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THE STRATEGY OF MASSIVE RETALIATION
IN THE SEVENTIES

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by

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this essay is to examine the feasibility of the nation adopting the strategy of massive retaliation as its principal defensive strategy for the 1970's. A comparison is made between the conditions and circumstances of the 1950's and the 1970's. The essay concludes that the declaratory statement by Mr. Dulles on 12 January 1954, was never properly understood, publicized, nor implemented. Current trends toward retrenchment and the assumption of a low posture abroad indicate either a decrease in US interest and will abroad, a withdrawal to the Fortress America concept, or a return to a strategy related to that of massive retaliation.

THE STRATEGY OF MASSIVE RETALIATION IN THE SEVENTIES

"Local defenses must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power."¹ This statement was uttered by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles before the Council of Foreign Relations in New York on 12 January 1954. Mr. Dulles said, and implied many other things that evening, but in the aftermath, one would be inclined to believe that the sentence above was the extent of his speech. It was from this statement that the strategy, at least semantically speaking, that was to dominate the defense policy of the United States for the next decade was born.

In the world of politics, definitions are not very definitive. It depends on whose version is being considered. There are times when one is inclined to believe that the great issues are but strategies of semantics. Massive retaliation was variously defined in capsule form. Perhaps the most familiar was "more bang for the buck." Opponents of the strategy defined it as a single thrust defensive strategy.

A reading of Mr. Dulles' declaratory policy can lead one only to the conclusion that in the realm of politics, definitions become highly flexible and subject to political winds that carry a strange brand of logic.

The newspapers and the political opportunists were quick to

¹John Foster Dulles, "Policy for Security and Peace," Department of State Bulletin, March 29, 1954, p. 461.

attack Mr. Dulles' statement. The strategy was quickly and inadequately reduced to the simple estimate of "More bang for the buck." This was not a true representation of the proposed strategy. The strategy was concerned about the size of the bang and also the matter of the buck, but its implications went much further.

The intent of this paper is to make a brief appraisal of the environment and circumstances that led to the strategy of massive retaliation in the 1950's. Then, an effort will be made to compare the conditions of the 1950's with those of the 1970's. Finally a determination will be made as to whether this country can return to such a strategy in the seventies.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE NEW LOOK OF 1953

The Eisenhower Administration ushered in the idea of "The New Look." A major concern of the "The New Look" was the condition of American security and solvency. Strength in both the military and the economic arenas was a primary concern of the new Chief Executive. He had previously stated, "The foundation of military strength is economic strength. A bankrupt America is more the Soviet goal than an America conquered on the field of battle."²

Mr. Dulles had left no cause for doubt as to the views of the Administration's interest in both security and solvency.

By the use of many types of maneuvers and threats,

² William W. Kaufman, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964), p. 21.

military and political, the Soviet rulers seek gradually to divide and weaken the free nations and to make their policies appear as bankrupt by overextending them in their efforts which, as Lenin put it, are 'beyond their strengths.' Then said Lenin, 'our victory is assured.' Then said Stalin, will be the 'moment for the decisive blow.'³

Mr. Dulles was well aware that to attain a balance between security abroad and solvency at home was not to be an easy task.

Under the conditions in which we live, it is not easy to strike a perfect balance between military and nonmilitary efforts which serves us best. The essential is to recognize that there is an imperative need for a balance which holds military expenditures to a minimum consistent with safety, so that a maximum of liberty may operate as a dynamic force against despotism. That is the goal of our policy.⁴

The national environment of the seventies has several similarities with that of the fifties. This, in part, gives rise to the possibility of a more overt acceptance of the strategy of massive retaliation as the dominant strategy for the United States during the seventies.

The "New Look" of 1953, found a comfortable and harmonious niche within the general psychology of the American public. Most Americans have an aversion to war. Our traditional approach has been to ignore the possibility as long as possible. Then, when war has become a reality, we marshal the great personnel and

³Dulles p. 459.

⁴Ibid, p. 460.

industrial capacity of the nation, gain the victory as quickly as possible, demobilize immediately, and revert to normal living.

This aversion to war and the reality of the Korean Conflict had rubbed a very sensitive spot on the American conscience. The cry was to "Stop the war in Korea." Mr. Eisenhower had made this a campaign promise.

The seventies share with the fifties a nation that is war weary. Obviously this within itself cannot end a war, but it is a strong incentive for the administration to leave no stone unturned in an effort to end the war and to bring the nation to peaceful and domestic concerns.

As previously indicated, the Eisenhower Administration sought ways to reconcile security and solvency. There was a fairly widespread viewpoint that a continuation of the Korean Conflict could only lead the nation to bankruptcy. The fear of national bankruptcy is not an immediate fear from the Vietnamese war. However, there is much clamoring and claiming that the war in Indo China is not the best way for a nation to spend its money. The cry of the seventies calls for a rearrangement of national priorities. This voice insists that national defense and military needs have had top billing long enough.

The strategy of massive retaliation in the fifties was also in harmony with the American's desire to have a single and simple solution to any given problem. The idea of having the very complex

problem of national defense solved by a single thrust strategy was an enticing prospect.⁵ This popular concept of the strategy was a misconception, but it is hard to keep people from believing what they want to believe.

Another root giving life to the strategy of massive retaliation was the desire to keep the war as far away as possible. This psychological trait accounts in part for the American dream that wars could be won by air power. Wars fought at 30,000 feet are impersonal and cleaner. Wars fought and won at 5,000 miles would be even more acceptable. Again, this is purely emotional and totally unrealistic, yet, it fits so neatly the American character that desires to avoid the unpleasant.

A further life giving root that is common to both decades is that of a kinship of leadership.

The Eisenhower Administration did not choose, in the words of Vice President Richard M. Nixon, to be 'nibbled to death,' by the Communists; but more important than that, the Administration refused to be provoked into spending itself into 'bankruptcy' in response to crisis after crisis. In preparing for the 'long haul', the Administration accepted the prospect of immediate military re-trenchment for the sake of long-term political and economic stability.⁶

The fact that the President felt this way sixteen years ago

⁵Warren R. Schilling and others, Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 386

⁶David W. Tarr, American Strategy in the Nuclear Age (New York: MacMillan Co., 1966), p. 68.

does not mean that he still holds these views without modification. However, his presence in the White House is a definite tie with the fifties.

VARIANTS BETWEEN THE FIFTIES AND SEVENTIES

Mr. Nixon ushers in the seventies as the Chief Executive and the current policy is an expanding program of retrenchment. Troop cut backs can be expected in all areas. There will be a reduction of direct US involvement. This means a reversion to an element in Mr. Dulles' speech of 1954, that did not receive as much publicity and recognition as the "more bang for the buck" idea.

Security for the free world depends, therefore, upon the development of collective security and community power rather than upon purely national potentials. Each nation which shares the security should contribute in accordance with its capabilities and facilities.⁷

The implication inherent in the quotation is that the US will bear the load of assisting and complementing, but that it will refuse to help in areas that national or community powers can handle.

There is one serious area in which the harmonious comparison between the 1950's and the 1970's ends. The US had an unquestioned superiority of nuclear weapons when Mr. Dulles made his declaratory policy. That cannot be said of the seventies. Even the

⁷Dulles p. 460.

most optimistic person has to admit Soviet parity with the United States. The arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States have reached such an inventory, that it is folly to play the numbers game. The US can do irreparable damage to the USSR and they have the same ability toward the US. In view of this parity, can the strategy of massive retaliation be a valid strategy for the US in the seventies?

To further complicate the picture, five nations have the atomic bomb today. According to Alistair Buchan of the Institute of Strategic Studies, ten other nations are technologically able to become nuclear powers: India, Canada, West Germany, Japan, Sweden, Italy, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, and Israel.⁸

Other lay experts, with lesser credibility, have added nine additional countries to this explosive fellowship; Australia, Brazil, East Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, the United Arab Republic, and Argentina.⁹

It is accurate enough to assume that the world has not seen the end of an expansion of the explosive fellowship.

The Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) will most likely develop a significant nuclear capability during the seventies. Numerically,

⁸George W. Ball, The Discipline of Power (Boston: Little and Brown Co., 1968), p. 198.

⁹Ibid.

the PRC will not challenge the US and the USSR in this decade. However, a significant nuclear capability is a major concern and its use would be prohibitive.

The seventies present another variance with the fifties. The Soviet Union was the unquestioned head of the Communist world during the fifties. Her domination was thorough. Today the situation is different. The Sino-Soviet rift is real and is becoming more concrete as time passes.

General Maxwell D. Taylor has indicated that the Sino-Soviet split may be the most significant political development of the sixties.¹⁰ He further states,

... for us it has not been entirely without disadvantages since now both Moscow and Peking must compete for leadership of the Communist world, and the rivalry has tended to make both more belligerent and aggressive than they probably would have otherwise been.¹¹

The fact that the Communist world is no longer led by a single purpose or a single leadership can be both an asset and a liability. The US must now watch in two directions, while at the same time the USSR and the PRC must be engaged in the same past time.

In view of the dissimilarities of the fifties and the seventies, can the US afford to resort to the strategy of massive retaliation? Can the clock be successfully turned back?

¹⁰Maxwell D. Taylor, Responsibility and Response (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 4.

¹¹Ibid., p. 12

Another serious discordant note between the fifties and the seventies is the reality of unconventional and guerrilla warfare. General Taylor, an early and persistent opponent of the strategy of massive retaliation, has stated that the strategy limits the leadership to two options: (1) The initiation of general nuclear war, or (2) compromise and retreat.¹²

General Taylor came forth with a proposed strategy which became known as the strategy of Flexible Response. This name suggests the need for a capability to react across the entire spectrum of possible challenge, for coping with anything from general atomic war to infiltration and aggression.¹³

The passing of the Eisenhower Administration ushered in new faces and new strategies. At least the semantics changed. The idea of flexible response came to the front. One would think the idea of a strategy with a flexible capability was a totally new thought. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mr. Dulles had used the identical idea and almost the same terminology in his noted statement in 1954.

To deter aggression, it is important to have the flexibility and the facilities which make various responses available. In many cases, any open assault by Communist forces could only result in starting a general war. But the free world must have the means for responding effectively on a selective

¹²Maxwell D. Taylor, The Uncertain Trumpet (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), p. 5.

¹³Ibid., p. 12.

basis when it chooses. It must not put itself in the position where the only response open to it is general war.¹⁴

Strictly speaking, the strategy of massive retaliation has been the primary strategy of the United States since the end of World War II. The fact of an immediate demobilization following World War II and the failure of the United States to require of itself and its allies a ground force comparable to that of the Communist world is evidence that the US reliance has been on its stockpile of nuclear weapons all along. If this fact is not true, then the only conclusion that can be logically drawn is that every administration since the end of World War II has been involved in the game of the calculated risk.

CAN THE STRATEGY OF MASSIVE RETALIATION BE A REALITY IN THE SEVENTIES?

Every directional arrow indicates that the Nixon Administration is moving toward a defensive and deterrent strategy closely akin to that of the Eisenhower Administration. The great question to be faced is, can the US and her allies afford such a decision and course of action at this time? To adopt such a policy will cause much wailing and gnashing of teeth from our allies. However, it is believed this is the decision that will be made and in the end the price for such a strategy will be borne.

An important element of statesmanship will be to convince the

¹⁴Dulles p. 461.

allies that a reduction in US presence is not tantamount to a reduction in interest of the United States' determination to continue its opposition to aggressive communism. The low posture idea abroad will require our best effort to allay the fears of our allies.

An additional area that will merit the best in statesmanship and diplomatic finesse will be to convey to the Communist world that this retrenchment does not imply a loss of will on the part of the US to support self determination among the nations of the free world. This will not be an easy task and is one that must be successfully faced and solved with determined will and resolution.

Further, a clear and determinative definition must be given to such terms as "collective security" and "community power." This means that each free world nation must be concerned with the business of acquiring meaningful treaties and security pacts with their neighbors. Old national animosities must be laid aside and national prides traded in for regional pride and mutual security and support.

For an example, Indo China is capable of establishing such a community of power. The US would indorse a security pact comprised of South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and perhaps Thailand. The United States would provide materials and economic support and would assure the "community" that the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China would not overtly attack the community. All other internal conflicts would be handled as "family problems"-- with no direct intervention from the United States. This is what Mr. Dulles had

in mind in his declaratory statement. This is to be the hallmark of the seventies.

The main thrust of the "new, new look" will involve collective security. It will not be a policy of being the world's policeman, nor will it be a policy that will feed the inherent fires of isolation that are so much a part of the average American citizen. Collective security, simply put, means the involvement of others.

Another principle that was spelled out by Mr. Dulles and will be applicable in the seventies is that collective security is to be accompanied by a will to use power in the most effective way in order to make aggression too risky and expensive to be tempting.¹⁵

Did the strategy of massive retaliation work in the fifties and early sixties?

Since massive retaliation was never ordered, it cannot be said that American policy was to retaliate massively against aggressions in the gray areas (limited war situations). On the other hand, with the speech of Mr. Dulles on January 12, 1954, it did become American policy to declare that we might respond by massive retaliation in such contingencies.¹⁶

The seventies may even be spared the terminology of Massive Retaliation, but the emphasis will be there. Retrenchment means either an acceptance of the Fortress America concept or a pulling

¹⁵Ibid. p. 462.

¹⁶Samuel P. Huntington, The Common Defense (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 84

back because the main thrust of our peace keeping machinery is to rest in our weapons system designed to make war prohibitive.

It has been suggested that the following proposals may comprise an acceptable and worthy foreign policy for the US in the seventies:

1. A policy of abstaining from the political policies of the underdeveloped countries, dealing with each on the basis of tolerance and generous correctness. What is proposed here is not a withdrawal of the US from these areas, but a change in its mode of participation in their affairs.
2. A large-scale economic aid program in which a regular part of our national income (or national growth) is committed to helping any of the underdeveloped countries that wish such aid.
3. An ability and willingness to fight overt military aggression. The US should be prepared to nullify the effect of Russian and Chinese military power by its readiness to come to the aid of victims of that power. But America should be cautious about committing itself to providing immediate assistance to nations that do not really need the help and use American participation as a weapon against their neighbors.¹⁷

Massive retaliation as presented by Mr. Dulles in 1954, and as it is envisioned in the seventies will provide for flexibility and selectivity.

US national interests require a capability to (1) prevent 'total' war, (2) win 'total' war, if necessary, (3) prevent 'limited' war, (4) win 'limited' war, if necessary, (5) prevent 'peripheral' war(s), (6) win 'peripheral' war(s), and (7) prevent communist expansion through 'cold war' tactics.

¹⁷Paul Seaburg and Aaron Wildavsky, Editors, US Foreign Policy: Perspectives and Proposals for the 1970's (New York: McGraw and Hill Book Company, 1969), p. 28.

As a matter of policy statement, Mr. Dulles has provided the necessary ingredients to accomplish all of these objectives. 'Massive' and 'selective' retaliation, collective security, military aid, and economic assistance can provide a firm basis for the attainment of US national objectives. In this sense Mr. Dulles' 'Policy for Security and Peace,' about which so much controversy has raged, can, if implemented with aggressive prudence, provide the guidelines for success.¹⁸

In conclusion, the strategy of massive retaliation returns in the seventies. The name may not even be whispered, but the aroma of retrenchment, disengagement of direct involvement, budgetary reductions, promotion of collective security through regional communities of power, and a more domestic orientation of resources and efforts means that the Administration has confidence in the weapon systems of the United States or that it is simply playing the odds. The latter seems totally out of character and foreign to sound judgment.

The Eisenhower Administration turned to a retrenchment type strategy because of a war-weary nation and out of fear that the solvency of the nation was in danger.

The Nixon Administration moves in the same direction as the Eisenhower Administration because of a nation that is weary of war, a realization that the US cannot be the world's policeman, and

¹⁸John E. Arthur, "Massive Retaliation Deters War", Student Individual Study, USAMC, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., February 1957, pp. 7-8.

because of a demand for rearrangement of national priorities. These voices are to be heard, but the nation cannot afford to become political or emotional about domestic problems at the expense of our national security. The nation is strong enough to provide for both foreign and domestic needs.

As the Eisenhower Administration sought for a balance of emphasis between military expenditures in order to assure the nation's security and solvency, so President Nixon must seek a balance between the application of our national resources to internal and external needs. The umbrella that will provide a safe environment for such a program to be carried out is the strength of the nation's defense and the will of the people to survive as a free nation.

It will require a tremendous effort on the part of the US to endure reduced foreign military presence without this being interpreted by our allies as a loss of interest in their security and by the Communist world as a loss of will and strength. In order to correct this, a maximum effort toward explanation must be made to allay any fears among our allies and any misconceptions that the Communist might hold. Perhaps there is no more vital area in which we must experience success than at this point.

In a world that is best known for its rapid changes, it seems inconceivable that a strategic posture that was assumed some 16 years ago could have any potential for the nation today. Yet, there is

considerable evidence that such is happening to the US in the seventies. That is not to say that this is what should be happening. However, it is believed that the nation can afford such a posture when that position is considered in all of its facets. The complete strategy as stated by Mr. Dulles has merit and validity for the US in the seventies. The US can not afford a strategy as publicized by the news media in the fifties.

This is the psychological moment for the US to adopt a low posture abroad. Such an approach is needed at home and also for the developing nations to realize that they have a responsibility for their own security and that of their neighbors. This lesson will be slowly learned as long as the US is present in great strength.

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