

Nuclear Time Warp

BY DR. BRUCE BLAIR | MAY 02, 2003

President George W. Bush's new Nuclear Posture Review harks back to the stone age, or at least to the 1950s, when America's most beautiful minds struggled to devise a strategy to deal with the original rogue state — the Soviet Union. The latest exercise to devise a nuclear strategy to neutralize threats of weapons of mass destruction wielded by the 2002-class of rogue states such as Iraq and North Korea is proof that time folds over on itself, and that higher-order nuclear intelligence is as elusive as table-top fusion. This repetition of history isn't funny, but it is dangerous.

In the 1950s, American strategists could not imagine having normal relations with the Soviet communist dictatorships bent on world domination through military intimidation or outright conquest. The Soviets were arming themselves to the teeth with nuclear, chemical, biological and conventional arms, and scarcely anybody believed they would conform to the international rules of the game set by the United States and other civilized democracies.

Resigned to a bitter hostility with an evil empire, American strategists threw up their hands and pursued every conceivable instrument of force to contain or defeat Soviet aggression — a long list that included preventive war, preemptive first strike, deterrence based on second-strike retaliation, missile defense, aircraft defense, civil (homeland) defense, and CIA-backed insurgencies.

But in the end, none of these tools save deterrence proved feasible. The Soviet's nuclear arsenal grew too big for any sober strategist to conclude that an American first-strike could prevent the Russians from inflicting apocalyptic destruction of the United States in retaliation. Likewise, air defense, missile defense and civil defense offered no meaningful protection from Soviet nuclear forces carrying many thousands of nuclear bombs. Despite an occasional flirtation with these notions — former President Ronald Reagan's naïve pursuit of Star Wars being the prominent example — practicality dictated that we abandon these unpromising tools.

The only surviving tool was to deter a Soviet nuclear attack by threatening to obliterate the enemy in retaliation. Clever strategists in both the United States and Russia made a virtue of mutual nuclear vulnerability, and enshrined it as the cornerstone of security known as mutual assured destruction — MAD.

That MAD is a most unsatisfactory formula on which to base national survival is evident by the Bush strategists' rejection of second-strike deterrence as the pillar of U.S. protection from the mad and despotic leaders of Iraq, North Korea, Libya, Syria, Iran, and possibly (though not publicly mentioned) China. No way will the United States rely on deterrence alone. Whereas the Soviet Union had proved its mettle and forced the United States to show grudging respect for want of alternatives, America's relative power today is so overwhelming that its strategists are having a field day in fashioning a multitude of nuclear and non-nuclear military options for putting down the rogue states. The 1950s mindset has been resurrected as the U.S. security establishment revs up its programs of offensive special operations, covert operations,

conventional and nuclear first-strike, national missile defense, air defense, homeland defense, and everything else conceivable under the sun.

Deterrence based on retaliation of course remains in the mix, but it hardly represents the centerpiece. No, the 1950s mindset was oriented to war-fighting, and not deterrence, and so is the 2002 warrior mentality. It's hard to successfully hide all of these options behind the smoke-screen of deterrence.

The Pentagon's tortured rhetoric wrapping the Nuclear Posture Review in the mollifying mantle of deterrence thus rings hollow. The emerging policy, whose lineage traces back to the Clinton presidency, really does lower the nuclear threshold. Non-nuclear states no longer enjoy the protective assurance that we will not attack them with our nuclear weapons as long as they truly abstain from nuclear pursuits and do not ally themselves with a nuclear nation at war with the United States. We moved the goalposts. Now, they had better abstain from chemical and biological weapons programs as well. The United States is putting all present and future adversaries on notice that we reserve the right to resort to nuclear weapons against them if they brandish a chemical or biological weapon at us. And this is not merely a rhetorical flourish. New weapons and plans for their use will come into existence to present new options to U.S. leaders. That alone ensures a lowering of the threshold, just as putting China back into the U.S. strategic nuclear war plan in 1998 after a hiatus of nearly two decades made it easier to go to nuclear war with that country.

Bush's strategists are not only making the use of nuclear weapons by the United States more probable, they are unwittingly encouraging our adversaries to re-double their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. We have put chemical and biological weapons on par with nuclear weapons if we regard them all as equally threatening to us and equally deserving of a U.S. nuclear response. This message hardly serves to dissuade the rogue states from acquiring any or all of the above. On the contrary, if chemicals and germs confer status on par with nukes, these states may value them more than ever as a means of deterring a U.S. nuclear or conventional attack.

Even more dangerously counter-productive is the hidden message to foes and allies alike that it is legitimate for states to unleash nuclear weapons when faced with a non-nuclear threat. If the most powerful nation on earth asserts its right to initiate the use of nuclear force, other states endowed with far less strength and far fewer non-nuclear options now need only to invoke the American logic to justify their nuclear aggression. America, the world's juggernaut in military, economic and diplomatic terms, is inducing the rest of the world to emulate U.S. policy and lift the 50-year old taboo against the use of nuclear weapons.

We are virtually inviting other countries to use them under a widening array of circumstances. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, this policy would have justified Iranian nuclear retaliation for Iraq's use of chemical weapons. Fortunately, Iran did not possess any. But Israel does, and in the future Israel could recite the Bush nuclear review to justify a nuclear strike against, say, Iraqi missiles suspected of carrying a payload of germs. The widespread adoption of the new American first-use principle around the globe will dangerously shorten the nuclear fuse in many regional confrontations.

The 9/11 tragedy should have helped to disabuse Bush's strategists from their 1950s-vintage thinking. After all, U.S. nuclear weapons played no role whatsoever in deterring the most immediate threat to the American homeland, and they contributed nothing to the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan. Their deterrent value and military utility were nil. The nuclear weapons and materials scattered across several continents represented nothing more or less than an acute danger to the civilized world. The world derived no comfort whatsoever from them, including U.S. nuclear forces, and only worried about the specter of nukes falling into the wrong hands.

The lesson of 9/11 for nuclear policy is not that the role of U.S. nuclear weapons should be expanded to cover chemical and biological as well as nuclear contingencies, and to pursue more ways to vest them with military utility in the event of a conflict with rogue states or terrorist organizations.

The real lesson, which apparently was lost on the drafters of the Bush review, is that all of these weapons of mass destruction (WMD) must be completely eliminated. WMD must be universally condemned, their possession universally prohibited, and the ban rigorously monitored and enforced. The only answer to the scourge is a WMD-free world. No country can be exempt from the ban. Not even the United States.

This solution also harks back to the 1950s, when a few visionary leaders held out hope for placing nuclear programs under strict international control. Soviet opposition dashed the hope and the war-gamers assumed preeminence in U.S.-Soviet relations. But in 2002, Russia is led by a president who acts like a friend, partner and moral ally of the United States. If the two countries would truly embrace and lead an international coalition that demands global abolition of WMD, the world could be rid of the gruesome danger. A real opportunity exists today for genuine leaders to step forward and rapidly transform the world in the most fundamental and glorious way. It's no longer a pipedream, if only Russia and the United States would overcome the last vestiges of their cold war mindset and get rolling.