

# A STRATEGY OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

by

LIEUTENANT COLONEL PETER F. WITTERIED, USA

*(What was the genesis of the strategy of Flexible Response? To what extent was the underlying theory of Flexible Response adhered to after the strategy was adopted in the early 1960s? Is the strategy still valid?)*



## INTRODUCTION

There are four critically important elements which enter into the formulation of US strategy in the nuclear age: *foreign policy, deterrence, defense, and dollars*. Much of the criticism and explanation of US defense policies is misleading because different definitions, of at least the first three elements, are provided or assumed by the critics and explainers.

For more than twenty years the principal thrust of US foreign policy clearly has been containment of Communist expansionism, especially when it took the form of outright aggression. Until very recently there was consensus in the United States on the value

and propriety of that policy, despite a continuous lack of consensus on how containment could or should be achieved.

Probably the best definitions of deterrence and defense are the formulations of Glenn H. Snyder:<sup>1</sup>

Essentially deterrence means discouraging the enemy from taking military action by posing for him a prospect of cost and risk outweighing his prospective gain. Defense means reducing our own perspective costs and risks in the event that deterrence fails. Deterrence works on the enemy's *intentions*; the *deterrent value* of military forces is their effect in reducing the likelihood of enemy military moves. Defense reduces the enemy's *capability* to damage or deprive us; the *defense value* of military forces is their effect in mitigating the adverse consequences for us of possible enemy moves, whether such consequences are counted as losses of territory or war damage.<sup>2</sup>

Presumably dollars need no definition and their importance in the shaping of military forces is obvious. Frequently, however, discussions of national security policy implicitly assume that resources (dollars) are not a major constraint on available policy options, or conversely, that fiscal considerations are the principal parameters in the formulation of security policy. Although neither assumption is correct, one is based upon a fundamental fact of life and the other upon a generally accepted principal of government. No matter how rich a nation is it must face the fact that its resources are not unlimited. On the other hand, as President Nixon has pointed out, the most fundamental task of government is to provide security for its citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Peter F. Witteried, Field Artillery, graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1954 and received an MA in Political Science from the University of Virginia. He has held command and staff positions with Field Artillery units and taught national defense policy while assigned as an exchange instructor with the Political Science Department at the US Air Force Academy. His most recent assignments include duty with the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam and with the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific. Following graduation from the USAWC in June 1972 he will be assigned to the Office of the Assistant Vice Chief of Staff.



# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>1972</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1972 to 00-00-1972</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>A Strategy of Flexible Response</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>US Army War College ,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>Parameters. Vol. II, No. 1, 1972. pp. 2-16</b>					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>15</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## MASSIVE RETALIATION

That a veritable hornet's nest of criticism followed Secretary of State Dulles' famous "Massive Retaliation" speech should not have come as a surprise. The speech addressed *foreign policy, deterrence, defense, and dollars*; and except for the policy of containment, there was significant opposition toward his views on each of those points.

Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations in January 1954, Dulles said that only by reinforcing a local defense with the "further deterrent of massive retaliatory power..." could the Free World hope to contain the spread of communism and, therefore, the US Government had reached a basic decision to "...depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate..." Moreover, that basic decision would avoid "...grave budgetary, economic, and social consequences."<sup>4</sup> Although US security policies and programs were not completely static during the years following Dulles' speech, the two assumptions and the basic decision announced in the speech continued to shape US security policy for the rest of the Eisenhower Presidency. The assumptions were that the landpower of the Communist World enjoyed such superiority that no mere local defense could be successful and, that if the



US ARMY

*John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State,  
during the Eisenhower Administration.*

---

**"...TO DEPEND PRIMARILY  
UPON A GREAT CAPACITY TO  
RETALIATE..."**

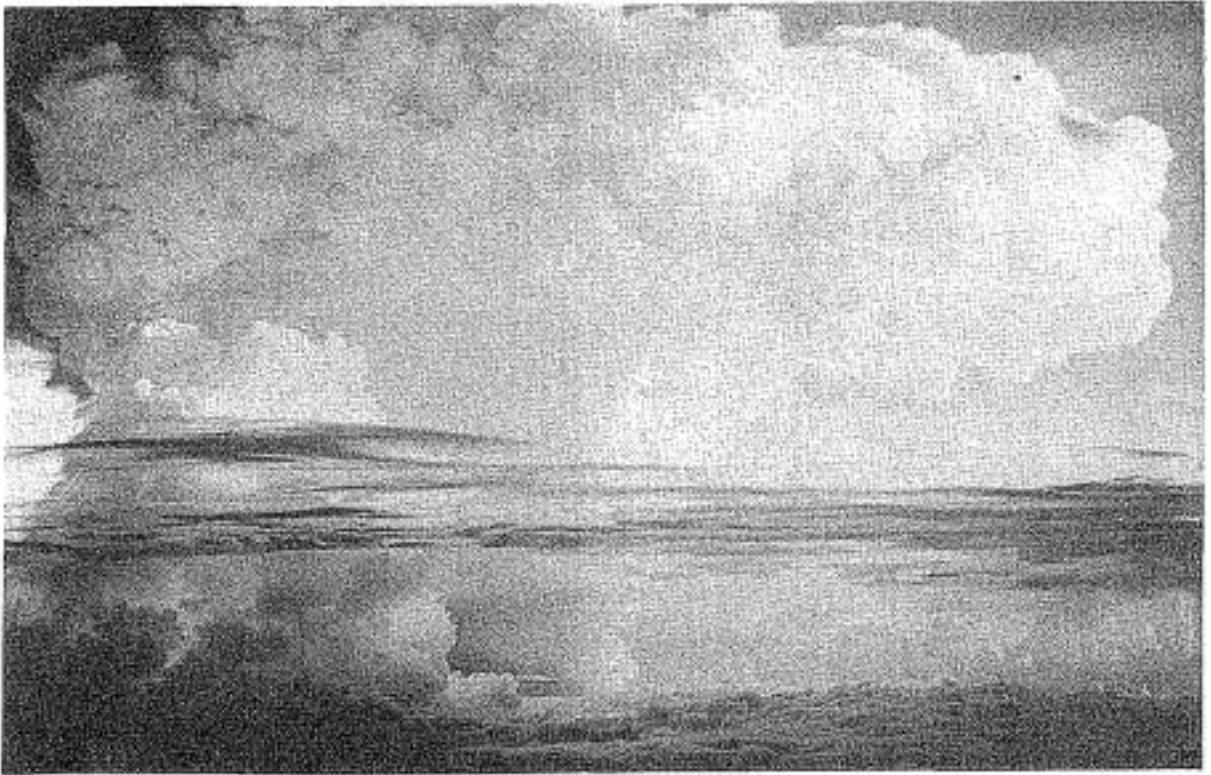
**John Foster Dulles**

---

United States attempted to maintain land forces adequate to provide meaningful reinforcement to the Free World's local defenses, it would spend itself into bankruptcy. The basic decision, of course, was that by placing primary reliance upon its capacity for nuclear attack, the United States and its allies could deter Communist aggression against the Free World's local defenses.

The attacks on the strategic doctrine of

Massive Retaliation focused on the effectiveness of US nuclear might as an instrument for shoring up the Free World's local defenses. It was argued that the threat of Massive Retaliation was of little value relative to local defenses because it posed for the American decisionmaker the choice between employing nuclear weapons or acquiescing in local Communist aggression. Moreover, since the Soviets possessed nuclear weapons, the stakes would have to be very high indeed before the employment of nuclear weapons could be a rational choice. Dulles' formulations, including his explanations subsequent to the famous speech, failed to draw a clear distinction between *deterrence* (discouraging the enemy from taking military action) and *defense* (reducing costs and risks in the event deterrence is not successful). It was this failure which made valid most of the critical analyses of the doctrine of Massive Retaliation.<sup>5</sup> Because it paid little attention to the concept of the *defense value* of military forces (their effect in mitigating the adverse consequences of enemy moves) the



First pictures of an H-Blast, Marshall Islands, 1952.

US ARMY

doctrine lacked credibility and, hence, it had little *deterrent value* against low level or ambiguous threats to Free World security. Further, the process of converting military power into diplomatic power or influence is always difficult, but especially so when military power is concentrated in a form which would be rationally usable only under very high levels of provocation. In short, the doctrine's lack of *defense value* severely limited its applicability for local or limited war.

Partly as a result of such criticism, the Eisenhower Administration's security policies shifted in the direction of an increased emphasis upon a capability to fight limited wars. However, any US involvement in such conflicts was to depend heavily upon the use of tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, since the Soviets introduced tactical nuclear weapons into their force structure during the 1950s, this shift in American policy did not negate the most basic criticism of Massive

Retaliation. The danger of escalation to an all-out nuclear war, once tactical nuclear weapons were employed, made limited tactical nuclear warfare almost as blunt an instrument as "pure" Massive Retaliation. In other words, because of the possibility of escalation, a local defense based on the use of tactical nuclear weapons included most of the shortcomings of Massive Retaliation in terms of its deterrent, defensive, and diplomatic value.

In retrospect, it appears that the strategic doctrine of Massive Retaliation was least effective with respect to events in areas under Communist hegemony and in areas where there was no clear and direct confrontation of US and Soviet power. In Western Europe, on the other hand, Massive Retaliation was a reasonably effective strategy. But there the stakes always have been high; hence the credibility of US willingness to accept the consequences of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union has been relatively great. Nonetheless,

as the Soviet strategic nuclear capability improved and expanded, the probable consequences of such a war became increasingly painful to contemplate.

### THE PROLOGUE TO FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

In 1959 General Maxwell Taylor's book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, was published. It was highly critical of the substance of US national security policy, the force structure which was intended to support the then current strategic doctrine, and the decisionmaking methods employed to arrive at strategies and force levels. As an "insider," the former Army Chief of Staff's arguments were read with interest by those, both in and out of government, who were opposed to the Eisenhower Administration's security policies. As a result, many of his views were further aired in Congress and in the Presidential campaign of 1960.

The principal thrust of Taylor's opposition

to the Administration's security policies was that both US strategy and force posture were badly lacking in *defense value* and, therefore, the United States was unable to deal adequately with Communist initiatives.

But the important contribution of *The Uncertain Trumpet* was its presentation of a program intended to correct the deficiencies of Massive Retaliation; a program Taylor called "Flexible Response." He explained that the label *Flexible Response* was intended to suggest "... the need for a capability to react across the entire spectrum of possible challenge, for coping with anything from general atomic war to infiltrations..." He justified the requirement for such a broad capability on the basis that "... it is just as necessary to deter or win quickly limited wars as to deter general wars" lest limited wars result "... in our piecemeal attrition or involvement in an expanding conflict which may grow into the general war we all want to avoid."<sup>17</sup>



US ARMY

*An artillery gun crew firing against the Viet Cong.*

Explaining the broad outlines of his program, Taylor unequivocally established the tune he wanted to hear in place of the previous "uncertain" sound of the "trumpet" of US security policy:

The National Military Program of Flexible Response should contain at the outset an unqualified renunciation of reliance on the strategy of Massive Retaliation. It should be made clear that the United States will prepare itself to respond anywhere, anytime, with weapons and forces appropriate to the situation.<sup>8</sup>

Taylor's Program of Flexible Response consisted essentially of five key elements. First, modernize and protect the strategic nuclear forces to insure that they could survive a Soviet attack in sufficient strength

---

**"... TO RESPOND ANYWHERE,  
ANYTIME, WITH WEAPONS AND  
FORCES APPROPRIATE TO THE  
SITUATION."**

**General Maxwell D. Taylor**

---

to inflict unacceptable levels of damage upon the Soviet Union. Second, immediately begin a major effort to revitalize the capability of all three services to conduct warfare at levels below general or all-out war and, though the services should maintain their tactical nuclear capabilities, principal emphasis should be placed on their ability to fight with conventional weapons. Third, establish a strong and highly ready force of active duty units in the continental United States as a backup reserve force for both our deployed forces and for our allies. Fourth, modernize and increase the size of air and sealift forces to provide a major capability for the rapid deployment of the active duty forces in the United States, and for resupply of all committed forces. Fifth, develop antisubmarine forces adequate for surveillance

of Soviet submarine forces and for defense against enemy submarines.<sup>9</sup>

It can be argued that Taylor's program actually did not require any significant alteration of the security policies which were being pursued in the late 1950s. After all, his proposals recognized the primary importance of the strategic retaliatory forces; included a requirement to retain a tactical nuclear capability in the hands of the conventional forces; and argued that all types of US forces played important roles in deterring Communist aggression. Because of its gradual evolution, the doctrine of Massive Retaliation already included all those elements. Since those elements were included in the formula of Massive Retaliation propounded in the late 1950s, the differences between Flexible Response and Massive Retaliation were only matters of degree—how large a force level should be maintained and what should be the level of combat readiness and deployability of the conventional forces.

But that argument misses the central differences between the two strategic doctrines; it focuses on the two fundamental elements where the doctrines converge and slight the two elements where they diverge. Both doctrines were designed to implement the foreign policy of containment and both place great importance on the concept of deterrence. However, they differ widely with respect to the importance they attach to the concept of defense—the capability to fight in a manner which will minimize damage and loss, should deterrence fail. And, because of that difference, they differ with regard to the dollars (resources) which should be made available for the nation's security forces. These differences are sufficiently great that they are not merely matters of degree, but instead represent significantly different philosophical approaches to the problem of national security. The basic philosophy of Flexible Response, with its emphasis on war fighting capability and willingness to use that capability in limited wars, is profoundly different from the basic philosophy of Massive Retaliation. Therefore, once adopted, the strategy of Flexible Response would (and did) lead to substantial changes in security



US ARMY

*General Maxwell D. Taylor shown in 1964 with other dignitaries at the representatives stand during the National Shame Day Demonstration at Le-Loi Circle, Saigon, when General Taylor was Ambassador to Vietnam.*

policy, defense budgets, and military force posture.

#### **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF FLEXIBLE RESPONSE**

Only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

—President John F. Kennedy,  
Inaugural Address<sup>10</sup>

With those words, the new President launched the United States upon a redirected course in its security policy and a changed emphasis in the structuring of its military forces. Though the implied hope of avoiding conflict was doomed to failure, the President's intent to alter the nation's security posture was clear. The new Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, promptly

embarked upon a program to remedy the deficiencies of Massive Retaliation. With the exception of strategic nuclear forces, the McNamara changes in forces and strategy were similar to those proposed in Taylor's National Military Program of Flexible Response.

Virtually the first issue McNamara addressed was the adequacy and mix of the strategic nuclear forces. Two fundamentally different positions on the proper size and mix of the strategic nuclear forces had developed in the defense establishment which McNamara inherited. Both positions recognized that the strategic forces must be able to survive a surprise attack in sufficient strength to retaliate with a devastating blow, and both stressed the requirement for effective command and control to preclude an accidental or unauthorized US attack. They differed, however, with regard to their theory

of targeting and the size and composition of the forces required. One position, adopted by Taylor in *The Uncertain Trumpet* and usually identified as finite or minimum deterrence, held that a relatively few well protected weapons (perhaps 300 or 400 Polaris missiles) aimed at Soviet cities would provide adequate strategic nuclear deterrence. Its supporters argued that such a force would slow down the arms race; lessen the likelihood that the Soviets would attempt a preemptive strike out of fear of US forces; and would free dollars for other uses. The other position called for substantially larger forces, composed of a mixture of delivery systems, and capable of a variety of targeting options even after a Soviet first strike. Usually labeled as the "war fighting nuclear strategy," this position rested upon two key premises: first, that even after a Soviet strike the United States would retain an interest in the nature of the postwar situation; and second, that perhaps a combination of avoiding enemy cities in the initial US retaliatory attack, and retaining nuclear forces in reserve would induce the Soviets to limit their attacks to military targets. Although McNamara never fully identified himself with this position, there is little doubt that, at least in the early 1960s, he generally accepted its arguments and adopted its views on the general size, shape, and targeting of nuclear forces.<sup>11</sup>

Secretary McNamara certainly flirted with the idea of inducing the Soviets to adopt a "no-cities" strategy. In a speech, probably intended for the Kremlin as much as for the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation to whom it was formally addressed, he said:

...Our forces can be used in several different ways. We may have to retaliate with a single massive attack. Or, we may be able to use our retaliatory forces to limit damage done to ourselves, and our allies, by knocking out the enemy's bases before he has had time to launch his second salvos. We may seek to terminate a war on favorable terms by using our forces as a bargaining weapon—by threatening further attack. In any case, our large reserve of protected firepower

would give an enemy an incentive to avoid our cities and to stop a war. Our new policy gives us the flexibility to choose among several operational plans, but does not require that we make any advance commitment with respect to doctrine or targets. We shall be committed only to a system that gives us the ability to use our forces in a controlled and deliberate way. . . .<sup>12</sup>

If those words were intended for the Soviets, they appeared to fall on deaf ears. McNamara waited in vain for any indication that the Kremlin was prepared to adopt a counterforce or city-avoidance strategy. Probably as a result, McNamara increasingly focused his subsequent public discussions of strategic nuclear matters on the concepts of assured destruction and damage limitation. Nonetheless, he never abandoned his insistence that US strategic forces must include a survivable and highly effective command and control system, in order that strategic weapons would remain a flexible instrument of policy—capable of employment in a manner appropriate to the situation.

Assured destruction simply means the development and maintenance of strategic nuclear forces and command and control systems which can survive an enemy attack, no matter how powerful, in sufficient strength to retaliate at a level unacceptable to the enemy. Such a capability clearly has represented the strategic deterrent component of US security policy from 1961 to the present. But *deterrence*, even at the nuclear end of the spectrum of violence, should not be the sole component of a security policy. Prudence dictates there also be a *defense* component, in case *deterrence* should fail. The label McNamara affixed to the *defense* component of US nuclear security policy was damage limitation; defined as "the capability to reduce the weight of the enemy attack by both offensive and defensive measures and to provide a degree of protection for the population against effects of nuclear detonations."<sup>13</sup> During the 1960s the relative superiority of the US nuclear arsenal provided a significant damage-limiting capability since

the number of warheads available would have permitted both counter-force as well as counter-value targeting. However, little effort was expended to improve the other components of a meaningful damage-limiting capability.<sup>14</sup>

A significant portion of the sizable increases in the early Kennedy defense budgets was attributable to spending on nuclear delivery systems and warheads, in order to insure that the United States could achieve and maintain an assured destruction capability.<sup>15</sup> In later years, however, McNamara said that the number of effective warheads the United States possessed was more than was required and contributed to the continuation of the arms race:

... In the course of hedging against what was then only a theoretically possible Soviet buildup, we took decisions which have resulted in our current

superiority.... But the blunt fact remains that if we had had more accurate information about planned Soviet strategic forces, we simply would not have needed to build as large a nuclear arsenal as we have today.

In strategic nuclear weaponry the arms race involved a particular irony. Unlike any other era in military history, today a substantial numerical superiority of weapons does not effectively translate into political control, or diplomatic leverage.<sup>16</sup>

In the final analysis, whether one uses Taylor's proposals of 1958 or what McNamara seemed to be saying by the mid-1960s, the basic philosophy of Flexible Response toward strategic nuclear weapons is that their possession in adequate numbers is vital, yet they have little utility in terms of



*President John F. Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara following a cabinet meeting at the White House.*

US ARMY

the politics, diplomacy, or the limited nonnuclear conflicts of the modern world. Once both sides have achieved an assured destruction capability, the tools of international adversary relations have to be the traditional ones of diplomacy, power politics or, at worst, limited armed conflicts; any resort to strategic nuclear weapons would be irrational.

The central elements of Flexible Response have to do with the strategy of force employment in conflicts short of all-out thermonuclear war, and the force structure necessary to conduct such conflicts. In *The Uncertain Trumpet*, Taylor described Flexible Response as the ability to react anywhere, anytime—with forces appropriate to the situation.<sup>17</sup> McNamara, in Congressional testimony said,

...Our limited war forces should be properly equipped to deal with the entire spectrum of . . . [limited aggression]; and they should have the means to move quickly wherever they may be needed on very short notice. The ability to respond promptly to limited aggressions, possibly in more than one place at the same time, can serve both to deter them and to prevent them from spreading out into larger conflicts.<sup>18</sup>

The crises over Laos and Berlin, early in the Kennedy Presidency, served to reinforce the new emphasis on general purpose or conventional forces, one in a negative, the other in a positive fashion. The new Administration had inherited a growing governmental and insurgent crisis in Laos. Investigation of the options available showed that, because of the inadequacy of US nonnuclear forces, no military action, short of a wholly inappropriate resort to the use of nuclear weapons, was feasible.<sup>19</sup> Some months later, the results of mobilizing part of the reserves and of deploying additional regular forces to Europe, in response to Soviet threats against Berlin, strongly suggested the very real *deterrent value* of the *defense value* provided by ready and mobile general purpose forces.<sup>20</sup> Both the Laotian and Berlin crises

of 1961 surely must have served to convince Kennedy and McNamara that their decision to improve substantially the US capability for warfare short of the strategic nuclear level was correct.

By late 1961 it was apparent that the United States was taking steps to provide itself with a general purpose force structure which could be employed according to the precepts of the doctrine of Flexible Response—particularly with regard to the concept of *defense*. But it was precisely at this point that the new Administration had to face up to the inescapable constraint of *dollars*. It is one thing to announce that a capability to deal with aggression across the entire spectrum of violence must be

---

**"... THE ABILITY TO RESPOND  
PROMPTLY TO LIMITED  
AGGRESSIONS. . . CAN SERVE  
BOTH TO DETER THEM AND TO  
PREVENT THEM FROM  
SPREADING OUT INTO LARGER  
CONFLICTS."**

**Robert S. McNamara**

---

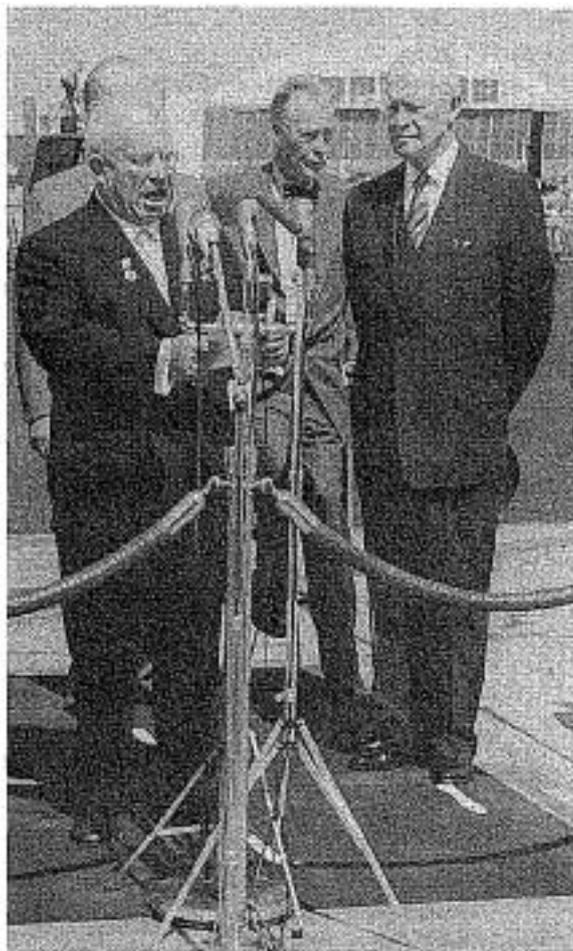
developed, and that its development must be based on an objective determination of requirements without regard to "arbitrary budget ceilings." But, in a democratic system, it is quite another thing to actually do it. Without belaboring either the politics or the management techniques of the McNamara era, it should be noted that, regardless of the strategic doctrine employed, hard decisions, in terms of compromises and risk taking, had to be made. Thus, the goal of a ready general purpose force structure capable of fighting major campaigns in two theaters of operations, plus a smaller contingency operation elsewhere, was never achieved. Nonetheless, the *defense value* of US forces was improved markedly with a concomitant increase in the diplomatic and political power of the United States in the world arena.

## FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND US COMMITMENTS AND INTERESTS ABROAD: THE DEVELOPING NATIONS

Justification for the new emphasis on general purpose forces seemed clear and easy to defend in regard to the underdeveloped or emerging nations of the non-Communist world. In January 1961, the Soviet Union formally announced that not only "world wars," but "local wars," because of the danger of their escalation into "world war," should be avoided. However, "wars of national liberation" were both "admissible" and "inevitable" and, moreover, should be supported by the Communist Powers.<sup>21</sup> Using this Soviet pronouncement as a backdrop for a major policy speech, Secretary McNamara attempted to explain both the nature of the threat posed by "wars of national liberation," and how the United States intended to counter it. By the use of "wars of national liberation" the Soviets hoped to practice what McNamara characterized as the "salami slice technique," which would gradually, in piecemeal fashion, erode the credibility of US resolve to defend its interests and commitments in the underdeveloped world, while reducing both the non-Communist world's territory and its will to resist further Communist expansionism.

Over the years since the strategy of Flexible Response was adopted, US resolve to resist the so-called "salami slice technique" was tested on the Indian subcontinent, in Africa, the Middle East, the Western Hemisphere, and most importantly, in Southeast Asia. Only the last two cases—intervention in the Dominican Republic and the Indochina War—involved the commitment of US combat forces. In the others, China's invasion of India, Communist meddling in various African nations, and Soviet penetration of Egypt and, to a lesser extent, other Arab states, the US responses involved a mixed bag of military assistance, economic actions, diplomacy, and demonstrations of force—with an equally mixed bag of results.

The principal difficulties in assessing the



US ARMY

*President Eisenhower listening to Nikita S. Khrushchev,  
Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR,  
in 1959.*

US intervention in the Dominican Republic lie in the field of foreign policy, not in the realm of strategic doctrine. If the danger of an imminent subversive Communist takeover of the Dominican Republic was gauged correctly, and if the prevention of Communist expansionism, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, was a fundamental axiom of the policy of containment, then the US intervention must be judged a successful demonstration of the efficacy of the doctrine of Flexible Response. The rapid deployment of an appropriate level of US forces had indeed snuffed out a "brush fire," before it became either a Communist victory or an

otherwise serious threat to the security of the Western Hemisphere.

With respect to the war in Southeast Asia, it can be argued that the strategic doctrine was not properly executed; that the tactical implementation of the strategy was hemmed in by too many constraints on the use of the military might available. Or, on altogether different grounds, it can be argued that the situation in Indochina involved neither a sufficiently clear US commitment nor interest to require armed intervention. Both arguments touch upon a key aspect of Flexible Response—the *value of defense*. The *defense value* of US and allied forces failed to provide sufficient *deterrent value* to preclude the continued escalation of the enemy's war efforts in Indochina. And, once *deterrence* fails, *defense* is what one does to reduce the damage or deprivation which the enemy is attempting to inflict—with the damage or deprivation being measured in terms of territory, population, dollars, blood, and political power and influence. In those terms, no matter what the outcome of the tragic conflict, a sizable body of US opinion, both public and official, is going to hold that the levels of damage and deprivation caused by US intervention in Vietnam far outweigh the costs which the United States would have incurred had we chosen *not* to defend South Vietnam. In short, the final irony of the Vietnam War may well be that the basic concepts of the strategy of Flexible Response will be rejected.

#### **FLEXIBLE RESPONSE AND US COMMITMENTS AND INTERESTS ABROAD: WESTERN EUROPE**

At Athens in early May 1962, Secretary McNamara addressed a semiannual meeting of NATO's foreign and defense ministers. He attempted to explain the new trend of US strategic thought as it applied to the NATO region.<sup>22</sup> The speech touched off a strategic debate on the US role in the security of Western Europe which was even then smoldering, and is not yet ended.

In essence, McNamara told the assembled ministers that the United States wanted to extend the strategy of Flexible Response to

Europe. The speech recognized that ultimately the ground forces of NATO might still function only as a trip wire to trigger a massive retaliatory attack upon the Soviet Union, but its principal theme was the importance of developing military options, short of a nuclear exchange, should NATO's deterrent strategy fail:

...The Alliance has over-all nuclear strength adequate to any challenge confronting it. . . . This strength not only minimizes the likelihood of major nuclear war, but it makes possible a strategy designed to preserve the fabric of our societies if war should occur. . . .

For the kinds of conflicts, both political and military, most likely to arise in the NATO area, our capabilities for response must not be limited to nuclear weapons alone. . . . In order to defend the population of the NATO countries and to meet our treaty obligations, we have put in hand a series of measures to strengthen our nonnuclear power. . . .

We expect that our allies will also undertake to strengthen further their nonnuclear forces, and to improve the quality and staying power of these forces. These achievements will complement our deterrent strength. With improvements in Alliance ground force strength and staying power, improved nonnuclear air capabilities, and better equipped and trained reserve forces, we can be assured that no deficiency exists in the NATO defense of this vital region, and that no aggression, small or large, can succeed.<sup>23</sup>

European arguments against the strategy of Flexible Response fall into three basic categories. The first is that any official declarations or actions indicating the adoption of the strategy (such as significantly strengthening NATO ground forces) lessen the *deterrent* value of the nuclear retaliatory forces, by suggesting to the Soviets that a war in Europe need not involve payment of the ultimate price of an all-out nuclear exchange.

Under careful examination this argument appears to have little substance; it clearly is the weakest of the three. Almost any alternative is better than an immediate resort to a cataclysmic Armageddon. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that the Soviets would be emboldened by policies or actions which suggest that NATO has increased its capability and determination to defend Western Europe.

The underlying premise of the first argument is extended by the second. Usually identified with the French, it holds that the formal adoption of Flexible Response accentuates nagging doubts about the reliability of the US commitment to take the final steps which would lead to a Soviet attack on the US homeland. Fundamentally, this argument shares the broader views of the French military theorist, General Gallois, who maintains that alliances have little value in the nuclear era. No nation, he argues, would risk annihilation for the sake of another. Exceptionally grave consequences would flow from a general acceptance of this line of argument, not the least of which would be a proliferation of national nuclear delivery systems and, as a result, a serious destabilization of the nuclear balance.<sup>24</sup>

The third argument is the most compelling. It begins with the recognition that the initial defense of Western Europe under Flexible Response can take only two forms, either a fully conventional defense or a defense based on the use of tactical nuclear weapons. A purely conventional defense almost certainly would not be feasible at the "Iron Curtain." It is possible that an adequate defense could be established at the Rhine, but it is more probable that it would be erected at the line of the Somme, the Vosges, the Jura, and the Alps. In the words of a former French Chief of Staff,

This...would culminate in allowing the aggressor to seize a part of Europe which might not be recaptured for a long period of time, or even recaptured at all if conventional methods were held to... [It] does not seem satisfactory to us,

Europeans that we are, as a method for defending Europe.<sup>25</sup>

A tactical nuclear defense, which surely would result in the use of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons, is equally unacceptable to the Europeans since, "...even a tactical nuclear exchange would completely crush Europe for 1800 miles from the Atlantic to Soviet border."<sup>26</sup> Finally, the likelihood of tactical nuclear war, long remaining limited, is very low; therefore the cost of developing a capability for an adequate defense would be wasted. In short, *deterrence*, not *defense*, is perceived as the only acceptable approach to the problem of serious Soviet aggression in Western Europe.

From a European standpoint the security of the NATO region begins and ends with *deterrence*. A genuinely credible conventional defense is rejected on the grounds that it is nearly impossible to believe that the Soviets would risk an attack without using at *least* their tactical nuclear weapons. Moreover, even if they failed to use tactical nuclear weapons, an unacceptably large piece of European real estate would, perhaps irretrievably, fall into Soviet hands. A defense with tactical nuclear weapons is even less appealing. For the average European citizen, such a defense would produce results little different from those of an all-out nuclear war.

The United States maintains that a reasonably credible capability for defense provides two advantages. First, options short of thermonuclear war offer at least the possibility that Soviet aggression could be checked. Second, and more important, the greater the *defense value* of NATO's general purpose forces, the greater the credibility of NATO's overall deterrent posture.

Henry Kissinger provides an excellent summation of the nature of the debate:

...The real problem is not that the Europeans fail to understand our quest for multiple options. They simply reject it for themselves. When the issue is Asia or Latin America, Europeans favor an even more flexible response than we do;

with respect to the defense of Europe, their attitude is more rigid. . . . Europeans prefer to force us to make our response as automatic as possible. . . .

They have maintained that deterrence depended on posing the most extreme risks. They have been prepared to sacrifice a measure of credibility in favor of enhancing the magnitude of the threat. This debate has been inconclusive because it ultimately depends on a psychological, not a technical judgment.<sup>27</sup>

### FLEXIBLE RESPONSE IN PERSPECTIVE

Flexible Response places great emphasis on *defense*, both as a means toward credible *deterrence*, and as an end, when *deterrence* fails. Therefore, the thrust of Flexible Response is clearly in the direction of war fighting. This means that high level policy-makers are forced to consider, in advance, the consequences of a failure in *deterrence*; it does not mean that every time *deterrence* fails the United States *must* choose to *defend*. In those cases, over the last ten years, where the United States has chosen to *defend*, the decision to intervene was not a knee-jerk response, blindly based upon a rigid strategic doctrine. Rather, the decisions to defend were based upon judgments as to the relative costs which would be incurred, on the one hand by defending, on the other hand by refusing to defend. The judgments may have been wise or tragically in error, but they have nothing to do with the strategy of Flexible Response.

Obviously, Flexible Response when contrasted with Massive Retaliation is both a more expensive strategic doctrine and, at least philosophically, suggests a greater readiness to commit forces in response to low levels of provocation. After all, Massive Retaliation and Flexible Response *are* different. Their principal difference lies in the fact that Flexible Response is based upon a more accurate perception of what constitutes credible *deterrence* and the options actually available to the United States should *deterrence* fail. In the 1950s, Massive

Retaliation was a strategy that failed to consider adequately the value of *defense*; it was overfocused on *deterrence*. It is quite possible that Flexible Response, as actually practiced in the 1960s, was overfocused on intervention and thus contributed to failures in properly assessing the *defense value* of the employment of US forces in certain situations. But if that is so, it simply represents a failure in judgment; it doesn't constitute a failure in the strategic doctrine. Or, to put it another way, US commitments and interests are not shaped by strategy; strategy is shaped by interests and commitments. On the other hand, an inability to defend a threatened interest or commitment because of an unwillingness to devote the necessary resources toward ready and reserve forces is not *necessarily* a failure in either strategy or political judgment; it may be simply a correct judgment as to the proper ordering of national priorities.

Those who claim that the international situation has evolved to a point where the basic concepts of Flexible Response are no longer valid are mistaken. In the future, as in the past, the likelihood of total war is low, while the likelihood of limited conflicts is relatively high. Therefore, the United States cannot expect to "preserve an external environment conducive to relative stability and security in the world" without an adequate and credible capability for limited war. This is not to deny that the world has changed; obviously it has. Indeed, the long-standing policy of containment is in a state of transition and a reordering of national priorities is constricting the relative availability of dollars for security forces. But the underlying logic of the requirements for *defense* as well as *deterrence* remains valid:

The external interests of democratic powers are not necessarily identified with the status quo in all respects, nor do they require that the rest of the world be democratic. Clearly, neither condition is feasible. However, they do require that the inevitable adjustments and accommodations among governments and people should be sufficiently moderate

and gradual to permit orderly change. Long run interests as well as immediate interests of democratic nations lie in preserving an external environment conducive to relative stability and security in the world.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Osgood

#### NOTES

1. Insofar as possible the terms *deterrence*, *deterrent value*, *defense*, and *defense value* will be used in the specific sense of Snyder's definitions throughout the article.

2. Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense; Toward a Theory of National Security* (1961), pp. 3-4.

3. Richard M. Nixon, *US Foreign Policy for the*

*1970's; A New Strategy for Peace* (18 February 1970), p. 124, and *US Foreign Policy for the 1970's; Building for Peace* (25 February 1971), p. 166.

4. John Foster Dulles, "The Doctrine of Massive Retaliation," in *American Defense Policy in Perspective from Colonial Times to the Present* (1965), ed. by Raymond C. O'Connor, p. 327.

5. One of the best critiques of Massive Retaliation is: William W. Kaufmann, *The Requirements of Deterrence* (1954). For a lengthy defense of Massive Retaliation see: Paul Peeters, *Massive Retaliation, the Policy and Its Critics* (1959).

6. David W. Tarr, *American Strategy in the Nuclear Age* (1966), pp. 88-89.

7. Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (1959), pp. 5-6.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-160.

10. John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address" in *To*



USARMY

*Conventional warriors.*

- Turn the Tide* (1962), ed. by John W. Gardner, p. 8.
11. William W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy* (1964), pp. 50-53; Morton H. Halperin, *Contemporary Military Strategy* (1967), p. 55; and Tarr, pp. 98-100.
  12. Robert S. McNamara, *Speech before the Fellows of the American Bar Foundation* (17 February 1962), pp. 6-7. Five months later, in his famous address at Ann Arbor, McNamara seemed to announce complete support for controlled response, but it should be noted that he did so with specific reference to an unspecified attack on NATO. See p. 16.
  13. Robert S. McNamara, "General Nuclear War: Assured Destruction and Damage Limitation:" in *American Defense Policy* (1968), ed. by Mark E. Smith III and Claude J. Johns, Jr., p. 98.
  14. For example, between Fiscal Year 1962 and Fiscal Year 1964, funding for strategic retaliatory forces averaged about eight billion dollars per year, while funds for air and missile defenses were about two billion dollars and for civil defense only about 300 million dollars. (See the budget of the US Government, Department of Defense extract for FY 64, p. 52.)
  15. Melvin R. Laird, *Statement of the Secretary of Defense before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the FY 1972-76 Defense Program and the 1972 Defense Budget* (15 March 1971), pp. 155 and 157.
  16. Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security; Reflections in Office* (1968), pp. 58-59; McNamara originally said the quoted words in a speech to the editors of United Press International on 18 September 1967, while he was still Secretary of Defense.
  17. Taylor, p. 146.
  18. US Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1962*, 87th Cong., 1st Sess., 1961 Hearings, pp. 18-19 quoted in Robert S. Ginsburgh, *U.S. Military Strategy in the Sixties* (1965), pp. 77-78.
  19. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, p. 269.
  20. *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 88, and 261.
  21. Nikita S. Khrushchev, "Address by Premier Khrushchev" (6 January 1961), in *Two Communist Manifestoes*, pp. 48-52.
  22. The Athens speech remains classified; but it is generally accepted that McNamara's Commencement Address at the University of Michigan, a month after the Athens speech, was substantially the same, with only the classified details on force posture eliminated. See Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, p. 114.
  23. Robert S. McNamara, "Speech at the University of Michigan Commencement Exercises" (16 June 1962), pp. 5 and 8.
  24. Henry A. Kissinger, "Coalition Diplomacy in a Nuclear Age," in *American Defense Policy*, pp. 183-184. See also Pierre M. Gallois, "US Strategy and the Defense of Europe," in *Henry A. Kissinger, Problems of National Strategy* (1965), ed. by Henry A. Kissinger, pp. 288-312.
  25. Charles Aillert, "Flexible Response," *Military Review* (February 1965), p. 81.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
  27. Kissinger, "Coalition Diplomacy," pp. 186, 187, 188. The question of the defense of Europe is incredibly difficult because it depends so heavily on psychological factors. Persuasive short articles are Kissinger's "Coalition Diplomacy," and Bernard Brodie's "What Price Conventional Capabilities in Europe" in *Problems of National Strategy*, pp. 313-328. An excellent, but lengthy, theoretical treatment is in Snyder's "Deterrence and Defense," pp. 120-224. See also Robert Endicott Osgood, *NATO, The Entangling Alliance* (1962) and Henry A. Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership; A Re-appraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (1965).
  28. Robert Endicott Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (1957), p. 237.

