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War, Peace, and Arms Control: A Review Essay

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OVERVIEW

In the 1960s and into the 1970s, arms control was considered essential to our national security and the prospect of enduring world peace. Restraining development and deployment of nuclear weapons was on the "short list" of policy preferences endorsed by most political leaders and citizens alike. We welcomed the Test Ban Treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty as important restraints on nuclear weapons and significant first steps toward peace. These agreements, we reasoned, lessened the probability of nuclear war.

With the Reagan presidency the notion of peace through negotiation, or the spirit of détente, has lost favor. In its place a commitment to war avoidance through political–military (nuclear) strength has assumed center stage in our nation's security policy. Consistent with this commitment, the United States since 1980 has augmented its armaments, emphasizing development and deployment of nuclear weapons, more rapidly than during any previous time in its peacetime history.

The flurry of anti-Soviet rhetoric, pride in a "stronger" America, and criticism of past arms control agreements have muffled voices favoring restraint of nuclear weapons through negotiation. On the
premise that deemphasizing the arms control process is contrary to both our national security and world peace, I here review two books and one major article that applaud negotiations in general and arms control in particular. Each work builds upon the premise that the prospect of nuclear war is imminently greater in the absence of arms negotiations than when reasonable, give-and-take bargaining is actively enjoined.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A NATIONAL SECURITY DELUSION

In 1945, George F. Kennan, the second-ranking civilian diplomat in the American embassy in Moscow, was appalled that the Soviet Union’s westward extension of its boundaries ‘‘had been permitted, with scarcely a murmur of protest from the Western side.’’\(^3\) Disturbed almost to the point of despair, Kennan sent to Washington the so-called ‘‘long telegram’’ of February 1946, detailing his view that Moscow’s territorial advances must not go unchecked. His ideas were soon widely circulated in an article which he published in *Foreign Affairs* (1947) and which he signed ‘‘X,’’ choosing not to identify himself as author. He there wrote: ‘‘In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.’’\(^4\)

While standing firm in his conviction that countering Soviet expansion ought to be a major end of American foreign policy, Kennan opposed the means chosen to secure that end. In his recent book, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age*, Kennan notes that in 1948 he hoped that negotiations would soon begin to remove peacefully ‘‘the essentially dangerous division of the European continent.’’\(^5\) But negotiations were not to be; the Allies chose another course:

> It was decided that the main thrust of Western policy must now be the creation of a military alliance directed against the Soviet Union. . . . Gone, now, was all serious thought of a negotiated political solution to the problems of the continent. . . . Instead of having to pursue complicated political solutions, we could now comfortably revert to the familiar patterns of old-fashioned military rivalry, only trying this time to be better prepared than we had been on the earlier occasions to confront this supposedly aggressive opponent.\(^6\)

That the United States would eschew negotiations in favor of a military alliance against the Soviet Union troubled Kennan because
nuclear weapons were to be the core of our military strength. As early as 1949, Kennan wrote that he “considered the device [nuclear weapons] one we ought never again to use, or even to plan to use.”\(^7\)

When in response to the Soviet detonation of a nuclear device the United States hastened research and development of the hydrogen bomb, Kennan forcefully argued (1950) that America should “deplore the existence and abhor the use of these weapons; that we have no intention of initiating their use against anyone.”\(^8\)

Secretary of State Dean Acheson rejected Kennan’s attempt to “persuade our government to pause at this particular brink [the hydrogen bomb].”\(^9\) Soon thereafter, Kennan departed government service.

Kennan’s endorsement of negotiation and opposition to nuclear weapons spans nearly forty years. For him, basing America’s national security on nuclear strength is both unsound and morally offensive. In an essay entitled “A Christian’s View of the Arms Race,” written in 1982 and published as the concluding chapter of *The Nuclear Delusion*, Kennan denounces nuclear weapons use:

> Readiness to use nuclear weapons against other human beings—against people whom we do not know, whom we have never seen, and whose guilt or innocence it is not for us to establish—and, in doing so, to place in jeopardy the natural structure upon which all civilization rests, as though the safety and the perceived interests of our own generation were more important than everything that has ever taken place or could take place in civilization: this is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity—an indignity of monstrous dimensions—offered to God!\(^10\)

Kennan believes that we are deluded in the belief that nuclear weapons contribute to civilization’s security and future.\(^11\) Nuclear weapons are not instruments of peace but instruments of unconscionable destruction. We ought not to countenance even risk of their use, a risk heightened by failure to negotiate their restraint and possible elimination.

Still, perhaps because we have avoided nuclear holocaust for nearly forty years,\(^12\) and perhaps because we have come to believe that nuclear strength is our surest defense against Soviet aggression, we are deaf to moral arguments that should move us to vigilantly and patiently pursue meaningful arms control negotiations. We have become weary of negotiations; we perceive détente as but a vehicle used by the Soviet Union to “advance its view of a desired international order, one dominated by Moscow.”\(^13\) Believing as we do, we justify our expanding arsenal of nuclear devices.
The contention that nuclear weapons do not ensure against nuclear war within acceptable bounds of risk, uncertainty, and error cannot be readily dismissed. Our reliance upon a strategy of peace through nuclear strength is inadequately complemented by the serious pursuit of negotiated, verifiable restraint in the further development and deployment of ever more sophisticated and destructive nuclear devices. Moreover, who can deny Kennan’s characterization of the use of nuclear weapons as morally offensive? We ought to be able to secure our interests through more justifiable means.

CURRENT STALEMATE

In Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control, Strobe Talbott reveals that the 1983 breakdown in nuclear arms negotiations was not entirely, nor even principally, a product of Soviet intransigence. The Reagan Administration was as much to blame for the interruption in negotiations as were the Russians.

Talbott documents that those in the first term of the Reagan Administration who assumed responsibility for arms control were extremely critical of the whole enterprise. These officials set about to “revolutionize” arms control discussions with the Soviets: henceforth the U.S. stance would be that of a tough negotiator unwilling to alter its arms control demands. If the Soviets wanted agreement, then they would have to assent to the U.S. position.

Nowhere was this hard-line posture more evident than in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) talks. At issue was the deployment by the United States of cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union’s already deployed SS–20 missiles. In intriguing detail Talbott recounts how in private conversations in the woods, in the botanical garden across from the site of formal negotiations, and in restaurants, Paul Nitze, the United States’ chief negotiator, and his Soviet counterpart, Yuli Kvitsinsky, fashioned a deal that each agreed to represent as the proposal of the other but which actually they jointly shaped.14 Kvitsinsky, consulting with his superiors, allowed that the Soviets might reduce the number of SS–20 missiles targeted at Europe by two-thirds if the United States would not deploy any Pershing II missiles. Deployment of American cruise missiles was to be allowed.15

Thus informally derived, the proposed agreement was hand delivered by the two negotiators to their governments. Describing the
turmoil with which the proposal was received in Washington, Talbott notes that the outcome of the “bureaucratic guerilla warfare” enjoined over this issue within the Reagan Administration was the rejection of the deal. Senior officials in the Department of State thought the deal promising, demurring only briefly to admit that it was outside the negotiating instructions that Nitze had originally received. From the outset, Caspar Weinberger, joined by Richard Perle, the Administration’s strongest opponent of arms control, fought against the agreement. Repeatedly Weinberger and Perle reasserted the original negotiating instructions given to Nitze: either the Soviet Union agrees to the option of “zero arms” in Europe or we deploy cruise and Pershing II missiles as scheduled.  

Had the Soviets agreed to the “zero arms” proposal, Talbott demonstrates, the USSR would have found herself without nuclear missiles to counter French and British land-based nuclear weapons that the original U.S. proposal would have left untouched. To agree was to give the United States a one-sided arms control victory. Predictably, the Soviets did not accept the original U.S. position, and soon they too disavowed interest in the Nitze/Kvitsinsky deal.

Similar evidence attests to Talbott’s conclusion that the Reagan Administration was only slightly less obstructionist in the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START). As with INF talks, the apparent intention of the Administration, orchestrated by the Department of Defense, was to buy time for rearmament, eschewing any serious negotiation of arms control agreements until the United States raised its military strength. Talbott concludes:

In both negotiations, the Administration’s principal concern was to keep military programs on track—the Pershing II and Tomahawk missiles in INF and an ambitious “strategic modernization” program in START. That meant the Administration had to be pushed to the bargaining table by political forces.

The evidence Talbott provides in support of his position—that the United States deliberately slowed the INF and START arms control process—leaves little doubt that during its first term the Reagan Administration courted the public image of a serious negotiator but rejected potentially beneficial arms agreements in the interest of augmenting its weapons supply. The costs of such action, in Talbott’s opinion, have been unacceptably high:

The Administration’s conduct of the INF talks and START brought about an unprecedented crisis in the already strained quarter-century-old arms-control process. And the crisis in arms control contributed to three
others: in the alliance between the U.S. and Western Europe; in the partnership between the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government; and in the Soviet–American relationship.18

STAR WARS AND ARMS CONTROL

After fifteen months the United States and the Soviet Union have returned to Geneva, presumably to negotiate arms restraint. However, it remains unlikely that they will readily set aside their differences. Recent negotiation failures, incriminations declared by each against the other, the notably strained Soviet–American relationship, and ongoing, ever more rapid arms buildup surely complicate the prospect of future meaningful negotiations. Yet as great as these obstacles to successful negotiations are, our refusal to negotiate “Star Wars” poses the greatest impediment to furthering the arms control process.

In an important article in Foreign Affairs, McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith compellingly demonstrate that the President may choose Star Wars or arms control, but not both. They further assert that if we pursue Star Wars we have little guarantee that it will accomplish what is hoped. And even if it were successful in its stated mission, numerous other means are available to the Soviets to deliver nuclear weapons against the United States.

Star Wars “cannot be achieved,” they contend. To this point, they argue, there is “no prospect for a leak-proof defense against strategic ballistic missiles alone, and it entirely excludes from its range any effort to limit the effectiveness of other systems—bomber aircraft, cruise missiles, and smuggled warheads.”19 While the probability of “success” is very low, the likelihood that the Soviets can build upon already existing capabilities to penetrate such a defense is very high.

As troubling as this concern is, their most compelling argument is that “precisely because the weapons are so terrible neither of the two superpowers can tolerate the notion of ‘impotence’ in the face of the arsenal of the opponent.” Consequently, any serious development of Star Wars will “stimulate the most energetic Soviet efforts to ensure the continued ability of Soviet warheads to get through.” The authors firmly conclude that “it is fanciful in the extreme to suppose that the prospect of any new American deployment which could undermine the effectiveness of Soviet missile forces will not be met by a most determined and sustained response.”20 Obviously, the Soviets
will not agree to limit their offensive nuclear weapons in the face of our commitment to Star Wars. Indeed, the Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars, will likely prove as obstructionist to present arms control bargaining as was the “zero arms” option to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces talks.

Still, some contend, if Star Wars can be developed, we may be able to defend against a significant portion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. However, even if Star Wars could achieve part of this objective, to commit ourselves to such a defense is fraught with extraordinary risk. Bundy, Kennan, McNamara, and Smith assert that a Star Wars defense “must work perfectly the very first time, since it can never be tested in advance as a full system.” Moreover, it “must be triggered almost instantly, because the crucial boost phase of Soviet missiles lasts less than five minutes from the moment of launch.” In that period “there must be detection, decision, aim, attack and kill.” Given the nature of such a system, they conclude, “It is hard to imagine a scheme further removed from the kind of tested reliability and clear presidential control that we have hitherto required of systems involving nuclear danger.”

They summarize conclude that the “President’s program offers no promise of effective defense against anything but ballistic missiles,” and since this leaves numerous other nuclear capabilities undefended, the risk of nuclear crisis will persist despite the heavy costs of Star Wars. Therefore, “the inescapable reality is that there is literally no hope that Star Wars can make nuclear weapons obsolete.” Moreover, Star Wars “will destroy the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, our most important arms control agreement; it will directly stimulate both offensive and defensive systems on the Soviet side; and as long as it continues it will darken the prospect for significant improvement in the currently frigid relations between Moscow and Washington. It will thus sharpen the very anxieties the President wants to reduce.”

CONCLUSION

Together, these authors convincingly advance the case for arms negotiations as a means to furthering our national security and promoting world peace. A policy of negotiating in the hope of securing world peace, beginning with nuclear arms restraint, by itself likely will not secure our national interest or assure world peace. But neither should it be dismissed in favor of the uncertain, morally questionable “security” that we believe nuclear weapons provide. At the very least, we ought
to listen to the "case for arms control" before we consent to the case against it. These books by George F. Kennan and Strobe Talbott and the article in Foreign Affairs deserve our careful study.

NOTES

1Since 1980, defense spending has taken an increasing share of the federal budget while the percentage going to social programs has declined. For fiscal year 1986, defense spending accounted for nearly 26 percent of total government spending, compared to 23 percent in 1980. During that same period, entitlements (including social security, Medicare, and other assistance programs) dropped from 47 percent to 43 percent. In constant dollars, defense spending has increased 31 percent during the past six years while social spending has gone up only 11 percent (see U.S. Office of Management and Budget, The United States Budget in Brief, 1987 [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986]; also see U.S. Congress, House, Report on the Subdivision of Budget Totals for Fiscal Year 1986, 99th Cong., 1st sess., 1985, H. Rept. 333).


5Kennan, Nuclear Delusion, xiv.

6Ibid., xiii; italics added.

7Ibid., xv.

8Ibid., xvi.

9Ibid., xvii.

10Ibid., 206–7.

11In an address entitled, "Let Us Have Peace," reported in the Deseret News on 30 August 1945, J. Reuben Clark said, "We are being generously dosed with that sovereign narcotic . . . that to ensure peace we must maintain a great army and gigantic armaments. But this ignores, indeed conceals, the unvarying historical fact that big armies have always brought, not peace, but wars. . . . Armament does not spell peace." (J. Reuben Clark's statement is also cited in Edwin Brown Firmage and Christopher L. Blakesley, "J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Law and International Order," Brigham Young University Studies: 13 [Spring 1973]: 334. The sentence "Armament does not spell peace" is not in the BYU Studies article.) Admittedly, President Clark was not speaking specifically of nuclear weapons, but the sentiment is very similar to that expressed by Kennan.

12While we have avoided nuclear holocaust to this point, we have on occasion been on the brink of that possibility.


14According to Talbott, Nitze admitted that the written proposal was 80 percent his and 20 percent Kvitinský's (Strobe Talbott, Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984]).

15There were other aspects of the proposed agreement, but this was the heart of it.

16Talbott's evidence suggests that some in the Administration, specifically Richard Perle, reasoned that the "zero arms" option would not be acceptable to the Soviet Union, that the Soviets would reject the deal, that the United States would appear more interested in arms control than the Soviets, thereby overcoming political opposition to its policies, and that as a consequence the U.S.A. could continue its rearmament without significant dissent. Talbott quotes Walter Slocombe, Perle's predecessor in the Pentagon: "There's a school in this Administration that hopes the proposal [zero arms] is so brilliant that the Soviets will never accept it and that rather than advancing the negotiations, it will stop them" (see Talbott, Deadly Gambits, 80).

17Ibid., 205.

18Ibid., xii.


20Ibid., 267.

21Ibid.

22Ibid., 267–68.

23Ibid., 268.

24Ibid., 269.

25Ibid., 269–70.