AD-779 347

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

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2 January 1974

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER AD 779 347
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) An Analysis of the Strategy of Flexible Response		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Student Essay
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) Colonel Francis J. Lopes, Transportation Corps, USA		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS US Army War College Carlisle Barracks, Pa. 17013		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		12. REPORT DATE 2 January 1974
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 15
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS(if different from Controlling Office)		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)

18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

None

DD FORM 1 JAN 73 1473 EDITION OF 1 NOV 65 IS OBSOLETE

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION		PAGE
	ABSTAINER	ii
I	INTRODUCTION	1
II	GENESIS OF THE STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE	3
	The Uncertain Trumpet	3
	Credibility and Massive Retaliation	4
III	THE STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE	4
IV	EFFICACY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE	6
	Deterrent Value of Flexible Response	8
	Measured Response	8
	Protracted Local Wars	9
	Credibility of Nuclear Deterrence	10
	Nuclear Threats and Limited Wars	11
V	FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND THE DEFENSE BUDGET	11
	Cost Growth	12
VI	FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND REALISTIC DETERRENCE	13
	Realistic Deterrence and the Public Mood	14
VII	SUMMARY	14
	NOTES	16
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	17

INTRODUCTION

Nations go to war in the pursuit of policy. Hence, national strategy is circumscribed by national objectives. Decisions on national objectives in the United States are made or approved by the president. A basic U.S. national security objective for some time has been to preserve this country as a free and independent nation.[1]

A nation's strategy and it's national objectives involve a wide range of defense problems and the intricacies of international politics. This includes military planning, weapons technology and economic, human and organizational factors of military security. Formulation of strategy and national objectives require an understanding of the impact of science and technology on international relations, of the ideological differences between the Communist bloc and the West, and of the conditions under which new nations are developing. There are three factors, however, which are unique; the destructive power of modern weapons, the impact of science on international systems and rapid nature of political change. The period following World War II provides a vivid and historic example of these factors at work in today's world.

The introduction of nuclear weapons during World War II quickly forced universal recognition that such weapons were so devastating that nuclear war was unacceptable. To many, it appeared that from that moment on, the use or threatened use of atomic weapons was sufficient to assure the security of the United States. It must be conceded that U.S. strategy in the Post-World War II years, always keyed to atomic weapons, has indeed been successful in deterring general wars. But the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as numerous other confrontations, illustrate that U.S. strategies in the Post-World War II

era did not deter limited or local wars. While it was believed earlier that the threat of escalation to nuclear wars would act as a deterrence to limited wars, all nations possessing such weapons have demonstrated the greatest reluctance to use them. Although this development tends to lessen the possibility of escalation to general war, it conversely contributes to a general tolerance of "Wars of Liberation" or guerrilla wars. Local wars, then, pose a profound challenge to all strategy-makers. Since World War II, the United States has had national strategies respectively termed Massive Retaliation, Flexible Response and Realistic Deterrence. Flexible Response remains today the most dramatic shift in U.S. military strategy since WWII to deal with "Wars of Liberation" or local wars. This paper focuses primarily on this strategy, its limitations, and its implications for the U.S. national budget today.

GENESIS OF THE STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

The dawning of the atomic age engendered general recognition of the unacceptability of nuclear war and ultimately led to a widespread notion later dubbed the "Great Fallacy" by General Maxwell Taylor.[2] The fallacy was that threatened use of atomic weapons would be sufficient to assure the security of the United States. Congress, the general public and to some extent, the Department of Defense, readily believed that in strategic nuclear bombers, the United States had the absolute weapon. It was in this climate that in 1945, our first Post-World War II strategy was conceived. Some years later this strategy was given formal expression in a statement made by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in January 1954 and given world-wide publicity. In his declaration, Secretary of State Dulles termed the strategy one of "Massive Retaliation." It was understood that this would be by aerial bombardment using strategic nuclear bombers. Despite serious setbacks during the events of the Korean War, the strategy and its adherents held sway over the U.S. defense posture from 1945 to 1960.

THE UNCERTAIN TRUMPET

Its "success" notwithstanding, Massive Retaliation came under increasing criticism from opponents who began voicing their concern as early as 1950. Congress and the general public were enjoined by both military and civilian critics to reexamine the nation's strategy and effect the necessary changes which would permit the U.S to confront world realities. It was not until 1959, however, that the doctrine of Massive Retaliation was seriously challenged in the form of a thoughtful book authored by General Maxwell Taylor, titled "The Uncertain Trumpet." Both the book and the man caught the attention of Presidential

candidate John F. Kennedy, and by 1961, Massive Retaliation had been discarded. A major shift in U.S. strategy then occurred as the Kennedy Administration guided the nation into "Flexible Response." As expressed by General Taylor, the concept of Flexible Response would permit a range of options to the U.S. in dealing with various forms and levels of military conflicts, particularly low intensity wars and confrontations.

The strategy of Flexible Response is generally regarded as the brainchild of General Maxwell Taylor. In truth, most early critics of Massive Retaliation, whether military or civilian, had conceived and advanced strategies similar to the one proposed by Taylor. It remained for General Taylor, however, to give formal expression to the concept and to title it "Flexible Response."

CREDIBILITY AND MASSIVE RETALIATION

Flexible Response was an almost natural outgrowth of its precursor, in retrospect. Massive Retaliation had begun showing signs of declining credibility throughout the world, and it could be said that the force of circumstances nearly dictated President Kennedy's move toward Flexible Response in 1960. And while this important shift for the U.S. could be viewed as the inevitable result of events, it was probably just as inevitable that Massive Retaliation should have been the first U.S. strategy of the nuclear age.

THE STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

With the advent of nuclear weapons, both national and military strategems have undergone major upheavals. Military strategy in the nuclear age

can take four forms: (1) preventive destruction of enemy weapons; (2) interception of enemy nuclear weapons in transit; (3) physical protection against the effects of nuclear explosions; (4) the threat of retaliation.[3] United States military strategy in the Post-World War II years has been based on the fourth solution - the threat of retaliation. Of the available alternatives, deterrence provides the only true protection possible. The simplest form of deterrence is a survivable striking force sufficiently powerful to deter the enemy from employing his own strike forces. While the U.S. has successfully deterred nuclear war since World War II, it has not deterred lower spectrum war in the form of insurgencies or limited wars. These wars pose threats distinctly different from general war. In order to deal with the total spectrum of wars, the national strategy of the United States in 1960 came to assume a more complex form of deterrence. This form of deterrence is aimed at discouraging general war, limited wars or unconventional wars by maintaining flexible military forces capable of responding to any level of violence in direct proportion to the aggression experienced. It would be achieved primarily by increasing U.S. general purpose forces and weapons. General Taylor described the program as essentially consisting of five elements:[4]

> ONE, modernization and protection of U.S. strategic nuclear forces to assure its survivability in sufficient numbers to inflect unacceptable levels of damage on the enemy; TWO, rebuilding the capability of all three services to wage conventional warfare, while retaining their ability to fight with atomic weapons; THREE, designating training and equipping highly mobile forces in the U.S. as backup reserve for our overseas forces and our allies; FOUR, reequipping air and sealift forces with modern efficient transport vehicles for deployment and resupply of U.S.-based forces; FIVE, strengthening antisubmarine forces and improving its equipment.

EFFICACY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

The Kennedy Administration had barely assumed office when two international crises arose to challenge it; Laos and the Berlin crises. The insurgent war in Laos came first, with the Administration urgently investigating all of its available options. The search unfortunately revealed that no military action short of nuclear employment was feasible. U.S. nonnuclear forces were incapable of reacting to this particular crisis because of inadequacies in strength and equipment.

Still later, Soviet threats to Berlin once again sent the Administration into crisis action. But this time the government responded with a substantial mobilization of reserve military units, and rapid deployment of regular forces to Europe.

The two events convinced President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara of the correctness of their original views on Massive Retaliation and the deterrent value of general purpose forces. Accordingly, a buildup of this segment of U.S. defense forces continued. For several years the defense budget grew and forces were expanded. Ultimately, however, the Administration came face to face with a familiar and persistent problem of American defense management; budget constraints. As public resistence to ever-larger budgets mounted, the expansion of these forces slowed. In the end, the Administration's goals were never reached. U.S. nonnuclear forces were nevertheless markedly improved with comparable growth manifested in the country's diplomatic and political power. If the U.S. had proved impotent in Laos, Berlin at least had proved the defense value of Flexible Response.

By 1963, the primacy of Flexible Response and the need for general purpose forces was unquestioned. The plight of underdeveloped and emerging nations seemed to provide sufficient proof, if proof were needed, that the Administration was indeed on the correct course. Administration spokesmen were quick to point out that in the twentieth century alone, 29 wars which could be classed as insurgencies had taken place. Virtually all of these wars originated in the geographic locales of South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Aside from Greece, which was a special case, nearly all of these military engagements took place in the old, colonial empires of Western nations and Latin America. Decades ago, Lenin theorized that undeveloped countries were more likely to generate revolution than those where technology was highly developed. In an extension of this theory the Soviet Union in 1960 declared it would support world-wide, what Premier Krushchev termed "Wars of National Liberation." The Kennedy Administration saw the Soviet policy as a method of reducing piecemeal, the territory and resolve of the non-Communist world. McNamara characterized this tactic as the 'salami slice technique." To counter this threat, Secretary McNamara announced:[5]

> There is no need, however, for the free world to be vulnerable to this dangerous Soviet tactic. An adequate level of nonnuclear military strength will provide us with the means to meet a limited challenge with limited forces. We will then be in a position of being able to choose, cooly and deliberately, the level and kind of response we feel most appropriate in our own best interests: and both our enemies and our friends will know it.

The strategy of Flexible Response was subsequently tested on the Indian subcontinent, Africa, the Middle East, the Western Hemisphere and Southeast Asia.

But commitment of U.S. combat forces occurred in only two places; the Dominican Republic and Indo-China. The others involved a mixed bag of military, diplomatic and political actions which produced an equally mixed bag of results.

DETERRENT VALUE OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

It is precisely in its proclaimed deterrent value that flexible response may be criticized. While Massive Retaliation clearly did not prevent the 1947 insurgent war in Greece and the 1950 Korean War. Flexible Response cannot be said to have deterred low intensity wars and confrontations during the 60's either. The Vietnam War, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic crisis, for example, were not deterred by our new strategic stance. Admittedly, the new U.S. strategy had hardly taken hold when these confrontations arose. But it can be further argued that these forces were less than totally successful in defeating enemy forces when committed in Indo-China. Gen Taylor had argued for counter-insurgent forces and was quickly given most of the resources he fought for. As it developed, efforts of U.S. special and counter-insurgent forces in Vietnam were quickly eclipsed by those of regular, conventional ground forces when it was feared that the South Vietnamese government would collapse under the siege of North Vietnamese regulars. Whether U.S. special and counter-insurgent forces can deter guerrilla warfare or small wars in the future is accordingly open to question.

MEASURED RESPONSE

Lyndon B. Johnson, continuing the policies laid down by President Kennedy, in 1965 declared that:[6]

> Our military forces must be so organized and directed that they can be used in a measured, controlled and deliberate way as a versatile instrument to support our foreign policy.

In his statement, President Johnson had summed a crucial difference between Massive Retaliation and Flexible Response. Events during the Vietnam War form mute testimony to a failure of this facet of Flexible Response. During the early 1960's, the Kennedy Administration stressed publicly that measured response would be used in reacting to the Communist challenge in Vietnam. The Administration accordingly followed a military strategy which supported this policy. In fact, however, the war developed into a conflict of ever-greater escalation and counter-escalations. This continued until at one point, it appeared that the Kennedy Administration had perceived the fallacy inherent in measured response as it was being followed, and sought to disengage U.S. forces during 1963. The Johnson Administration in later years reverted to Kennedy's earlier policy and the Indo-China struggle intensified over the succeeding years. The failure of measured response to bring about the desired result is viewed by some as validating a classic and basic rule of war: avoidance of piecemeal commitment of forces. Other observers feel that U.S. intervention was neither timely nor properly supported politically and militarily. Had this been done, they maintain, measured response might well have worked. The mining of North Vietnamese harbors is cited as an excellent example of measured response properly implemented.

PROTRACTED LOCAL WARS

World experience with insurgent wars suggest most nations engaged in them are willing to establish as their objective a negotiated settlement

rather than total victory. As such, a good argument could be made for establishing a military stalemate on the battlefield as a prerequisite for eventual negotiations. In effect, this is what occurred in Vietnam. But how to achieve the stalemate quickly or in an acceptable period of time without the protracted struggle the U.S. experienced, is a difficult question to answer.

CREDIBILITY OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Regardless of the emphasis placed on conventional arms in the Flexible Response Strategy, there has never been any doubt about the necessity for strategic nuclear forces. Some critics would carry this reasoning further, suggesting that any serious plans for meeting conflicts on a level below the nuclear threshhold as Flexible Response does, tends to diminish the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. Our European Allies are inclined strongly toward this point of view. Europeans feel that NATO conventional forces can never be large enough to form a credible deterrent to communist forces there. Recent strategic analyses indicate that NATO and Warsaw Pact nations are more evenly matched than earlier supposed, challenging this view to some degree. The logistic advantages of communist forces and their presumed advantage in initiative (for attacks), however, cannot be doubted. Assuming that these critics are correct in declaring that Western and Warsaw Pact nations are unfairly matched in conventional forces, the argument that credibility of the nuclear shield has declined is specious. It is a matter of record that the U.S. abandoned Massive Retaliation and nonetheless successfully retained a credible nuclear deterrence from 1960 to date.

NUCLEAR THREATS AND LIMITED WARS

Adherents of the strategy of Massive Retaliation are inclined to feel that nuclear retaliation failed to deter limited wars because the U.S. did not exercise its strategic superiority in Korea and Vietnam as we did in the Cuban Crisis. Had this been done, they stress, there would have been no need for the strategy of Flexible Response. Moreover, they claim the Korean War was finally halted only when President Eisenhower threatened use of nuclear weapons. But even Gen LeMay, the country's most ardent supporter of Massive Retaliation, had difficulty in saying exactly where the line should be drawn in threatening use of nuclear weapons to deter small wars. Surely to threaten use of nuclear weapons in the Mideast during 1973 or the Dominican Republic would be gross overreaction. The General undoubtedly overstates his case, too, when he claimed that a single threat of using nuclear weapons brought the Cuban crisis to a conclusion favorable to the U.S. It should be remembered that a large, ready force of conventional weapons and infantry troops were poised on Florida for deployment to Cuba. In the Russian view, it may well have been these conventional forces and their disposition which made credible President Kennedy's threats to move against Cuba. If so, the Cuban incident should in fairness be regarded as support for the strategy of Flexible Response, not Massive Retaliation.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND THE DEFENSE BUDGET

In moving from the strategy of massive retaliation to Flexible Response, the U.S. tacitly accepted the financial burdens of a larger defense budget. Flexible Response continues to rest on a need for strong strategic nuclear

forces as a deterrent to atomic war. Thus, the added capabilities for limited war forces are an additional item for the defense budget. It is expensive. President Kennedy clearly indicated that Flexible Response would require greater financial outlays. President Johnson, in continuing Kennedy's defense policies stated:[7]

> ". . . our strategy and . . . our policies requires a large budget for defense."

COST GROWTH

But if Flexible Response resulted in a larger defense budget, initially, then the problem of supporting this strategy has since become greatly magnified. Recent growth in the cost of defense manpower has been dramatic, outstripping the growth in materiel acquisition, large as they have been. This development raises serious questions as to whether Americans will continue to support the policy of having conventional forces of the size envisioned by General Taylor for Flexible Response. Whereas strategic nuclear forces tend to be "material-intensive" in investment costs, conventional forces tend to be "manpower intensive." Additionally, over a period of time, incremental manpower costs tend to appear in retirement budgets and VA costs, a prospect which congress and the public eyes apprehensively. Manpower costs already amount to over 57% of the U.S. defense-related costs, while retirement cost are 20% again as large as manpower costs for active forces and growing yearly. During the Kennedy years the U.S. defense budget grew by some 18% over a period of 3 years (including inflation). A comparable growth for FY 75 to 78 would take the defense budget to a figure approximating 95 billion in outlays and requiring a Budget Authority of nearly 100 billion. It would undoubtedly

face strong opposition from anti-military forces. Yet conventional forces are rapidly nearing their pre-Kennedy year levels. There is some probability that they will go lower still, in the coming years.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND REALISTIC DETERRENCE

Current U.S. national strategy was given expression by President Nixon in his State of the World Address during February, 1971. In it he stated:[8]

> We will maintain our commitments, but we will make sure our troop levels or any financial support to other nations is appropriate to current threats and needs.
>
> We shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.
>
> But we will look to threatened nations and their neighbors to assure primary responsibility for their own defense and we will provide support where our interests call for that support and where it can make a difference.

President Nixon went on to proclaim defense planning criteria, as follows:[9]

> In deterring strategic nuclear warfare primary reliance will continue to be placed on U.S. strategic deterrent forces.
>
> In deterring theater nuclear warfare the U.S. also has primary responsibility, but certain of our allies are able to share this responsibility by virtue of their own nuclear capabilities.
>
> In deterring theater conventional warfare . . . for example, a major war in Europe . . . U.S. and allied forces share responsibility.
>
> In deterring subtheater or localized warfare, the country or ally which is threatened bears the primary burden, particularly for providing manpower, but when U.S. interests or obligations are at stake we must be prepared to provide help as appropriate.

REALISTIC DETERRENCE AND THE PUBLIC MOOD

The Nixon Administration has quite clearly weighed the nation's vital interests and the public's mood against the governments' perceived needs for national defense. Our current national strategy retains certain aspects of Flexible Response on the one hand, while on the other, emphasis on "wars of liberation" has shifted to one of far more selective involvements. The "low profile" adopted by the present administration toward foreign military entanglements achieves two major objectives compatible with the public's current interests: it diminishes the likelyhood of both direct and indirect complicity in small wars; and it reduces the need for conventional forces. It simultaneously holds defense budgets to a level acceptable to the public. The flexibility inherent in the new strategy preserves the range of options desired by the Administration. It will be seen that the Administration has provided for the possibility of U.S. intervention at a time and place of its choosing, should Americans deem it in their interest. There are firm indications that the Mideast is an area so regarded by the U.S. Government today, evidence that foreign military interventions are not out of the question for the U.S. in the immediate future. In this sense, at least, Flexible Response continues as a viable part of the Nixon Administration's plan, despite its declaration of a new strategy labelled "Realistic Deterrence."

SUMMARY

Strong military forces have been, and remain, the essential element of U.S. national strategy. The concept of flexible response has been retained, in part, and incorporated in the present administration's strategy of Realistic Deterrence. The flexibility afforded by this strategy permits U.S.

forces to cope with all levels of warfare from nuclear exchanges to unconventional or protracted war. The capability to react to all intensities is vital to the credibility of U.S. forces. An important lesson of the Vietnam War, however, is that intervention in insurgencies must be timely and properly supported.

Henceforth, measured military responses which support national objectives and limited political objectives should characterize United States diplomatic efforts and aid to threatened nations. But threatened nations and their neighbors will be expected to shoulder the primary responsibility for their own defense under Realistic Deterrence. Thus, the direction of current U.S. national strategy is a logical outgrowth from Flexible Response. Some features of the older strategy are retained while new ones have been adopted to harmonize it with prevailing attitudes of the public. While a "new" strategy has emerged, it might more properly be regarded as more or less a refinement of its own precursor, Flexible Response. The concept of Flexible Response, therefore, is not dead.

Footnotes

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3. Seymore J. Deitchman, "Limited Wars," Military Review, Vol LI, July 1971, p 12.

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5. Robert S. McNamara, Speech before the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation (17 February 1962) pp 7.

6. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress on the State of the Nation's Defenses," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, Book I: Jan 1 to May 31, 1965. Washington GPO 1966, pp 64. Hereafter referred to as Public Papers of the Presidents of the U.S.

7. Public Papers of the Presidents of the U.S.

8. Richard M. Nixon, State of the World Address, February 1971.

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10. Hanson W. Baldwin, "Strategy for Tomorrow," Strategy for Tomorrow, New York, Harper & Row, p 333.

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