Unthinking the Unthinkable: U.S. Nuclear Policy and Asymmetric Threats

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 2 (February 2004)

by Wade L. Huntley

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

For a PDF version of this article, click here.

Introduction

Barry Zellen's recent essay, "Rethinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and the War on Terror," offers an unabashed endorsement of the Bush administration's strategy of preemptive or preventive war and its willingness to consider first use of nuclear weapons for counterproliferation and counterterrorism.[1] Zellen supports the administration's policy to undertake preemptive and preventive military action to counter terrorist threats, the war on Iraq as an application of this policy, and preparations for threatening and implementing first-use of nuclear weapons in future preemptive contexts.

By coincidence, on the same day I read Zellen's piece, I encountered another offering sharply different views. The starting point, this latter author wrote, is "that which everyone agrees to: that nuclear war is so terrible that it must not be allowed to happen." The purpose of U.S. strategic nuclear weapons has been and should continue to be "only retaliatory." Threats to use tactical nuclear weapons, first or otherwise, are justified only to gird "the effectiveness of deterrence." Even granting the adversary "but a thread of rationality," deterrence "has worked and is working today." Underlying this restrictive view of the function of U.S. nuclear weapons is the conviction, "Force of arms is not the way to resolve international disputes." "[W]e must remember that as health is not just the absence of sickness, neither is peace just the absence of war." "We reject war as a deliberate instrument of foreign policy because it is repugnant to our national morality." One might think this prioritization of the moral imperative to avoid war reflects a wooly idealism with no place in U.S. security policy. One might be surprised, then, to learn the proponent of these views: then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.[2]

Weinberger's essay defended Reagan administration nuclear policy initiatives that at the time were considered by some to be accelerating the superpower arms race and increasing the danger of nuclear war. Weinberger defended developing tactical nuclear capabilities for "escalation dominance" and the threatening of "first use" of nuclear weapons. But his essay also makes clear that "escalation dominance" was strictly for deterrence purposes, and "first use" threats were necessary to deter overwhelming Soviet conventional superiority in Europe.

By contrast, the Bush administration's embrace of a wide range of tactical capabilities and first use options reaching well beyond deterrence marks the dramatic departure of its strategic and nuclear policies not only from the general thrust of past U.S. postures but also from the administration's own conservative progenitors. Because these nuclear policy initiatives may shape the U.S. posture for generations to come—perhaps long after the "war on terrorism" has faded as a national priority—it is incumbent upon us to fully think through such an embrace of the unthinkable.

The following essay first reviews the self-described dramatic changes in U.S. nuclear policy laid out in the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review. The essay then assesses the administration's argument as to the need to prepare for first use of nuclear weapons for purposes of counterproliferation and counterterrorism. The

essay concludes with some observations on how the evolution of U.S. nuclear weapons strategies fits into longer-term trends in U.S. security attitudes.

The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review

The Bush Administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) bills itself as providing a major change in U.S. strategic policy to fit the new demands of the post Cold War and post-9/11 world.[3] The core innovation in the NPR is a new "triad" combining offensive, defensive, and infrastructure capabilities. Among the other virtues the NPR ascribes to this new strategic triad is reduction in U.S. dependence on nuclear weapons.

However, the NPR does not call for a reduced reliance on deterrence per se. Rather, the new triad envisions supplementing deterrence with "new concepts" (such as counterproliferation), "active defenses" (principally meaning missile defense), and "responsive infrastructure" (principally meaning a reconstituted nuclear weapons production capability).

Following from this strategy, the administration is moving to resuscitate fissile material production facilities, and the Defense Department's Nuclear Weapons Council has begun debating whether the United States needs to resume nuclear testing in order to carry out these development plans. The NPR does plan reductions in the number of operational nuclear weapons and adjusts their alert level, but also envisions greatly diversifying the types of nuclear weapons in the arsenal, including production of new low-yield, earth-penetrating, and damage-limiting nuclear weapons suitable for tactical, first strike missions.[4]

Planning acquisition of new tactical capabilities is not the NPR's most fundamental broadening of the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security and alliance relations. The NPR also calls for replacing the U.S. Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) with an "adaptive planning" approach explicitly blending conventional and nuclear capabilities as interchangeable options, selection between which would be determined solely on the basis of the contingency at hand. This unprecedented vision for broadening tactical nuclear weapons use options is complemented with a call for increasing non-nuclear "strategic strike" capability to create a seamless integration of capabilities that erase the view of nuclear weapons use as a qualitatively distinct option with additional unique consequences.

Despite the NPR's claims of novelty, many of its ideas are really old wine in new bottles. Most, including development of new tactical nuclear weapons capabilities, have been percolating in the Pentagon, the weapons labs and civilian think tanks for at least a decade.[5] Some, such as the centrality of missile defense, date to the Reagan administration. Indeed, the call for new strategies for nuclear weapons use in limited contingencies revivifies "war-fighting" strategies that are as old as the nuclear age itself.

The dangers of such capabilities and strategies are well established: they tend to erode the "firebreak" between conventional and nuclear war long seen as a key psychological impediment to nuclear engagement. The countervailing argument, evinced in Weinberger's logic, is also well established: escalation dominance actually bolsters deterrence more than it weakens the psychological "firebreak." The critical point here, however, is that the Bush administration is seeking new tactical nuclear weapons for counterforce missions in which there is no risk of escalation to higher levels of nuclear war. Hence, the logic offered by Weinberger as the only justification for U.S. limited nuclear use options does not apply.

In addition, Bush administration plans to complement broadened tactical nuclear weapons use options with increased non-nuclear "strategic strike" capabilities would also erode the "firebreak" from the other side. This complete integration of nuclear and conventional capabilities in a single strategic motif, perhaps even more than the creation of a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons, goes further than ever before in U.S. strategic policy toward treating nuclear weapons as simply "another arrow in the quiver."

While the NPR is threaded with references to sustaining U.S. nuclear capabilities for deterrence, it is also explicit in describing melding these with conventional strategic strike capabilities, and adding defense and

infrastructure components to form a new "triad," as necessary to prepare for deterrence failure. The intent is clear: to put in place the capabilities and strategies for the United States to threaten use of nuclear weapons for purposes other than deterrence and to expand U.S. flexibility to follow through on these threats and use its own nuclear weapons in non-retaliatory missions if it deems this necessary.

Clearly, the Bush administration has abandoned the practical as well as moral dimensions of Weinberger's exclusive reliance on deterrence to justify the Reagan administration's nuclear position. This profound shift in the nation's nuclear weapons policies demands an equally profound justification of its own.

Lunatics on the Loose?

Weinberger's arguments on U.S. nuclear policies were focused on the Soviet nuclear threat, which evaporated with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The NPR itself acknowledges that with the "new relationship between the U.S. and Russia," it is inappropriate to sustain U.S. forces even at a level "as though Russia presented merely a smaller version of the threat posed by the former Soviet Union." Therefore, justification for expanding U.S. nuclear capabilities and strategies beyond their Cold War deterrence roles must be found in the new circumstances of the post-Cold War, and especially post-9/11, era. There is no doubt we now live in a different world; the key questions are exactly how this world is different, and what the appropriate responses are. To sustain the strategy laid out in the NPR, the argument must be not only that new dire threats to U.S. security have emerged, but that an adequate response to these threats requires an unprecedented offensive expansion of U.S. nuclear policy.

The Bush administration's first exposition of its view of the United States' new threat matrix is found in the 2002 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), particularly in the section dealing with WMD threats.[6] This argument was elaborated in two successor documents, the *Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (SCT) and the *Strategy to Combat WMD* (SCW).[7] These documents, taken together, present the administration's rationale for focusing on threats posed by hostile states and terrorist groups developing weapons of mass destruction, for adopting a willingness to undertake preemptive strikes to counter such threats, and for developing new offensive nuclear strategies for potential counterproliferation or counterterrorism purposes.

The NSS and successor documents highlight post-9/11 circumstances to urge that the new, emerging threats the United States now faces are *as grave or graver* than those posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. A crucial assertion fundamental to this claim is that "rogue states," in contrast to the Soviet Union, have different motivations, are more determined in pursuing their goals, and are more likely to actually use WMD capabilities if they have them. Although the Soviet nuclear threat was much more massive, it was a rational state against which deterrence was reliable. For "rogue" states, WMD "are not weapons of last resort, but militarily useful weapons of choice."[8]

The SCW states clearly that the United States "reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force—including through resort to all our options—to the use of WMD."[9] This notion of using nuclear weapons to deter WMD attacks from "rogue" states is not new—Pentagon planners had been giving increasing attention to this previously more obscure element of U.S. deterrence policy in the post-Cold War period. However, the Bush administration's elevation of this idea to U.S. official policy has significant repercussions, not least because the threat of nuclear retaliation against biological, chemical or radiological weapons attack directly contravenes U.S. legal commitments under the NPT never to use nuclear weapons against a state not armed with nuclear weapons itself.

The NSS and SCW also underscore that against the "irrational" motivations of "rogue" states, deterrence is much more likely to fail. This proposition is highly debatable. The NSS lists a set of attributes of rogue states meant to distinguish them from other adversaries the United States has previously faced—"rogues" are more risk-taking, uninhibited in using WMD for any purpose, and unconcerned to suffer retaliation or

even annihilation. But this distinction certainly mischaracterizes past U.S. government views of Soviet intentions; indeed, conservative strategists throughout the Cold War routinely portrayed the Soviet Union as just as convinced that nuclear war is winnable and just as determined to use nuclear weapons for political coercion as current neoconservative strategies now portray "rogue states" to be. The Soviet Union was, after all, the "Evil Empire" long before there was an "Axis of Evil."[10]

The NSS also provides no positive argument why these "rogues" are less easily deterred than was the Soviet Union. In fact, Iraq, North Korea and other "rogues" have been quite "rationally" cautious, never using WMD capabilities in any context in which retaliation was possible and a deterrent threat applied.[11] These states in fact are more easily deterred than was the Soviet Union because they are both conventionally and strategically weak; U.S. force capabilities obviously dominate at every level. These countries' pursuit of WMD capabilities likely has been motivated not by an irrational desire to attack the U.S. despite the consequences, but by the very rational motivation to deter a U.S. attack upon themselves.[12]

A Good Defense is a Strong Offense?

Exhibiting little faith in deterrence of "rogue" states' WMD ambitions, the NSS and SCW evince even less faith in nonproliferation—the conclusion of the SCW's single paragraph on the role of "active nonproliferation diplomacy" simply states the need for "a full range of operational capabilities" if the efforts fail.[13] Instead, these statements emphasize the need for proactive counterproliferation efforts, including preemptive attack, to eliminate adversaries' WMD capabilities before they are used—and even before they are explicitly threatened to be used. This emphasis includes the prospect that preempting WMD threats may entail use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the incorporation of nuclear roles for countering WMD proliferation is one of the key purposes for which the NPR's seamless integration of nuclear-conventional strategic planning was devised, and a principal role for which the NPR deems development of smaller nuclear weapons for tactical operations to be vital.

There are several strategic issues raised by this posture. First, it is neither empirically or logically clear that threats of *preemptive* attack to deter an adversary's *acquisition* of WMD are as inherently credible as threats of *retaliatory* attack to deter an adversary's *use* of WMD. Second, there are core intractable questions concerning the effectiveness and usability of both nuclear and non-nuclear counterproliferation weapons, further undermining the acquisition deterrence credibility of counterproliferation threats. Finally, there is the prospect that whatever weak acquisition deterrence might accrue from counterproliferation threats would be more than offset by U.S. adversaries' increased motivations to obtain capabilities to deter U.S. action, fueled by the general undermining of non-nuclear use and nonproliferation norms that rededicated U.S. reliance on nuclear threats could foster.[14]

The Bush administration policies entail not only threatening use of nuclear weapons to deter "rogue state" use of WMD, but also possible first use of nuclear weapons to deny WMD capabilities to such states. U.S. preemption policy must be logically credible with meaningful criteria to justify its application—and seen to be so by the responsible world community as well as the American people. Such legitimacy is vital to ensuring that U.S. policy on use of its own nuclear weapons is absolutely distinguishable from its characterization of "rogue states," for whom WMD "are not weapons of last resort, but militarily useful weapons of choice."

The explanation that the NSS and SCW provide to justify the need for possible preemptive use of force is rooted in the nature of WMD capabilities themselves. The NSS acknowledges that international law limits the legitimacy of preemption to the existence of an imminent threat. However, the NSS asserts that character of WMD threats makes it impossible to wait for traditional criteria for imminence—such as clear indications of the time and place of attack—to become manifest. While past international norms "conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat," now the United States "must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries."[15]

The generic premise of this argument is correct: international norms on use of military force must adapt to fit the times. In fact, historically, the "rules of war" have continually evolved in response to new technologies and changed international conditions. However, this evolution has been in the opposite direction of the one in which the Bush administration has moved. As emerging nationalism and "total war" capabilities qualitatively magnified the dangers of offensive war, international law increasingly emphasized the self-defense limitation of legitimate war-making and the imminence of attack limitation of legitimate preemption. Many interpret Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, affirming the right of self-defense "if an armed attack occurs," to forbid preemptive attack of any sort.

In contrast, the NSS provides no minimum level of imminence, no criteria of imminence comparable across differing cases, and no indication of need to forge an international consensus on revising the concept of imminence in international law to fit modern threat conditions. It merely states, "The United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats, nor should nations use preemption as a pretext for aggression." Most importantly, the Bush administration would allow no restriction on the U.S. right to gauge the imminence of a threat for itself; the NSS promises only that the U.S. will "always proceed deliberately," "build better, more integrated intelligence," and "coordinate closely with allies."[16]

The concept of imminence as related to justifying preemption must take into account newly emerging WMD threats, but the Bush administration has wielded an axe where a scalpel is needed. The existing structure of international norms against the arbitrary use of force widely serves U.S. interests—it enables the world community to delineate truly "roguish" behavior and makes it diplomatically easier to constitute responsive coalitions of otherwise disparate states.[17] Preemption against WMD threats can and should be made to fit within this structure.

One example of a more nuanced approach is Brad Roberts' explicit consideration of how to build generalizable criteria allowing for preemptive attack to thwart proliferation of nuclear, biological, chemical and radiological weapons.[18] This 1998 work predates the advent of the Bush administration, the September 11 attacks, and the political controversy surrounding the administration's preemption policy. Roberts offers six criteria whose satisfaction would establish the "strongest moral case" for U.S. preemptive action:

1. Actual threatened use of such weapons specifically against the United States;
2. Acquisition of such weapons in violation of international law;
3. Concern for broader U.S. regional security guarantees and/or power stability;
4. Approval of presidential action by the U.S. Congress;
5. Backing of the U.N. Security Council and any relevant regional organization;
6. Satisfaction of the prudential tests of last resort, proportionality, and reasonable chance of success.

These criteria are well tailored to meet the kind of threats central to the concerns of the NSS. They could also form the basis of a revision of norms against aggressive use of force that could gain international consensus. In contrast, the Bush administration's justification for its policy of preemptive attack as a tool for counterproliferation simply disregards existing international norms, incognizant of U.S. interests in sustaining those norms. The current U.S. approach, if adopted by all countries, would constitute a preemptive "open season" in which states would be restrained in action only by considerations of relative power. Motivations for WMD acquisition would be significantly enhanced, and the United States could easily find threats to its security propagating faster than its capacity to respond to them.

Nuclear War on Terrorism?

As noted earlier, the idea of using U.S. nuclear weapons to deter or counter acquisition or use of WMDs against the United States is not new. However, Pentagon planners in the 1990s examining this idea worried that non-state terrorist organizations probably could not be deterred by U.S. nuclear forces. The

September 11 attacks demonstrated that such concern for the undeterrability of terrorist attacks, as distinct from state-based WMD attacks, is real.

Preventing a WMD attack on a global city is rightly a paramount security goal of the international community. The unlikelihood of deterrence success against stateless terrorist organizations justifies a more proactive policy. Unfortunately, many of the Bush administration's policy statements, including the NSS and SCW, obfuscate this core issue by conflating "rogue states and terrorists" into a single threat concept.[19] In fact, "rogue states" and "terrorists" are very different entities posing very different types of threats to U.S. security.

"Rogue states" are states, with governments and territories. As discussed above, today's "rogues" have shown themselves to be quite deterrable across a range of circumstances. "Terrorists," on the other hand are not states; international terrorist organizations are landless entities surviving in the dark alleys of globalization. Such organizations well not be deterred by U.S. conventional or nuclear capabilities; certainly Al Qaeda is not. But irrationality is not the reason. Deterrence is hard because terrorist organizations tend not to have physical assets that can be easily threatened by military force, and because they are not motivated (as even "rogue" states are) by survival as a territorially sovereign regime.

To its credit, the SCT clearly recognizes these key transnational, non-territorial elements of the threat of terrorism. The SCT presents a pyramidal "Structure of Terror." "At the base, underlying conditions such as poverty, corruption, religious conflict and ethnic strife create opportunities for terrorists to exploit… Terrorists use these conditions to justify their actions and expand their support." The next level is the "international environment": "As a result of freer, more open borders this environment unwittingly provides access to havens, capabilities and other support for terrorists." Only at the third level do we find the role of states themselves, which may, "through ignorance, inability, or intent," provide the physical and/or virtual havens from which terrorists can work.[20]

The nature of the global terrorist threat, as described in the SCT, militates against military preemption being the first choice policy option. The root cause, underlying conditions, is embedded in the world political economy—it cannot be attacked with force of arms, but only through a fulsome campaign to solve the trenchant poverty and oppression that are the lifeblood of terrorism's support. To its credit, the SCT's third of four goals for counter-terrorism strategy addresses this point.[21] The next level of causation, the international environment, is most readily dealt with through intelligence, covert operations and collaboration with relevant governments.

The third level, state governments, is in principle amenable to military influence; but in practice even at this level terrorism cannot be easily restrained simply by holding deterrent threats over the governments of states within which terrorists reside. For example, a principal state within which the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks planned and trained was the U.S. itself. The kind of physical presence that Al Qaeda established in Afghanistan under the pliant Taliban regime is rare. In the wake of the U.S. reaction to the September 11 attacks, they will be rarer: already Al Qaeda appears have decentralized and hidden its operations precisely to avoid exposure to conventional military attack in the future.[22] For their part, existing governments with weak territorial sovereignty have every interest to cooperate with U.S. efforts to squelch such terrorist usurpation, not simply to avoid U.S. retribution but to enhance their own sovereign territorial control.

Thus, the "war" on terrorism is necessarily more metaphorical than military. As Secretary of State Colin Powell noted just days after the September 11 attacks, we are "speaking about war as a way of focusing the energy of America and the energy of the international community. . .it may be military action, but it can also be economic action, political action, diplomatic action and financial actions. . . it is a long-term campaign, which is why we are characterizing it as a war—if not in the technically legal sense of war."[23]

These fundamental aspects of the problem of global terrorism have gotten lost in the Bush administration's increasingly conventional approach to this "new war." The Bush administration's policy

statements have ceased to recognize the metaphorical nature of terming the anti-terrorism campaign a "war", as its military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have become the central features of that campaign.

Above all, threatening use of nuclear weapons as a means of countering terrorism is likely to do more harm than good. Terrorists themselves will not be deterred by such threats, which are more likely to exacerbate the challenges of dealing with foundational sources of terrorism the SCT rightly identifies. Such threats are irrelevant to weak states unable to control terrorist activities within their borders—assistance is far more desired.

Such threats are in principle credible to absolutist states. But due to these states' self-interest in keeping control over WMD capabilities whose use could be blamed on them, threats specific to terrorist support probably add little to these states' perceptions of the credibility and scope of U.S. deterrence threats. Rather, reduced confidence that the U.S. will refrain from nuclear first use will increase tensions in any security conflicts in which U.S. nuclear use could be envisioned.

Moreover, threatening U.S. nuclear weapons use in retaliation for terrorist WMD attack creates a unique credibility problem. Supporters of such a position often observe that U.S. leaders should be deprived of no response options. However, the logic here is quite different than that of expanding options for "escalation dominance" for deterrence purposes. In a context of deterrence failure in which there is no risk of escalation to higher levels of nuclear war, heavy reliance on a threat of nuclear response can create a "commitment trap." After a biological or chemical attack, U.S. leaders might reckon that failure to respond with nuclear weapons in that instance would undermine the credibility of threats of nuclear response against similar future attacks, thereby making such attacks more likely. This logic "trap" creates a temptation for nuclear response regardless of the proximate circumstantial merits of such a response. Indeed, Pentagon planners already have reacted to the unlikelihood that nuclear deterrence will work against terrorist threats by enhancing preparations to carry out the threatened nuclear attacks.

Threats All The Way Down?

A native individual once told a visiting anthropologist that his people believed the entire world rested on the back of a turtle. When asked what was under the turtle, the native quickly responded: another turtle. When the anthropologist pressed to discover what lay beneath the turtles, the native blithely replied that there were "turtles all the way down."[24]

Underlying the problematic nature of the prominence of nuclear weapons in the Bush administration's strategic policies and their application to the war on terrorism is a fundamental qualitative conceptual leap: the NPR's implementation of a shift from a "threat-based" to a "capabilities-based" approach to strategic planning. This cornerstone of the NPR is also its one genuinely new element, marking a significant change from the Cold War era, in which nuclear weapons were developed with specific missions in mind—usually deterrence missions.

The NPR portrays this shift as a response to the replacement of the nuclear threat posed by the former Soviet Union by the new prospect of "unexpected developments," and as a means to provide a "credible deterrent at the lowest level of nuclear weapons" possible. In fact, however, the shift from a "threat-based" to a "capabilities-based" approach is a tacit acknowledgement that threats sufficient to justify maintaining a nuclear arsenal at planned levels and configurations no longer exist.

The NSS put this NPR conceptual shift into a broader strategic context, embracing the unprecedented fact of unequaled U.S. power and influence, and determining to maintain this position indefinitely in order to promote freedom throughout the rest of the world.[25] Such a vision is peculiarly appealing in the American political milieu because it harkens to a nineteenth century internationalism underpinned by the security of broad oceans, whose principal diplomatic policy was to avoid diplomacy at all. Neither the realist nor the idealist traditions in U.S. international policy have embraced diplomatic engagement: the former rejected it in favor of pure power (e.g. "speak softly and carry a big stick"), the latter in favor of

visions of reconstituting international society on ethical terms (e.g. "the war to end all wars"). Diplomacy requires patience, acceptance of limits, tolerance, and willingness to compromise—none of which were highly prominent traits in the first couple centuries of U.S. international behavior.

The Cold War shattered the ideal of American unassailability, forcing the U.S. to confront indefinite vulnerability by presenting an intractable adversary of equal power who, due to the advent of nuclear weapons, could not be met decisively on the battlefield. Neither the realist nor idealist communities were ever entirely comfortable with the diplomatic tasks thus thrust upon U.S. policy-makers, epitomized by both sides' discomfiture with "mutually assured destruction" as the premise of U.S. security. Reagan's vision of missile defense freeing the American people from fear of nuclear attack hearkened powerfully to restoration of the vision of unassailability—the "shining city on the hill"[26] is, after all, also a nice strategic position.

The Bush administration strategic posture, at its core, seeks to take advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the world's preeminent military power to realize the Reaganesque vision to restore American unassailability. This vision, articulated by neoconservative strategists in and out of the administration, combines the realist and idealist traditions to re-invoke pre-cold War visions of the American mission to deliver a safer world through virtuous exercise of American power:

[W]e do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favors human freedom… We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent… The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.[27]

America is a nation with a mission—and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace—a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman. America acts in this cause with friends and allies at our side, yet we understand our special calling: This great Republic will lead the cause of freedom.[28]

Restoring the sense of American unassailability is a prerequisite to carrying forth this vision. But this vision, always part myth, is more illusory today than ever before. As the SCT's own "Structure of Terrorism" recognizes, the September 11 attacks emerged from an ever more integrating globalization—the very globalization that U.S. political, economic and social power now leads and from which it draws its strength. There is no military protection from globalization's seamy side, and pursuit of such a "Fortress America" blinds the most powerful nation on earth to the realities of the twenty-first century world; it offers false promise instead of real preparation for the next terrorist attack, and risks distracting attention and resources from the practical efforts that might successfully prevent that attack.[29]

The most basic imperatives of "realpolitik" are for states to prepare to defend themselves from the threats they face. These legitimate preparations are already inherently threatening to others—this is the essence of the "security dilemma." It is difficult enough to sustain international stability and peace under conditions of minimal preparation for war. Military buildups that go beyond meeting clear and present dangers are inherently signals to others of more aggressive intentions—this is basic international realism. Such behavior by the world's most powerful state, backed by a military budget exceeding that of all other nations combined, cannot help but be threatening to other countries—even America's traditionally strongest allies have trepidations about current U.S. intentions.[30] Adversaries will respond in kind, to the extent that they are able, and new adversaries will emerge. Thus is pursuit of an impossible unassailability more likely instead to exacerbate the security threats America already faces.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our *Strategic Insights* home

page.

To have new issues of *Strategic Insights* delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email ccc@nps.navy.mil with subject line "Subscribe". There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

About the Author

Dr. Wade L. Huntley is Associate Professor for strategic studies at the Hiroshima Peace Institute in Japan. His areas of expertise include international security, nuclear nonproliferation and arms control, political relations in the Asia-Pacific region, and political theory. Dr. Huntley received his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1993, and has been a research associate at the U.C. Berkeley Institute of East Asian Studies, director of the Security Program at the Nautilus Institute, and visiting professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo and at Whitman College.

References

1. Zellen, Barry, "Rethinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and the War on Terror," *Strategic Insights*, 1 Jan 2004.
2. Weinberger, Casper W., "A Rational Approach to Nuclear Disarmament," *Defense* (August 1982).
3. The NPR was first publicly summarized at a Department of Defense briefing on January 9, 2002. The classified review was subsequently obtained by *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*. Substantial excerpts of the review are available online.
4. For critical overviews, see Levi, Michael A., "Fire in the Hole: Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Options for Counterproliferation," Carnegie Endowment Working Paper #31, November 2002; and Alexander, Brian and Alistair Millar, eds., *Tactical Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, Inc., 2003).
5. See, for example, Dowler, Thomas and Joseph Howard II, "Countering the Threat of the Well-Armed Tyrant: A Modest Proposal for Small Nuclear Weapons," *Strategic Review* 19/4 (Fall 1991), pp.34-40.
6. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, September 2002, section V, pp. 13-16.
7. *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, White House, December 2002; *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, White House, February 2003.
8. *Strategy to Combat WMD*, p.1; cf. *National Security Strategy*, p.13.
9. *Strategy to Combat WMD*, p.3.
10. Representatively, these views are evident in Weinberger, Casper W., "A Rational Approach to Nuclear Disarmament," *Defense* (August 1982).
11. See Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism," U.S. Army War College, December 2003, pp.17-8; regarding Iraq, see Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003.
12. Cf. Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism," p.33. North Korea, for example, may be pursuing its nuclear weapons option in recognition of its growing conventional inferiority to the U.S. and ROK forces aligned against it. Ironically, the DPRK's indefensible artillery threat against the city of Seoul, rather than its incipient nuclear program, probably remains the most significant deterrent to U.S. preemptive action against Pyongyang. See Huntley, Wade L., "Countdown in Korea," Center for Contemporary Conflict Strategic Insights, May 1, 2003 and McDevitt, Michael, "Iraq and North Korea: Disarmament vs. Deterrence," PacNet Newsletter #48, November 14, 2002.
13. *Strategy to Combat WMD*, p.4.
14. Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism," pp.29-32.
15. *National Security Strategy*, p.15.
16. *National Security Strategy*, p.15-6. Most recently, in his 2004 State of the Union address President Bush reiterated, "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our people."
17. I would not argue that constituting responsive coalitions is easy (during the Cold War it was near

impossible) or that the record in the last 15 years has been one of success. But if the U.S. really wants to make responsive coalitions work, it needs to support the growth of norms that distinguishes roguish behavior in general terms—and make sure its own behavior is on the other side of that line.
18. Roberts, Brad, "NBC-Armed Rogues: Is There a Moral Case for Preemption?," in Elliott Abrams, ed., *Close Calls: Intervention, Terrorism, Missile Defense, and 'Just War' Today* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics & Public Policy Center, 1998).
19. On this threat conflation, see Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism," pp.13-19.
20. *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, p.6.
21. *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, pp.22-24.
22. *Strategic Survey 2002/2003, An Evaluation and Forecast of World Affairs* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003), pp.9-10.
23. Quoted in Huntley, Wade, "The Coming 'New' War", Special Policy Forum Essays on the September 11 Attacks, September 17, 2001. Cf. Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism," pp.2-3,6.
24. Renditions of this story can be found in: Brown, Chris, "'Turtles All the Way Down': Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory, and International Relations," *Millennium*, 23/2 (1994), pp. 213-236; Hawking, Stephen. *A Brief History of Time:From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, 1988; Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973.
25. *National Security Strategy*, p.1.
26. This favorite Reagan symbolism has biblical origins: "A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." *Matthew* 5:14-16.
27. President Bush, "Preface," *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, September 2002. Note that "balance of power" in this context means unchallenged US military supremacy: "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace." President Bush, Speech at West Point, June 1, 2002
28. President Bush, State of the Union address to Congress, January 20, 2004. Cf. Frum, David and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (Random House: December 2003). Compare Theodore Roosevelt:

It is only the warlike power of a civilized people that can give peace to the world… [T]hat the barbarians recede or are conquered, with the attendant fact that peace follows their retrogression or conquest, is due solely to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace into the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway.

"Expansion and Peace," *The Independent*, December 21, 1899.
29. For a recent noted elaboration of this argument, see Record, Jeffrey, "Bounding the Global War on Terrorism."
30. In South Korea last May, only 24 percent supported the US war on terrorism while 58 percent said they were disappointed that Iraqi armed forces had not put up more of a fight. (Pew Global Attitudes Country Profile of South Korea, May 2003, cited in Donald Gregg, "The United States and South Korea: An Alliance Adrift," Korea Herald, January 29, 2004). In Great Britain last November, 60 percent thought President Bush was a threat to world peace while only seven percent said he was a good world leader. (Poll by *Sunday Times* November 14-15, 2003, "1 in 3 Brits call Bush 'stupid,'" WorldNetDaily, November 17, 2003.)