious concepts to interpret reality and to provide guidance for action also reflect the imprint of American society on him. Like many people of his generation, the combined experiences of the Great Depression and World War II served to reaffirm his devotion to American values. As a result of the Great Depression, Nitze seriously evaluated alternative political-economic systems and concluded that the democratic, mixed economies of the West was the preferable choice. Both his immediate prewar experience (a disturbing trip to Germany in which he beheld Nazism with horror) and his war experience caused him to reject the isolationist position he held in the early and mid-1930s. These experiences also convinced him that a strong and vigilant defense was required to protect American values against those openly hostile to them. After the war, Nitze's work on various studies concerned with American national security served to further develop his thinking on this subject. At the pinnacle of his thought are two concepts, crisis stability and flexible response, designed to protect American values, deter war, and limit war's destruction should it occur.

Notes

1. This paper is based on information obtained from published articles, Nitze's private papers, personal interviews, and declassified government documents. As government documents are often the product of group efforts and do not always represent the views of a particular individual in the group, the author quotes these documents only when he is certain that they reflect Nitze's autonomous thinking.

For granting me permission to interview them on various aspects of Paul Nitze's professional and intellectual life, I thank Ambassadors Raymond Gartoff and Gerard Smith; Lieutenant General Jasper Welch; Admiral Elmo Zumwalt; Dr. Charles Burton Marshall; and Mr. Sidney Graybeal. For their helpful comments on this paper, I thank Dr. Michael Vlahos, Dr. Steven Reardan, Dr. Michael Roskin, Mr. Stanley Sienckiewicz, Ms. Ann Smith, and Lt. Cdr. David Muller. Finally, I thank Ambassador Nitze for discussing his views with me and for his comments on drafts of this paper.

2. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1946).

3. NSC-68, "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," 14 April 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1950* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1977), pp. 234-292. (This series hereinafter cited as FRUS.)

4. NSC-5724, *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age*, 7 November 1957, Modern Military Records Division, National Archives. Also see *Developments in Military Technology and Their Impact on U.S. Strategy and Foreign Policy* (Washington: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [FRC], 1960).

5. Paul H. Nitze, "Necessary and Sufficient Elements of a General Theory of International Relations," in W.T.R. Fox, *Theoretical Aspects of International Relations* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), pp. 1-14.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

9. Paul H. Nitze, "Strategy in Pursuit of Political Purpose," Lecture 4, The Johns Hopkins University, Washington, 14 October 1981.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Paul H. Nitze, *The Recovery of Ethics* (New York: The Church Peace Union, 1960), p. 19.

12. Interview with Paul H. Nitze, 8 July 1981.

13. Paul H. Nitze, "Strategy in Pursuit of Political Purpose," Lecture 1, The Johns Hopkins University, Washington, 16 September 1981.

14. NSC-68, *FRUS*, p. 238. Also see Paul H. Nitze, *The Political Aspects of National Strategy* (Washington: SAIS Center of Foreign Policy Research, 1960), pp. 1-2.

15. Nitze, *The Political Aspects of National Strategy*, p. 2.

16. NSC-68, *FRUS*, p. 237.

17. Paul H. Nitze, "Strategy in the Decade of the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1980, p. 90.

18. NSC-68, *FRUS*, pp. 280-281.

19. Nitze, "Strategy in the Decade of the 1980s," p. 83.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

21. *Ibid.* Also see Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1976, pp. 207-232; and Paul H. Nitze, "Should Nuclear Weapons Be Used in a Limited War," Address, Air Force Scientific Advisory Board, Chandler, Ariz., 5 December 1957.

22. Interview with Paul H. Nitze, 8 July 1981. According to Nitze, Secretary of State Dean Acheson considered the final version of the "War Aims" paper so sensitive that he eventually had it destroyed. An early version of the paper did, however, survive. See "Draft paper prepared by Messrs John Patton Davies, Jr., and Robert Tufts of the Policy Planning Staff, Washington, June 26, 1951, Subject NSC-79," in *FRUS: 1951* (Washington: US Govt. Print. Off., 1979), pp. 94-100.

23. Interview with Paul H. Nitze, 8 July 1981.

24. Nitze, *The Recovery of Ethics*, p. 17.

25. However, once the United States became involved, he did not think it prudent for the United States to withdraw its forces. He continues to support their current presence as a stabilizing influence on the Korean peninsula. See Paul H. Nitze, "The Development of NSC 68," *International Security*, Spring 1980, pp. 170-176. Also see interview with Paul H. Nitze, 29 September 1981.

26. Alan Tonelson, "Nitze's World," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1979, p. 88.

27. Nitze, "Strategy in the Decades of the 1980s," p. 83.

28. NSC-68, *FRUS*, p. 237.

29. Interview with Paul H. Nitze, 8 July 1981.

30. NSC-68, *FRUS*, p. 281.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

32. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, pp. 29-30.

33. Both the *Summary Report* and *The Absolute Weapon* appeared in 1946. See Bernard Brodie, ed. *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).

34. See Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

35. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, pp. 29-30.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

37. Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon*, p. 76.

38. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, p. 30.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

40. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," p. 213; and Nitze, "The Development of NSC 68," p. 175. Also see Paul H. Nitze, "Foreign Policy and Moral Responsibility," Address, National Council of the Churches of Christ, Greenwich, Conn., 1 November 1954.

41. Paul H. Nitze, "The Relationship of Strategic and Theater Nuclear Forces," *International Security*, Fall 1977, p. 124.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

43. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," p. 213.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-215. Also see Nitze, *Developments in Military Technology and Their Impact on U.S. Strategy and Foreign Policy*, pp. 85-91.

46. Albert A. Wholstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1959, pp. 211-234.

47. NSC-5724, *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age*; and FRC, *Developments in Military Technology and Their Impact on U.S. Strategy and Foreign Policy*.

48. Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 381.

49. NSC-68, *FRUS*, pp. 284-292.

50. Kaplan, pp. 137, 186.

51. See William Kaufmann, *The Requirements of Deterrence*, Memorandum 7 (Princeton: Princeton Center of International Studies, 1954), and Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1957).



People and Performance

A military leader, too, knows both times. But traditionally he rarely had to live in both at the same time. During peace he knew no "present"; the present was only a preparation for the future war. During war he knew only the most short-lived "future"; he was concerned with winning the war at hand. Everything else he left to the politicians.

That this is no longer true in an era of cold wars, near wars, and police actions may be the single most important reason for the crisis of military leadership and morale that afflicts all armed services today. The military today lives neither in "peace" nor in "war"; it lives in something we call "defense," which is a state of preparedness akin closely to what was "all-out war" yesterday but aimed not at "winning" but at preventing actual conflict. As a result, military objectives and military planning in the traditional sense no longer apply. Both assumed a sharp conflict between present and future, rather than the profound ambiguity of the modern political and military world.

Taken from Peter Drucker, *People and Performance: The Best of Peter Drucker on Management* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).