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WINNERS AND LOSERS: A CONCEPTUAL
BARRIER IN OUR STRATEGIC THINKING

Ralph E. Strauch

RAND Corporation
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WINNERS AND LOSERS: A CONCEPTUAL BARRIER
IN OUR STRATEGIC THINKING

Ralph E. Strauch^{*}

The RAND Corporation, Washington, D. C.

Concepts of limited strategic conflict for coercion or bargaining purposes have been discussed by strategic theorists for over a decade. Until recently, however, these concepts have had little impact on the institutional concepts and images of conflict that provide the foundation for strategic planning within the U.S. defense community. Those concepts and images of conflict have, for the most part, remained centered around general nuclear war (the rapid and massive exchange of most of the U.S. and Soviet strategic arsenals) and assured destruction (the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the Soviet Union in such an exchange) as a deterrent to general nuclear war.

A number of factors, including the recent buildup of Soviet strategic forces, have resulted in increasing concern within the U.S. defense community about the adequacy of these concepts and the ability of our strategic forces to deal with potential future conflict

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situations. This concern is reflected in President Nixon's much-quoted questions in his 1970 foreign policy statement:

Should a President, in the event of a nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of the certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans? Should the concept of assured destruction be narrowly defined and should it be the only measure of our ability to deter the variety of threats we may face?*

and in 1971's answer to that question:

I must not be -- and my successors must not be -- limited to the indiscriminate mass destruction of enemy civilians as the sole possible response to challenges. This is especially so when that response involves the likelihood of triggering nuclear attacks on our own population. It would be inconsistent with the political meaning of sufficiency to base our force planning solely on some finite -- and theoretical -- capacity to inflict casualties presumed to be unacceptable to the other side.**

I want to explore the thesis that a major part of the inflexibility in our current strategic capabilities stems from the institutional images of strategic conflict which form the foundation for our defense planning. These images, even of limited strategic conflict, are based on an underlying idea of conflict as a process that separates the protagonists into a winner and a loser according to criteria which both accept. This "winner-loser" image is, I believe, inadequate

* U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970's, A New Strategy for Peace, A Report to the Congress by Richard Nixon, February 18, 1970, p. 122.

** United States Foreign Policy for the 1970's, Building for Peace, a second annual review by Richard Nixon of U.S. foreign policy in a message to the Congress, February 25, 1971.

to deal with problems of limited conflict between nations that possess the ability to destroy each other's societies.

The premise underlying this thesis -- that there are identifiable institutional concepts and images of conflict on which our defense planning rests and that these concepts and images impose significant constraints on the capabilities we realize from our strategic forces -- is itself subject to question. The validity of the premise must be judged on subjective grounds, since there are no objective standards by which to prove or disprove it. I believe it to be valid. Organizations and institutions -- far more than individuals -- tend to adopt and fit themselves around a small number of unifying concepts and ideas. This is due in part to the need for a simple conceptual framework to serve as an institutional "language" for internal communication. Once adopted, however, the language imposes limitations on the issues with which the institution can deal readily and on the way it perceives those issues.

Even granting this, however, these institutional concepts and images are difficult to identify and explicate, and, when identified, they appear as grossly oversimplified caricatures that almost no one would accept as valid. This is because most experienced individuals within the defense community possess a richer and deeper understanding of the problems with which they deal than is reflected in the institutional concepts of the community as a whole. In their day-to-day activity, however, this deeper understanding is often set aside, with phrases such as "These considerations are important, but we'll ignore them for the time being" or "This formulation leaves a lot out, but

it's the one everybody uses, so it will have to do for now." As a result, the caricatures become accepted by the institution as adequate representations of reality. It is these caricatures, then, which few individuals in the defense community would accept without reservation but which are accepted and used by the community as the "operating principles" underlying our defense planning, with which this article deals.

The Winner-Loser Image of Conflict

Though the realities are far more complex, warfare is commonly thought of as resulting in a clear and unambiguous division of the protagonists into a winner and a loser -- the victor and the vanquished -- according to terms of reference that both accept. The conflict is thought of as terminating when one protagonist "agrees to lose" and to accept the terms imposed upon him by the winner. The winner, in turn, acknowledges this agreement and imposes the terms he desires. This may occur when the loser has no other option, when his military forces are effectively destroyed and the winner is in de facto or near de facto control of his territory, or it may occur considerably earlier if the loser decides that there is no point in continuing. The defeat of France by Germany in 1940 is an example of the latter type, while the later defeat of Germany in 1945 comes closer to the former.

These perceptions lead easily to a highly simplified "winner-loser" image of conflict, in which all political considerations are abstracted out, and a "win" is defined by the achievement of what appear to be the operationally relevant military goals -- destruction of the opponent's military forces, occupation of his territory, etc. The

purpose of the conflict, then, and of the military forces employed in it can be seen as determining the "winner," according to that definition. This image provides the foundation for most peacetime defense planning. Winning is defined in terms of the operational objectives for which it is anticipated that military forces would be applied in conflict, and peacetime defense planning is directed at attaining the capabilities needed to achieve those objectives. The objectives, in turn, provide analytical yardsticks against which to measure the adequacy of the preparation.

The label of "winner," however, seems unlikely to apply in any reasonable way to either protagonist in a future U.S.-Soviet general nuclear war in which most of the arsenals of both sides are used. Each now has, and seems likely to retain, enough destructive power to ensure that, if it is used without restraint, the term "loser" would be far more appropriate for both sides. This has been an accepted fact of life since the early 1960s, and for this reason the deterrence of nuclear war, rather than the ability to fight one successfully, has been the primary objective of U.S. strategic policy. Even our basic concepts of deterrence, however, are derived from an underlying winner-loser image of warfare.

Our deterrent is based on ensuring that the Soviet Union would "lose" in a general nuclear war. We translate this into an operationally relevant military objective -- the "assured destruction" of the Soviet Union as a functioning society following a Soviet attack -- and we maintain strategic forces sufficient to achieve that objective. The fact that our underlying objective is deterrence notwithstanding, then, we view general nuclear war, for planning purposes at least, as a

winner-loser conflict in which "assured destruction" of the Soviet Union, in spite of Soviet destruction of the United States, constitutes a "win."

Their mutual ability to destroy each other induces considerable stability in U.S.-Soviet relationships. In spite of that stability, however, significant differences and sources of disagreement between the two nations will continue to exist. We cannot ignore the possibility that those differences will lead to conflicts that must be resolved by military force, possibly at the strategic level. Our ability to deal successfully with future strategic conflict will depend in part on the adequacy of our concepts of conflict when the conflict occurs. If we are prepared for only general war, we ensure ourselves the position of loser by providing ourselves with only the alternatives of capitulation or holocaust. The possibility of strategic conflict at less than the general-war level is one we must be prepared to deal with if it arises.

Our current institutional concepts of strategic conflict at a less-than-total level, whether at high levels of counterforce exchange or at low levels of limited strategic conflict, are also based heavily on a winner-loser image. The winner and the loser, perhaps, are defined in less total terms and with significant constraints, but nonetheless the image of a well-defined winner and loser is clear. This image is conveyed in phrases such as "termination at a relative military advantage" or "he will quit when his potential losses outweigh his potential gains." The image carries with it the implication of the mutually acceptable definition of "victory," or at least of "being ahead," and the assumption

that one side would be willing to quit at a time when he is a "loser" by that definition, but still retains the capability to inflict enormous damage on the other. The implicit assumption is often made, in effect, that political leaders directing the course of a strategic conflict would do so according to objectives and criteria which analysts find convenient for evaluating military forces. If conflict between nations were a board game, like Monopoly, with clearly defined rules and mutually accepted methods of keeping score, this view would be reasonable. Reality, however, is far more complex. The same problem and the same situation may look considerably different to different people, or nations.

It is sometimes argued that such assumptions are made for "analytical convenience," and the results must, of course, be interpreted in a larger context. This argument would be valid if, in fact, the problems of interpretation in a larger context were regularly considered and addressed; but they seldom are. It is standard practice in the analysis of strategic forces and capabilities to perform "sensitivity analysis" to determine the sensitivity of the conclusions to variations in the values of the numerical parameters describing weapon systems performance. "Sensitivity analysis" of the sensitivity of the conclusions to the assumptions made about the objectives, motivations, and behavior of the protagonists, however, is performed only infrequently and is rarely done systematically.

The winner-loser image is a convenient one on which to base the defense planning process in peacetime, and perhaps that fact is a major reason for its predominant role in that process. It assumes

that when strategic forces are employed in combat, they will be employed for well-defined, operationally relevant, "military" objectives. This implies, in turn, that if those objectives can be determined in advance, then the capabilities required to achieve them can be identified and procured, and the war plans to utilize those capabilities can be developed in an orderly and systematic manner. Defense planning, therefore, can be made into a systematic quantitative process and carried on in a manner which provides "high confidence" that the objectives of conflict can be adequately met if the conflict occurs. The "high confidence" apparently provided, however, is based on the assumption of the validity of the winner-loser image. It does not reflect the basic inadequacies of that image, or the degree of confidence which one might reasonably place in the likelihood that the "objectives" being met would be reasonable national objectives at a time of conflict.

Strategic Conflict as a Process of Bargaining

Should a future strategic conflict occur between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, it seems likely that it would come about as something neither side really wants but that at least one side feels itself forced into, possibly as a result of bad judgment or miscalculation by one or both sides. The minimization of the amount of force used and the avoidance of escalation to high levels of violence are likely to be major objectives of both sides. The ability of each to assure, at the price of being a loser itself, that the other is also a loser will create intense pressure for resolution in a manner which allows each to claim at least a partial win and forces neither to accept a clear-cut loss.

The conflict is likely to be resolved, then, not on a "winner-loser" basis but through a process of bargaining to achieve a mutually acceptable outcome, where acceptability is defined in terms of the preservation of broad national interests and objectives. What looks acceptable at the termination of the conflict, moreover, may be considerably different from what looked acceptable at the beginning, for both sides. A "final solution" to the underlying dispute, in the sense that the victory in World War II was a "final solution" to the German problem, is unlikely. Solutions, instead, will be temporary expedients, resolving the immediately crucial issues and passing the underlying differences on to the future. Whatever settlement is finally reached, each side will accentuate those aspects of the settlement which it finds favorable and downplay those which it finds unfavorable. A "winner-loser" image seems particularly ill-suited to describe (and to prepare for) this form of conflict. Rather, it should be viewed as a bargaining process, engaged in reluctantly, at best, by one and perhaps both parties.

The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 perhaps was a prototype of this form of conflict resolution. The Soviet Union attempted the clandestine deployment of intermediate-range and medium-range ballistic missiles to Cuba. The United States discovered this shortly before the missiles became operational and placed a naval quarantine around Cuba to prevent further introduction of strategic offensive weapons. A settlement was reached in which the Soviet Union removed its missiles and agreed not to reintroduce them, and the United States pledged not to invade Cuba.

The crisis involved a minimal level of violence. The only combat casualty was an Air Force U-2 pilot. The confrontation, nonetheless,

contained many of the elements that might be present in a future limited strategic conflict. U.S. military forces were used -- the naval forces involved in the blockade. The use of other forces -- U.S. air power against Cuba and Soviet submarines against the naval blockade forces -- was threatened, at least indirectly. The threat of nuclear war hung in the background and significantly affected the decision processes, and the behavior, of both sides. The actions taken by both sides show a strong interest in restraining the escalatory process and resolving the dispute with a minimum of violence.

Who won, the U.S. or the Soviet Union? In the U.S., a nearly unanimous view seems to be that we did. Soviet offensive missiles were removed from Cuba, and we obtained a clear pledge that they would not be reintroduced. Relative to the situation which would have resulted had the U.S. been unwilling or unable to act, therefore, the U.S. was clearly a winner. Relative to the situation which would have resulted had no Soviet attempt to introduce the missiles been made, however, a strong argument can be made for Soviet victory. In Soviet eyes, the U.S. probably represented a real threat to the Castro regime prior to the crisis. In the spring of 1961, the U.S.-supported invasion at the Bay of Pigs had failed. Following this, sentiment ran high in the U.S. in favor of decisive military action against the Castro government. The objective evidence, coupled with traditional Russian distrust of the West, would have provided ample grounds for a Soviet assessment that a U.S. invasion of Cuba was a real threat. This threat would almost certainly have been one of the justifications used when the decision to introduce the missiles was being debated and made. (It is,

by the way, the justification advanced by Khrushchev in his memoirs.)*

The crisis ended with a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba and with de facto U.S. recognition of Cuba as a Communist stronghold in the western hemisphere, with continuing significant Soviet presence there.

Khrushchev described the settlement in a speech to the Supreme Soviet in December 1962 as follows:

We declared that if the U.S.A. pledged not to invade Cuba and also restrained other ally-states from aggression against Cuba, the Soviet Union would be prepared to remove from Cuba the weapons the U.S.A. calls "offensive."

In reply, the President of the United States, for his part, declared that if the Soviet government agreed to remove these weapons from Cuba, the U.S. government would lift the quarantine, that is to say the blockade, and give assurance of the rejection both by the United States and by other countries of the Western hemisphere of an invasion of Cuba. The President declared in all definiteness, and the whole world knows this, that the United States would not attack Cuba and would also restrain its allies from such actions.

But after all, this was why we had sent our weapons to Cuba, to prevent an attack on her! Therefore, the Soviet government confirmed its agreement to withdraw ballistic missiles from Cuba.

Thus, in short, a mutually acceptable settlement was reached that signified a victory for reason and success for the cause of peace. The Cuban question moved into the phase of peaceful negotiations and, as concerns the United States of America, was transferred there, so to say, from the hands of generals into the hands of diplomats.** (Emphasis added.)

* Nikita Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970), pp. 492-95.

** Speech to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in December 1962, reported in the Current Digest of the Soviet Press, Vol. XIV, No. 49 (January 2, 1963).

It has been argued that the outcome of the missile crisis was a significant factor in Khrushchev's fall from power. Even if true, this in no way detracts from the central point of this argument: that the way out chosen at the time could be interpreted at the time, if not as a clear victory, as far less than a clear defeat. The interpretation of the outcome as a clear U.S. victory was not, after all, universal even in this country. There was significant criticism at the time, and subsequently, of the President's noninvasion pledge and of his failure to secure the complete removal of the Soviet presence from Cuba. In spite of this criticism, securing the removal of the missiles was a major U.S. achievement.

The explanation put forth by the strategic folklore, that the U.S. "won" because of our "strategic superiority," hardly seems borne out by the facts. It is far too simplistic. U.S. actions were too cautious, and too tempered by the desire to avoid nuclear war, to support that explanation. The U.S. was, in fact, deterred from direct military action against Cuba, at least until the blockade was tried. What we did have was the will, the skill, and the military capability to apply a blend of military and political pressures and concessions sufficient to arrive at an acceptable resolution with minimal use of force. All three elements -- will, skill, and military capability -- were required, and no two, without the third, would have been sufficient.

It is important to note that neither side attempted to force a resolution in a manner which would force the other to admit, or accept, a clear loss. The actions of each side were strongly influenced by the desire to reach a settlement that was acceptable to the other and to

avoid escalation to higher levels of violence. Such a settlement was possible because each side could and did look at it differently, accentuating the aspects of the settlement which were to its advantage. It seems likely that these same influences would have continued to work, perhaps even more strongly, had higher levels of violence occurred. It also seems likely that these influences will be strongly felt in any future strategic confrontation or conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

This mutuality of interest in avoiding general war and finding a mutually acceptable resolution of conflict is frequently expressed by describing limited strategic conflict as a "non-zero sum game." That description, however, may obscure the nature of the bargaining process as much as it illuminates it. The idea of a "non-zero sum game" carries with it the image of a well-structured problem, with the objectives of each side well-defined and unchanging -- as well as the relationship between the actions available to each and the achievement of those objectives. It allows the possibility that each side is using a different method of keeping score, but it still assumes that both are playing the same game. One of the central features of future conflict may well be the fact that both sides are playing quite different games for quite different reasons, and that the perceptions of each side about its own, as well as its opponent's game, are continually changing. This implies that preconceived images of the nature of the conflict, and of what constitutes acceptable outcomes, are likely to be inappropriate and possibly dangerous, as are military plans derived from such images. The nature of the dispute, and the

objectives of both sides, are likely to differ considerably at the start of a conflict from the stereotypes held prior to the crisis. Our ability to resolve future conflicts satisfactorily may depend on our ability to modify those stereotypes.

In the Cuban crisis, the U.S. was able to adapt to the requirements of the situation on an ad hoc basis -- to overcome the institutional "winner-loser" bias in our defense planning and use the inherent capabilities in our military forces to fashion effective tools to resolve the crisis acceptably. Our ability to adapt with equal success in the future, however, seems problematic, and to rely on ad hoc adaptation seems dangerous.

This suggests the need to develop an alternative "bargaining process" image of conflict that more adequately (and explicitly) reflects the probable importance of political context in future strategic conflict, and to bring this image to bear more explicitly in the peacetime defense planning process. Such an image would put less emphasis on well-defined threats and responses and more emphasis on providing a range of responses to an ill-defined spectrum of threats, without attempting to identify a priori the "best" response to any particular threat. It would bring into sharper focus the values of diversified, flexible, and adaptable strategic forces, capable of providing such a range of options, and of holding options open in the transconflict and postconflict period as well.

The bargaining-process aspects of conflict have always played an important role in the conduct of conflict, particularly in the last two decades. From the point of view of the military planner, however,

the winner-loser characteristics have usually appeared predominant. However, the emergence of a mutual capability for societal destruction and the need for restraint which that capability imposes require that the bargaining process aspects of conflict receive greater attention in peacetime defense planning. Nonetheless, the institutional concepts and images of conflict on which our defense planning is based are still predominantly of the winner-loser type. These concepts and images appear to provide clear and internally consistent solutions to our strategic problems and yardsticks with which to measure the adequacy of our strategic capabilities. At the same time, they neglect or assume away many uncertainties and ambiguities in the real strategic environment and possible deficiencies in our capabilities to deal with that environment.

In the absence of severe strategic crisis, these concepts, and the capabilities developed while using them, are subject to no empirical test. Whether or not they would survive such a test, therefore, remains in doubt and is a matter that must be judged on purely intellectual grounds. (This is, of course, equally true of any alternative, including that proposed here.) We ask of our strategic forces that they be able to accept the full brunt of a Soviet attack and respond with the destruction of the Soviet society. We label that test the "worst case." That test, however, does not address, except perhaps indirectly, the underlying goal of defending and preserving our national values and interests. A better "worst case" test of that might be the ability of our strategic forces and institutions to bring us through severe (and perhaps prolonged) strategic confrontation, possibly involving the use of strategic

nuclear weapons, without leading to either extreme of capitulation or the holocaust of general war. Their ability to pass that test is less obvious.

Need for Institutional and Conceptual Change

We tend to think of our military capabilities as determined by our weapon systems and our command, control, and communications (C³) systems. These factors do, indeed, define the inherent capabilities available to us. The actual capabilities we can derive from these forces, however, are also affected by our institutions and concepts for using them. The role of institutional and conceptual factors in determining the limits of our strategic capabilities receives little attention in our analyses of those capabilities, although it is no less important than the weapon systems or the C³ systems. If our military institutions believe that limited strategic conflict as a method of bargaining is impossible or unthinkable, they may be unable to deal with such a conflict, regardless of the adequacy for the task of the weapon systems and the C³ available.

The major conceptual change required is a broadening of our concepts of strategic conflict and the uses of strategic forces -- a broadening which, while it need not totally reject the winner-loser image of strategic conflict, will also allow for recognition of a bargaining tool image, as well as the implications of that image. Chief among these is the explicit recognition of the high degree of a priori ambiguity and uncertainty about strategic conflict and appropriate forms of strategic force use in conflict. The major institutional change required is a greater institutional tolerance

for ambiguity, the ability to accept and live with fundamental ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in future strategic conflict. The institutional propensity to identify those problems for which apparently satisfactory solutions can be found, and to deal only with those problems and solutions, should be replaced with the explicit institutional recognition of the fact that few, if any, strategic problems have clear and unambiguous formulations or solutions, at least until they actually occur.

Even once a conflict occurs, the nature of the conflict and the strategic problem it entails may be seen in various ways, each calling for a possibly different response. The set of reasonable formulations and explanations, moreover, will change as the conflict progresses, as will the objectives and criteria for settlement on both sides. The institutional ability to recognize, articulate, and resolve these differences during a conflict is needed. This ability to recognize different ways of looking at the problem is important to the bargaining process. Final resolution is likely to be brought about by achieving a position that is acceptable to both sides, but possibly for quite different reasons. The ability to evaluate the situation from the point of view of the Soviets and to identify ways of bending that point of view to one which is acceptable to us (and possibly bending ours to one which is acceptable to them) is of major importance. This is not the same as, and in fact may be considerably different from, bending the Soviet point of view to one which agrees with ours. We will want to induce them to accept a settlement that we find acceptable, not for our reasons but for whatever reasons best induce them to do so.

The Cuban crisis of 1962 provides not only an example of a compromise settlement reached through a political bargaining process but also an illustration of the fact that the important aspects of a strategic confrontation -- and the imperatives requiring (and determining) the U.S. response -- may be far different from those usually addressed in a priori analysis of future strategic contingencies.

One result of the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba, had it been successful, would have been a change in the balance of strategic forces between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The usual formulations of problems involving changes in the strategic balance, and the need to react to such changes, are in terms of that balance alone, i.e., in terms of the weapons available to each side and the utility of those weapons in a general nuclear exchange. It has been reported that during the Cuban crisis Secretary of Defense McNamara analyzed the problem in those terms and concluded that the change in the balance resulting from the Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba would be marginal and would only speed up the process of change that would probably take place in a few years in any event. On the basis of this view of the problem, he argued that no corrective action was necessary and that any attempt at corrective action entailing significant risks of escalation was undesirable.

Regardless of the validity of these arguments in the context of a "strategic balance" formulation of the problem, they were somewhat peripheral to the problem facing the President. In the weeks preceding discovery of the missiles in Cuba, he had drawn a clear and

unmistakable line between offensive and defensive weapons and had stated categorically that he was unwilling to tolerate the Soviet deployment of offensive weapons in Cuba. He had done this largely to counter domestic criticism from Republican senators, in the belief that the Soviets had no intention of introducing offensive weapons. Nonetheless, it was done. Because of that position, the objective change in the strategic balance caused by the deployment was a secondary consideration. The credibility of the United States, and indeed President Kennedy's personal credibility as its leader, required the removal of the missiles. He was thus under pressure from what William Jones has called the "Imperial Imperative," which he describes as follows: "Kings do not voluntarily abdicate! When applied to the leader of a nation ... it means that a decision that would obviously result in a general loss of his control, tantamount to abdication, is a decision that he will not make no matter how much it would seem to an outside observer to be in his nation's interest."^{*} At the same time, Kennedy's choice of actions during the crisis was significantly influenced by his desire to allow Khrushchev a "way out" within the terms of Khrushchev's "Imperial Imperative."

During the course of the debate concerning the actions to be taken, a variety of explanations regarding the Soviet reasons for introducing the missiles into Cuba were considered. Only one of these (and one considered among the less probable) explained the Soviet behavior in terms of strategic balance.

^{*} William M. Jones, Predicting Insurgent and Governmental Decisions: The Power Bloc Model, The RAND Corporation, RM-6358-PR, December 1970, p. 12.

The actions taken by the U.S. during the Cuban crisis did not involve the use of strategic forces in combat. Nonetheless, they illustrate many of the characteristics and complexities that might be present in a conflict involving those forces. The military action finally selected, imposition of the "quarantine," was chosen more for political than for military reasons. It was taken not in isolation but in combination with a number of diplomatic and political actions, including a TV speech, diplomatic notes, U.N. activity, and the implicit "threat" of further military action, if required. As the crisis progressed, a number of actions were taken to downplay the Soviet "loss" associated with removal of the missiles. Among these were the noninvasion pledge and the dropping of the initial demand for on-site inspection of the removal. The objective was to obtain removal of the missiles, not to force the Russians to concede defeat in removing them.

The quarantine itself was a course of action dictated by (and probably successful because of) the total context of the situation, political as well as military. It was chosen after consideration of a diverse set of operationally different alternatives, including diplomatic action only, air strike, and invasion as well as other variants of naval blockade. It was a course of action that we possessed the capabilities to perform, but it was not an action chosen to achieve a clearly defined military objective directly relevant to the removal of missiles already in Cuba. It was an option that probably would not have been given much weight in any precrisis contingency planning process.

This suggests a need for considerable flexibility to react to the requirements of the situation in contingencies requiring strategic force use. That this need can be adequately met by detailed pre-planning of strategic operations, no matter how extensive, seems doubtful. What seems required instead is the development of a variety of "building blocks" for strategic force use, capable of being put together in a manner appropriate to the overall context of the problem and the national objectives at the time the need occurs. An institutional capability for evaluating all aspects of the situation and developing appropriate strategic options in light of the total situation as it occurs, is also needed. This requires a high institutional tolerance for ambiguity, a tolerance which must be carefully nurtured and developed, since the normal tendency for any organization is to attempt to structure and perform its function in a way that minimizes uncertainty and ambiguity.

The objection can be raised, of course, that, in developing the ability to look beyond the "military" aspects of force application and consider the political implications as well, the military planner is overstepping the bounds of his responsibility and moving into areas which rightfully belong to the politicians. At one time this might have been a valid objection, but this is no longer true. The nature of future strategic conflict will demand consideration of all aspects of strategic force use, including those usually considered "nonmilitary." The resolution of political questions and the final selection of the option to be implemented will remain the prerogative of the political leadership, specifically the President. In order to provide adequate options to the political leadership, however, the military planner must

take into account the political context in which that decision must be made. If he fails to do so, the military planner is making the implicit, but nonetheless real, judgment that that context is unimportant and can be neglected. That judgment is insupportable. In so doing, moreover, he runs the risk of providing the political leadership with an insufficient range of alternatives, all of which are unacceptable for reasons he ignored.

The change in our strategic capabilities that this conceptual shift might bring about can be summarized by contrasting a caricature of our current position with one that might result from a shift to a bargaining process image. With some, but perhaps not excessive, distortion of reality, the position of the military establishment with respect to the strategic capabilities it provides the President may be summarized as follows:

Mr. President: We have identified a set of possible objectives for which you might desire to employ strategic forces. We are prepared, at your direction, to accomplish those objectives within the capabilities of the forces we possess. If the need arises, you need only select the objective which meets your needs and give us the word. We will take care of the rest.

In peacetime, when the possibility of conflict seems remote and the President's primary concern about the strategic forces is that they provide an adequate deterrent, this position is satisfactory. It may not remain so, however, in a crisis when he must seriously consider the use of strategic force. At that time he is likely to find that neither the objectives provided for nor the means proposed to accomplish them are very well matched to his needs. This deficiency is reflected in Robert Kennedy's description of President Kennedy's impressions of the military following the Cuban crisis:

But he was distressed that the representatives with whom he met, with the notable exception of General Taylor, seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of the steps they suggested. They seemed always to assume that the Russians and Cubans would not respond or, if they did, that a war was in our national interest.* (Emphasis added.)

Similar mistrust marks the description of the meeting of the National Security Council at which final arguments for a blockade and military attack were discussed:

The discussion, for the most part, was able and organized, although like all meetings of this kind, certain statements were made as accepted truisms, which I, at least, thought were of questionable validity. One member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, argued that we could use nuclear weapons, on the basis that our adversaries would use theirs against us in an attack. I thought, as I listened, of the many times that I had heard the military take positions, which, if wrong, had the advantage that no one would be around at the end to know.** (Emphasis added.)

The objective validity of such views may be subject to dispute. Nevertheless, they may be held by a future President or some of his closest advisers at a time of serious strategic confrontation. If the President finds the military options presented to him inadequate, he has three choices: First, he can forego the use of military force altogether and accept whatever losses that entails. Second, he can accept one of the proffered options in spite of the risks. Third, he can attempt to put together an appropriate response on an ad hoc basis

* Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1969), p. 119.

** Ibid., p. 48.

at the time, if necessary against the advice of his military advisers. This was the course chosen in the Cuban missile crisis.

These alternatives seem inadequate in view of the wide range of capabilities inherent in our forces. The inadequacy is traceable to the basic military position I have summarized. An alternative military position might be reached through changes in our strategic concepts and institutions along the following lines:

Mr. President: We know that you would prefer not to have to employ strategic forces, but we recognize that contingencies making such employment necessary may arise. Our forces have a wide range of inherent capabilities, and should such a contingency arise, we stand ready to assist you in identifying and selecting appropriate strategic force options. Because of the political nature of this type of conflict, and the uncertainties inherent in it, we cannot make any a priori guarantees of success. At the same time, we believe we can provide strategic capabilities which may prove to be politically relevant bargaining tools in extremis and which will enhance your capabilities to achieve an acceptable settlement and avoid escalation to general war.

I am not proposing this conceptual shift as a way of making nuclear war more acceptable or of justifying the use of nuclear weapons to settle disputes that could otherwise be resolved without resort to war. Rather, I am suggesting it as a way of looking at conflict which might provide greater opportunity for containment and avoidance of escalation, should war come about as a result of circumstances beyond our control. This requires, I believe, that we view the use of military forces as an inherently undesirable, but occasionally necessary, tool of policy, which should be used as carefully and sparingly as possible. This attitude toward the use of military force was eloquently expressed by the Chinese philosopher Lao-tse over two thousand years ago:

Where armies are, thorns and brambles grow.

The raising of a great host

Is followed by a year of dearth.

Therefore a good general effects his purpose and then stops; he
does not take further advantage of his victory.

Fulfills his purpose and does not glory in what he has done;

Fulfills his purpose and does not boast of what he has done;

Fulfills his purpose, but takes no pride in what he has done;

Fulfills his purpose, but only as a step that could not be avoided.*

The course I am suggesting involves a significant shift of emphasis in our strategic concepts that requires a rejection of the neat, clear-cut, high-confidence answers to our strategic problems, which our current concepts appear to provide, and at the same time entails an acceptance of the fact that no clear-cut, high-confidence answers really exist. It requires the acknowledgment of higher levels of risk in strategic conflict than do our current concepts. It might produce, however, a lowering of the actual levels of risk we face -- by lessening the chances that our capabilities would prove inadequate, should the empirical test arise. By acknowledging the difficulty of the questions, it would decrease our confidence in our answers but would provide us with a better chance of having asked the right questions.

* Lao-tse, Tao Tê Ching, Chapter XXX, translated by Arthur Waley in The Way and Its Power (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958).