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Protracted Nuclear War

The Reagan Pentagon wanted to plan for it. Then, all hell broke loose.

By Richard Halloran



During a trip to Europe in the 1980s, Undersecretary of Defense Fred C. Iklé sat down to breakfast one morning and fell into a discussion about how a nuclear war might be fought. After several minutes, the Reagan Administration aide paused, then said, “Of course, none of us really knows what he is talking about, because we have no empirical feedback on nuclear war.”

Iklé, a well-known nuclear theorist, later expanded on that thought, writing that the “instantaneous terror” of nuclear war “is so unfathomable that people tend to think about it in all-or-nothing fashion; either no nuclear

weapons will be used, or aggressor and defender will be totally destroyed.”

Ever since the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, strategic thinkers such as Iklé have struggled to imagine how a nuclear war might unfold, even as they sought to shape doctrine and procure weapons for fighting such a war. For many reasons, that intellectual exertion reached a climax in the early 1980s.

In retrospect, the pivot was the new Reagan Administration’s concept of “protracted nuclear war,” often cast in shorthand as “fighting and winning nuclear war.” It was hardly a military secret; almost as soon as they arrived in Washington in 1981, Reagan officials began discussing a military campaign after a potential breakdown in deterrence.

Surrender was out, said these officials, as was suicidal all-out retaliation, so some more-limited, episodic nuclear doctrine was needed. Better to plan for it.

Top: B-52G bombers take flight. Left: The May 30, 1982 article from the New York Times.

In this view, such planning was a logical extension of the deterrence that had been in place for decades. Why, they thought, should the US be forced to choose between doing nothing or committing suicide? If the USSR knew the US had retaliatory options, it would only strengthen deterrence.

Others, however, found such talk horrifying. To them, anything that made nuclear war seem less than doomsday made it more likely that somebody might try it. Some even mistook the Reagan team's planning as preparation to initiate a nuclear war.

Backtracking

A political backlash erupted and soon Reagan himself was backtracking. When asked during a March 1982 press conference whether nuclear war was winnable, he responded: "I don't believe there could be any winners" and "everybody would be a loser." In April 1982, Reagan declared forcefully, "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

Behind the scenes, however, nuclear planners churned away. Indeed, an official embrace of "protracted nuclear war" was an essential element in the classified *Fiscal Year 1984-1988 Defense Guidance*. The 125-page *Defense Guidance* was drawn up by Pentagon officials in 1981-82 and signed by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger in March 1982.

Moreover, *Defense Guidance* was blessed by the White House with National Security Decision Directive 32, signed by Reagan on May 20, 1982. The recently declassified NSDD stated, "The modernization of our strategic nuclear forces ... shall receive first priority." It continued: "The United States will enhance its strategic nuclear deterrent by developing a capability to sustain protracted nuclear conflict."

That was followed by NSDD-75, signed on Jan. 17, 1983, which underscored deterrence. It said Soviet calculations about war must always see "outcomes so unfavorable to the USSR that there would be no incentive for Soviet leaders to initiate an attack."

The substance of the Pentagon document was soon leaked to the *New York Times*. My 2,500-word piece about it appeared in the May 30 edition under the headline, "Pentagon Draws Up First Strategy for Fighting a Long Nuclear War." It began: "Defense

Department policy-makers, in a new five-year defense plan, have accepted the premise that nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union could be protracted and have drawn up their first strategy for fighting such a war."

The piece, noting that US officials believed that nuclear deterrence could fail and a long war result, said US armed forces were ordered to prepare for nuclear counterattacks against the Soviet Union "over a protracted period." The kicker was that the US "must prevail and be able to force the Soviet Union to seek earliest termination of hostilities on terms favorable to the United States."

With the Administration's nuclear vision out in the open, a vigorous debate ensued.

Or rather, it continued. This was a time of deep argument over all things nuclear. Congress and the Administration were going at each other over the MX (later, Peacekeeper) ICBM, especially its basing mode, and over plans to deploy US Army Pershing II theater-range ballistic missiles and US Air Force Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles in Western Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20 missile force.

It was an era of disputes over the B-1 bomber, which had been killed by President Carter but resurrected by President Reagan in 1981, and the "stealth" bomber, later called the B-2 Spirit. It was an era of deliberations over the Trident ballistic-missile-firing submarine and its planned D-5 missile, a bigger, more powerful, and more accurate successor to the C-4 weapon.

It's hard, after the passage of a quarter-century, to characterize the debate of those days. It didn't break down along the predictable lines of Republican vs. Democrat, conservative vs. liberal, military vs. civilian. About the only constant in the brawl was that few professed to have a monopoly on truth. Almost everyone knew he was groping in the dark.

A key part of the debate had always been out of public view, among a handful of strategic wise men often called "nuclear theologians," who dove deep into nuclear arcana. That brotherhood included (but was not limited to) Paul Bracken, a Yale political scientist; Bernard Brodie, another political scientist at Yale and father of the concept of nuclear deterrence; Herman Kahn, the strategic analyst known for "thinking the unthinkable" that deterrence

might fail and the US might have to wage nuclear war; Bruce G. Blair of the Brookings Institution; and Alan Vick of the RAND Corp.

The debate was unlike any other in universities or government. Iklé, a full-fledged member of the nuclear priesthood, acknowledged in his 2006 book, *Annihilation From Within*, that much of the discussion "took the form of an abstract and cold-blooded theorizing of an eerily academic nature."

The debate consumed forests of newsprint and hours of television time. Perhaps the key dispute was whether there could be any plausible theory of victory in nuclear warfare.

The traditionalist view was that, when it came to nuclear war, a tie game was the best that could be hoped for, and even then, the US lost.

Harold Brown, a renowned nuclear physicist who had served as Secretary of Defense in the Carter Administration, put it in the starkest possible terms. "The destruction of more than 100 million people in each of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the European nations could take place during the first half-hour of a nuclear war," Brown wrote after he left the Pentagon in 1981. "Such a war would be a catastrophe not only indescribable but unimaginable," he added. "It would be unlike anything that has taken place on this planet since human life began."

Dig a Hole

A strong and vocal minority held a different view. Thomas K. Jones, a senior engineering official in the Weinberger Pentagon, argued in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* that nuclear war would not be the end of days. It would be bad but survivable. In Jones' estimate, the United States could recover from a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union in two to four years. He put great store by civil defense. Americans would dig holes in the ground, cover them with wooden doors, and blanket the whole thing with three feet of dirt. "If there are enough shovels to go around," he said, "everybody's going to make it." Jones' comment did not reflect mainline thinking in the Pentagon, but it did reflect a willingness to ponder what might happen should deterrence fail.

In a third view, Michael Howard, the Oxford don and later military historian at Yale, was optimistic that nuclear war



**Caspar Weinberger,
Secretary of Defense, at
a DOD news conference
in 1985.**

could be avoided altogether. “The development of nuclear weapons,” he said, “has given us a chance for the indefinite future of preventing the outbreak of major war. ... One cannot rule it out as a possibility, but our very dread of nuclear war makes it a highly remote possibility.”

When Reagan became President in 1981, he brought to the White House limited knowledge of nuclear affairs. It was much the same with Weinberger, a lawyer and a relative novice in security policies. Even so, Reagan and Weinberger presided over a shift of doctrine by relying on specialists such as Iklé, a Swiss-born thinker who supervised the drafting of *Defense Guidance*.

That document specified six nuclear objectives:

- “Promote deterrence by being convincingly capable of responding to a first strike in such a way as to deny the Soviets (or any other adversary) their political and military objectives.”

- “Minimize the extent to which Soviet military nuclear threats could be used in a crisis to coerce the United States and our allies.”

- “Maintain the capability to support Alliance commitments.”

- “Should deterrence fail, deny the Soviet Union (or any other adversary) a military victory at any level of conflict and force earliest termination of hostilities on terms favorable to the United States.”

- “Limit damage, by active and

passive measures, to the United States and its allies.”

- “Maintain in reserve, under all circumstances, nuclear offensive capabilities so that the United States would never emerge from a nuclear war without nuclear weapons while still threatened by enemy nuclear forces.”

The final point was key, putting the “protracted” in “protracted nuclear war.”

Press Coverage

The disclosure in the *Times* was immediately picked up by network television. With graphic film of nuclear tests, the TV reports made a splash. Not all DOD officials were disturbed by the coverage; some suggested it might have a deterrent effect on the Kremlin.

Weinberger, however, was displeased. He invited me to breakfast, during which he voiced two complaints. First, he was unhappy that someone had leaked classified material. Second, he complained—with civility—that the headline on the article made it seem that the US was plotting an offensive nuclear war against the Soviet Union. He considered that part of the newspaper’s coverage to have been misleading.

Weinberger was an erudite and likeable man, possessed of a quick mind and dry, self-deprecating sense of humor. As Secretary of Defense, he quickly became the leading advocate for the Reagan nuclear posture.

Over the next months, Weinberger

went to great lengths to make the point that the Reagan Administration was not planning a nuclear assault on the Soviet Union, that neither Reagan nor his top aides thought that nuclear war would be “winnable” in any ordinary sense of the word, and that he was doing his job by planning for the most demanding nuclear contingency.

He declared more than once in public, “You show me a Secretary of Defense who is planning not to prevail and I’ll show you a Secretary of Defense who ought to be impeached.”

Weinberger pressed the point in a speech at the Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. “We must,” he said, “have a capability for a ‘protracted’ response to demonstrate that our strategic forces could survive Soviet strikes over an extended—that is to say, protracted—period.”

He made many such speeches. With each utterance, Weinberger seemed to become more deeply enmeshed in the complexities and “negatives” of *Defense Guidance*.

The Reagan nuclear stance continued to draw flak, and not just from traditional political opponents. Toward the end of his tour in 1982, Air Force Gen. David C. Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the *Washington Post*, “I don’t see much of a chance of nuclear war being limited or protracted. I see great difficulty in keeping any kind of exchange between the US and the Soviets from escalating.”

Jones, not always one of Weinberger’s favorites, also told military writers: “If you try to do everything to fight a protracted nuclear war, then you end up with the potential of a bottomless pit.” He added, “We can’t do everything. I personally would not spend a lot of money on a protracted nuclear war.”

Indeed, high cost was a main drawback in the protracted war concept. First, the nation needed large numbers of secure, accurate, and flexible weapons. Even more important, the concept required a survivable command, control, and communications net, one that would be filled with redundancy. Without it, no one could be sure the US could unleash its weapons under the demanding conditions of war.

Bracken, the Yale nuclear theologian, was sharp in his criticism. He wrote that “questions of how nuclear weapons would really be used are questions of irremediable insanity.” Blair of the Brookings Institution asserted,

with understatement, that “preparing forces and command networks for protracted intercontinental nuclear war is not palatable to significant segments of the defense community.”

The political attacks continued. By late summer 1982, Weinberger was moved to dispatch to 30 American and 40 foreign publications a letter stating that he was “increasingly concerned with news accounts that portray this Administration as planning to wage a protracted nuclear war, or seeking to acquire a ‘warfighting’ capability.”

In the letter, he argued: “We must have a capability for a survivable and enduring response—to demonstrate that our strategic forces could survive Soviet strikes over an extended period.”

The letter sparked a memorable exchange between Weinberger and Theodore H. Draper, the historian and social critic, in the *New York Review of Books*. When the written combat ended, Weinberger had provided an authoritative Reagan Administration view and Draper had summed up the position of many Administration critics.

The argument that began in November 1982 reached a crescendo in mid-1983. Weinberger, who had a combative streak, wrote Draper that “each and every assertion you have made is absolutely incorrect and at variance with the truth.” Moreover, he said, Draper’s assertions showed “fundamental misunderstanding of US nuclear policy as it has evolved” since World War II.

Weinberger went on, “Our historical objective of deterrence is founded on our belief that there could be no winners in a nuclear war. ... We are under no illusion that a nuclear war would be anything less than an absolute catastrophe.” He suggested that Draper take the time to read the annual reports of the previous five Defense Secretaries, after which “you will observe that the policy I have enunciated rests squarely in the mainstream of US strategic thought.”

In a long, occasionally testy response, Draper disputed Weinberger’s claim, noting, “You yourself have made the distinction between the requirements for fighting and winning a nuclear war and those for merely deterring it.”

Draper emphasized what he saw as the danger inherent in calibrating the relative acceptability of different types of nuclear war. “This vision of a controlled nuclear war, capable of hitting only military targets precisely and

Thomas Jones, a senior engineering official in the Weinberger Pentagon.



discriminately, ... is the most perverse and dangerous nuclear temptation that has been dangled before us in a long time. ... To pretend that moral distinctions can be made between allegedly different types of nuclear wars is already taking a most slippery and menacing step toward breaking the nuclear barrier.”

In the End, In the Mainstream

Draper, however, finished with a grace note, rare in American politics then and even more rare today: “As you see, I have not been persuaded by your letter, and I rather think that you will not be persuaded by mine. But I cannot end without acknowledging my deep respect for your willingness to engage in an open exchange of views with a professedly critical private citizen. It is an act in the best democratic tradition, and I wish to salute you for it, whatever the merits of your case or mine.”

Eventually, the debate blew over. Pentagon officials stopped talking about “winnable” nuclear war. Critics had difficulty finding new cracks to exploit. President Reagan himself pushed nuclear arms control initiatives with undeniable sincerity and vigor. With Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin, perceptions of the Soviet Union grew more benign.

The trail from Hiroshima and Naga-

saki in 1945 to Weinberger and Draper in 1983 was long and tortuous. After World War II, many strategic planners saw nuclear weapons as merely bigger versions of the bombs used in conventional operations. President Truman viewed them as weapons of last resort. President Eisenhower tended to view them as weapons of early resort. President Kennedy embraced “flexible” nuclear employment, while President Johnson tended to emphasize assured destruction.

Under President Nixon, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger devised “limited nuclear options.” President Ford continued the evolution of policy in that direction. By the end of President Carter’s term, the US had adopted Presidential Directive 59, which, according to Harold Brown, dealt with “how a nuclear war would actually be fought by both sides if deterrence fails.” The US, he said, planned “to employ strategic nuclear forces selectively ... as well as by all-out retaliation.”

In the end, it seemingly was not so large a step from Brown’s PD-59 to Weinberger’s *Defense Guidance* and its theoretical acceptance of protracted nuclear war. Indeed, as Weinberger contended with Draper, the Reagan approach rested in the mainstream of historical US strategic thought, even if it didn’t appear to be that way. ■

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