'The dilemma of deterrence remains"

P.D. 59: New Issue in an Old Argument

BY J. BRYAN HEHIR

My task is to comment on the political, strategic, and moral implications of P.D. 59, the presidential directive on U.S. nuclear strategy and targeting policy revealed in the media in August. The commentary is of necessity preliminary and tentative, since no document or position paper has been made available to the public to spell out the contents of P.D. 59. The most authoritative text we have is a major speech by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown on August 20 explaining the rationale of the new directive.

Secretary Brown's opening point was that P.D. 59 should not be understood as a new strategic doctrine but as a "refinement, a codification of previous statements of our strategic policy. Among analysts of the strategic debate, however, the refinement of P.D. 59 sparked significant interest and comment. While acknowledging that P.D. 59 had to be interpreted in the context of previous U.S. statements on strategic policy, commentators drew quite different conclusions about the significance of the statement, the degree of change it introduced into U.S. strategic policy, and the impact it would have on the strategic balance. Richard Burt of the *New York Times* saw it as an "almost inevitable product" of changes in weapons technology and Soviet strategic moves; Irving Kristol in the *Wall Street Journal* judged P.D. 59 to be a "momentous move toward a new realism in foreign policy by the Carter administration; while the *Christian Science Monitor* judged its displacement of MAD, the "mutual assured destruction" policy (approved by Kristol), a "dubious" contribution to the strategic debate. With this newest round of the nuclear debate there arises three issues: the significance of policy (or "doctrine") for strategy and ethics in the nuclear age; the meaning of P.D. 59 itself; and the challenge of such a policy for questions of morality and nuclear policy.

P.D. 59 arouses serious and intense interest because it may alter the prevailing U.S. strategic policy. In the nuclear age strategic policy or doctrine assumes a significance it did not have for other forms of warfare. By its strategic policy a nation (1) states its intention of what it will do in a war; (2) shapes the choices that will confront a political leader in a crisis; and (3) structures its forces to implement the policy.

It is true that the function of strategy always involved these elements, but the nuclear age involves two new dimensions. First, the timing of policy choices may be telescoped into a very limited period. In the nuclear era there are some choices that, once made, appear irrevocable. Second, the qualitative distinction between conventional and nuclear weaponry makes the decision to cross the nuclear divide one such irrevocable decision. As the nuclear age has evolved, a presumption against the use of nuclear weapons has been constructed that places a unique burden of proof upon any nation deciding to use them. The content of a nation's strategic doctrine shapes, possibly determines, how and when this decision "to go nuclear" will be made.

Because policy decisions made in peacetime have such a decisive impact on the range and kind of choices decision-makers would face in the midst of a nuclear crisis, the content of strategic doctrine is crucial for ethics. Any strategic policy is a mix of both strategic analysis and moral choices, whether the latter be explicit or implicit in the policy. Classical moral teaching addressed acts of war, testing them by several questions of purpose, intention, and means. In the nuclear age it is the strategic policy of a nation that must be continually evaluated. Because a modern war could be initiated and completed in a matter of hours or days, the impact of moral guidance on policy is most significantly offered in peacetime, shaping the doctrine which in turn will determine the choices in a nuclear crisis.

THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The genesis of P.D. 59 goes back at least to the tenure of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who urged a policy of selective nuclear options. Secretary Brown, stressing both the continuity of the policy and the fact that it was a response to Soviet strategic doctrine and deployment, referred to his annual report to the Congress in 1979 and 1980 to explain the rationale of P.D. 59. In these reports Mr. Brown had outlined a posture he called a "countervailing strategy." The phrase and the policy seemed consciously designed to alter the conventional strategic debate from its "counterforce" vs. "countervalue" discussions. While the content of these options had become well known and understood, the counterforce option had acquired a "first-strike" connotation. In his presentation of countervailing strategy Secretary Brown wants to avoid being tarred with the first-strike brush.

At the same time, the countervailing strategy is clear-

J. Bryan Hehir, a Roman Catholic priest, is Associate Secretary for International Justice and Peace, U.S. Catholic Conference.

ly designed to expand the range of targets beyond the urban-industrial mix that was the heart of the mutual assured destruction policy developed during the McNamara era. In Mr. Brown's words: "We must have forces, contingency plans and command and control capabilities that will convince the Soviet leadership that no war and no course of aggression by them that led to use of nuclear weapons—or any scale of attack and at any stage of conflict—could lead to victory, however they may define victory." The goal of countervailing policy is defined as "mutual deterrence" rather than the often-criticized MAD.

It should be understood, however, that what is involved in P.D. 59 is more than a change in terminology. While the directive may be a specification in existing strategy, the specificity carries significant implications. These can be assessed in terms of the strategic concerns to which the P.D. 59 policy responds and the political atmosphere which sets the context for the defense debate today.

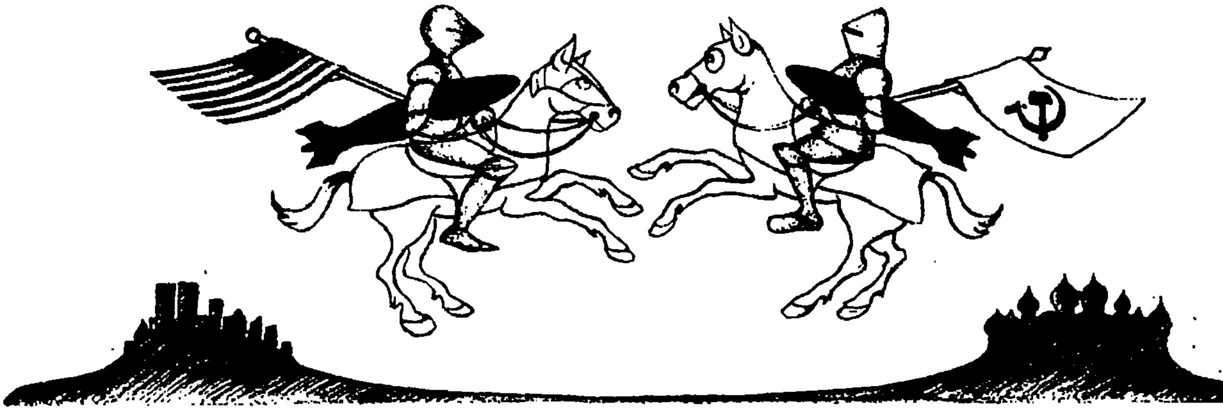
There are three related strategic objectives to which the P.D. 59 policy is addressed. The first is to provide a series of nuclear options for the president, a strategy of selective targeting designed to postpone the moment in a nuclear crisis when the choice would be between striking Soviet cities (with retaliation assured) or conceding to Soviet demands. The second is to shift U.S. policy objectives away from civilian targets toward more traditional military objectives. This is not a disavowal of the threat to strike cities; the threat remains part of U.S. policy. P.D. 59 means that the urban option is postponed, not cancelled. The third objective is to offset the Soviet's new counterforce capability, expected to threaten the U.S. Minuteman ICBMs, by providing a "silo-killing" option for the United States.

These specific strategic objectives should be seen in light of the broader political debate that has erupted in 1979-80 over U.S.-Soviet relations, with the arms race as the center of the debate. The renewed debate about the Soviets is rooted in several sources, but the SALT II ratification process crystallized the issues. They involve assessments of Soviet strategic doctrine and deployment; perceptions of U.S. posture around the globe; and, as a result of the first two, a call for rethinking and restructuring U.S. strategic policy. The argument made here is not that P.D. 59 resulted from these issues, but that these broader questions were the context in which the countervailing strategy was developed. They affect both its public reception and policy implementation.

P.D. 59 has been presented as a response to two themes in Soviet policy. First, there is concern over the rate and amount of Soviet spending on defense in the last fifteen years: Professor William Kaufmann of MIT places current Soviet spending at least 35 per cent higher than that of the U.S. Second, much attention has been given to the body of Soviet strategic literature that stresses the possibility of waging and winning a limited nuclear war. Secretary Brown has explicitly expressed his doubts that a nuclear exchange could be kept limited or that conventional political calculations can be used to assess the utility of nuclear weapons as instruments of policy. Yet in spite of these convictions he has pushed for P.D. 59 in response to the trends he sees in Soviet policy.

Others in the debate are less forthcoming about how they evaluate the utility of nuclear weapons as instruments of policy. They stress instead the increased political leverage the Soviets gain if they are perceived to have a more substantial nuclear arsenal and a coherent strategy for employing it. The primary exponent of this "geopolitical" argument during and since the SALT II debate has been Henry Kissinger. The essence of the argument is that the Soviet Union is now, and is perceived by others to be, a superior political and strategic power in the world, and this perception provides them with a margin of influence in key political contests in the Mideast, the Horn of Africa, and even in Europe.

Precisely because of these views on the U.S.-Soviet competition, the call arose during the SALT II debate for a fundamental recasting of U.S. strategic posture and policy. There was no single voice but a series of related themes. Paul Nitze, the principal opponent of the treaty, focused attention on the need to upgrade the U.S. deterrent. Mr. Kissinger went much further. In an address to a European audience in September, 1979, he called into question the strategic concepts that had governed U.S. policy for a generation. His principal target was the concept of assured destruction, which had been the basis of deterrence policy since the early 1960s. Although he had helped to develop the theory in the '60s, he sought to disown it in 1980 because it failed, he said, to relate our deterrent capability to changes being made by the Soviets in their strategic posture. By focusing on our ability to deliver a credible second strike on



Janice Stapleton

Soviet cities, the assured destruction concept ignored the Soviet thrust to supplement their deterrence posture with a counterforce capability directed at the U.S. Minuteman missiles. Kissinger urged the creation of a U.S. counterforce capability and a change in strategic policy that would provide a defined purpose for using nuclear weapons.

It would be a mistake to read all these broad political themes into P.D. 59 or to see the policy simply as a response to these voices. But it would be equally mistaken to examine the shift in U.S. policy apart from the persistent critique lodged against the policy of the last twenty years. The political arguments prepared the way for the "specifications" of strategy in P.D. 59, and they may influence how such a strategy actually would be implemented.

The end result of P.D. 59 is that while deterrence remains, in Secretary Brown's words, "our fundamental strategic objective," there is a new readiness at the level of theory and practice to consider fighting a limited nuclear war. The declared intent of P.D. 59 is to render deterrence more secure, but the means of doing this involves a willingness to threaten use of "selective" nuclear options. This raises the question whether the declared intent may be eroded or corrupted by lowering the psychological, political, and strategic barriers that have been painfully erected against any use of nuclear weapons. The dilemma of deterrence remains, How does one shape a declared strategy and force structure so that deterrence is solidified and use is precluded?

ETHICS AND STRATEGY

Deterrence is the "hard case" for policy and the "limit case" for ethics. The dilemmas of deterrence policy all find reflection in the ethical analysis.

P.D. 59 raises all the fundamental questions again. Deterrence is a limit case in ethics because it pushes the conventional moral principles to their extreme application. There are, for example, two clear, consistent responses to the deterrence problem: a pacifist position (nuclear or total pacifism) that prohibits both the *use* of nuclear weapons and the *threat* to use them; and a form of just war argument that finds *limited use* justifiable and seeks then to structure a deterrent that *intends* only limited use. The pacifist position is clear, decisive, commands increasing assent in religious communities today, and yields a posture of witness against the whole political and moral debate that has permeated the era of deterrence. I can respect the position but can't share its ultimate conclusion.

The position of limited use and limited deterrence is the position I understand to be Robert Gessert's, and is the position that has been advocated in this journal by Paul Ramsey. It is a position that will find P.D. 59 an encouraging sign insofar as it shifts from civilian to military targets and seeks to keep possible nuclear exchange within the rational limits of force.

My difficulty with this position is not its moral logic or method but its empirical conviction, i.e., that the use of nuclear weapons *can* be kept limited. I share Secretary Brown's judgment, found in his 1979 annual report: "The odds are high, whether the weapons were used against tactical or strategic targets, that control would be lost on both sides and the exchange would become unconstrained. Should such an escalation occur, it is certain that the resulting fatalities would run into the scores of millions." This empirical assessment leads me to share Michael Walzer's view that the *use* of nuclear weapons bursts the bounds of any rational ethic of war, not because it is impossible to conceive of a given *act* of war that is limited but because of the strong possibility that the *act* would initiate a *process* in which all limits will be consumed.

But here we are in 1980 with a deterrent in place. In the words of Vatican II, "Many regard this procedure as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time." While doubting to the point of disbelief the possibility of keeping nuclear war limited, I do have a marginal faith in the deterrent and find myself justifying it politically and ethically. It is a most imperfect instrument for preserving "peace of a sort." Because of the deterrent's counter-city principle, Paul Ramsey correctly points out the vulnerable link in this policy: It tolerates a threat of behavior that it could never justify if the threat were implemented. A moral position prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons while tolerating deterrence is as imperfect as the deterrent it justifies.

Does P.D. 59 provide a way out of the dilemma of deterrence? The desire to move primary targeting from civilian to military objectives provides a presumption to support the new policy. It is a new form of the challenge Ramsey makes to ethicists: Take up the task of restructuring the deterrent so that it is justifiable when it deters and would be justifiable if it had to be used. If we were at the point of constructing a deterrent from scratch, clearly Ramsey's challenge would be the strategy and task to be pursued. Robert Gessert, I believe, will find in P.D. 59 strategic reasons for reinforcing Ramsey's argument.

I wish I could follow the course; it has about it an ethical integrity that gives it strong appeal. In the end, my problem is with the empirical assessment: I am dubious about the possibility of restructuring the deterrent, and dubious about the possibility of restructuring it without increasing the risk of nuclear war.

P.D. 59 illustrates the problem. Its end product is not a shift from assured destruction to assured deterrence devoid of the problems of targeting cities. What P.D. 59 gives us is deterrence *plus* selective targeting. Secretary Brown affirms in his speech and his annual reports that the ultimate threat is the counter-city threat. P.D. 59 is not a qualitative shift from deterrence strategy as we have known it, but a modification of that strategy. The modification does not nullify the problem of counter-city threats, but it does increase the possibility of limited use of nuclear weapons.

At this point in the nuclear age the first moral priority, in my view, is to prevent *any* use of nuclear weapons. Tolerating the deterrent is something less than endorsing it; one tolerates it while seeking to transform its role in world politics. If we can prevent use long enough, we may have time to reduce the scope, significance, and danger of nuclear weapons to a point at which they no longer are the central political and moral contradiction of the political process.