

## **What we need to know about nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence**

David C. Hall, MD, Sunday, October 22, 2017 with special appreciation for General Lee Butler

Nuclear weapons are NOT conventional weapons. Their destructive power is a thousand times greater than any conventional weapon. It took almost 300 B-29 sorties over Tokyo dropping over 1,600 conventional bombs to level Tokyo in March 1945 comparable to the leveling of Hiroshima in August 1945 by one small atomic bomb. And that's accounting for only the blast and firestorm. Radiation sickness and genetic damage extended severe consequences for generations of Hiroshima survivors. Current nuclear warheads in the arsenals of the United States and Russia number in the thousands, and each warhead is 7 to several hundred times the power of the Hiroshima atomic bomb.

Nuclear armaments beget nuclear armaments. The first nuclear arms race set the United States and the Soviet Union on a path to 65,000 nuclear warheads, an insane level of destructive potential that put global civilization at risk. Later came responses from Europe and Asia as Britain, France, China and later India and Pakistan and then Israel and North Korea all developed nuclear weapons both to protect themselves and to maintain influence on the international political stage.

The United States has been the driving force behind these nuclear weapons developments. It's been our technological and economic prowess that led us to develop the atomic bomb before the Nazis did in World War II and that kept us ahead of the Soviets through the Cold War. Deterrence theory appropriated from millennia of conventional warfare was used to justify development of nuclear arsenals. What we have failed to understand in the words of former STRATCOM Commander Lee Butler is that the Soviets could not and would not tolerate the possibility of losing a major war. They had survived "mind-numbing losses" during the Nazi invasion that included a three-year siege of Leningrad. They were not concerned with the US deterrence notion of mutual assured destruction (MAD), they were concerned with survival as a proud if humiliated nation built on a proud and centuries-old culture.

General Butler: "... it is imperative to recognize that all numbers of nuclear weapons above zero are completely arbitrary; that against an urban target one weapon represents an unacceptable horror; that twenty weapons would suffice to destroy the twelve largest Russian cities with the total population of twenty-five million people — one-sixth of the entire Russian population; and therefore that arsenals in the hundreds, much less in the thousands, can serve no meaningful strategic objective....

"In sum, it is my profound conviction that nuclear weapons did not, and will not, of themselves prevent major war. To the contrary, I am persuaded that the presence of these hideous devices unnecessarily prolonged and intensified the

Cold War. In today's security environment, threats of their employment have been fully exposed as neither credible nor of any military utility.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Deterrence, the flawed rationale for nuclear arsenals**

General Butler: “How is it that we subscribe to a strategy that requires near-perfect understanding of enemies from whom we are often deeply alienated and largely isolated? How can we pretend to understand the motivations and intentions of leaders with whom we may have little or no substantive personal association? In the case of the former Soviet Union, why did we ever imagine that a nation that had survived successive invasions and mind-numbing losses would accede to a strategy premised on fear of nuclear war? Nuclear deterrence in the Cold War setting was fatally flawed at the most fundamental level of human psychology in its projection of Western reason through the distorted lens of a paranoid foe. Little wonder that deterrence was the first victim of a deepening crisis, as with Cuba in 1962, leaving the antagonists to grope fearfully in a fog of mutual misperception. While we clung to the notion that nuclear war could be reliably deterred, Soviet leaders derived from their experience the conviction that such a war might be thrust upon them and if so, must not be lost. Driven by that fear, they took Herculean measures to prepare to fight and survive no matter the odds or the costs. Nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union was a dialogue of the blind with the deaf. In the final analysis, it was largely a bargain we in the West made with ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

The decisions that drive force levels and rebuild agendas for nuclear weapons in the United States are coming from bi-partisan politics and irrepressible corporate lobbying. In adversary nuclear states these decisions derive from demand for international status and fear of US power and fear of each other.

The imponderable with nine nuclear weapon states is what happens to deterrence if any one of them violates the taboo against use or if a non-state actor does so. There are no brakes on escalation given there is little if any way to limit the destructiveness of these weapons, even “small” ones.

We need high level personal conversations between potential belligerents starting with informal meetings at all levels of political decision-making, military command, and business/scientific leadership.

There is no cure for nuclear war, only prevention.

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Lee, *Uncommon Cause*, Vol II, 2016, pp. 409-14

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 266