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The following is quoted from the essay "A Sterile and Hopeless Weapon" (1958), pp. 6-7 in The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age. by George F. Kennan, (Pantheon Books, N.Y. 1982):

"The beginning of understanding rests...with the recognition that the weapon of mass destruction is a sterile and hopeless weapon which may for a time serve as an answer of sorts to itself and as an uncertain sort of shield against utter cataclysm, but which cannot in any way serve the purposes of a constructive and hopeful foreign policy. The true end of political action, is after all, to affect the deeper convictions of men; this the atomic bomb cannot do. The suicidal nature of this weapon renders it unsuitable both as a sanction of diplomacy and as the basis of an alliance. Such a weapon is simply not one with which one can usefully support political disiderata; nor is it one with which one readily springs to the defense of one's friends. There can be no coherent relations between such a weapon and the normal objects of national policy. A defense posture built around a weapon suicidal in its implications can serve in the long run only to paralyze national policy, to undermine alliances, and to drive everyone deeper and deeper into the hopeless exertions of the weapons race."

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NUCLEAR NONSENSE

by Steven Kull

They are playing a game. They are playing at not/playing a game. . . ./I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.—R.D. Laing, *Knots*

Through the 1960s, American strategic policy was focused on building and maintaining retaliatory forces capable of surviving an all-out Soviet attack. During the 1960s Washington accomplished this task. Each superpower remained vulnerable to attack from the other. Each retained adequate survivable nuclear forces to retaliate in the event of an attack. Since then, new ideas have emerged that call for building weapons beyond these requirements of retaliation. One of the most persistent theories, arguably most responsible for the continuing arms race, is a version of perception theory.

Perception theory, a phrase applied to nuclear weapons issues by strategic analyst Arthur Macy Cox in his 1976 book *The Dynamics of Détente*, argues that building weapons beyond the requirements of deterrence can achieve important psychological objectives. It argues that important audiences misperceive the military relationship between the superpowers apparently largely because of a widespread illusion that nuclear weapons are not fundamentally different from conventional weapons. But, strikingly, perception theorists today do not favor trying to correct these misperceptions by dispelling this illusion. Instead, they propose playing along with the illusion by building weapons that create desired perceptions even when the weapons are not militarily necessary.

A primary concern of perception theory is a question as old as the nuclear arms race itself: "Who's ahead?" Perception theorists readily agree that in a real military sense—in the event of war—such comparisons are not important, given greatly redundant arsenals. They do not contest the fact of overkill. But they insist that such comparisons have political and psychological consequences that outweigh military considerations. The perception of U.S. strategic inferiority by Soviet or other world leaders or even by the American public, they contend, might lead to developments that would weaken American security.

Perception theory then takes yet another step. Not only does it claim that key audiences believe incorrectly that the question "Who's ahead?" is important. It also asserts that these audiences gauge "Who's ahead?" incorrectly, focusing naively on misleading numerical comparisons.

As a result, perception theory argues that the United States cannot simply focus on the relationship between the number of survivable American warheads and the number of meaningful Soviet targets. The United States should also be concerned with comparisons of the gross number of weapons on each side. Apparently, perception theory seeks to respond to the false belief that American weapons effectively cancel out Soviet weapons the same way a sword or more troops can offset their counterparts.

A later variation of perception theory proposes playing along with the illusion of conventionality in yet another and perhaps even more dangerous way. Some American leaders and strategists fear that the Soviets might be entertaining the illusion that nuclear war, like conventional war, can be limited and even meaningfully won. Again, perception theory proposes playing along with the illusion by recommending that the United States try, through its weapons procurements and by devising war-fighting strategies, to create the perception that it, too, believes that a nuclear war can be limited and even meaningfully won.

The assumption that this widespread illusion of conventionality does in fact exist is dubious, though not entirely far-fetched. The most questionable aspect of perception theory, however, is its proposal that, in order to create false impressions, the United States should play along with the illusion by building militarily unnecessary weapons according to mistaken parameters. The theory even proposes

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actively promoting the illusion at times—a course of action wrought with ironic contradictions.

Perception theory originally grew out of the idea that the Soviets believed in it. By the mid-1970s, the Soviets surpassed the United States in combined totals of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). This build-up created some uneasiness. Some analysts feared that the Soviets were trying to build enough weapons to gain the capability for a disarming first strike. But this seemed highly doubtful given the maintenance of U.S. assured destruction capabilities. More sophisticated audiences speculated that the Soviets might seek political advantages by acquiring more weapons than the United States.

The dominant sentiment, however, was a determination not to race the Soviets but to put a cap on superpower arsenals, which led to the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). In the spirit of détente, the principles of equality and equal security were established to guide the negotiations. Yet because American negotiators were interested in real military capabilities, gaining precise numerical equality in all strategic areas was not a high priority. As a result, the 1972 interim agreement accepted Soviet numerical advantages in ICBMs and SLBMs because from a military point of view this asymmetry was more than offset by the much larger U.S. advantage in bombers and by American technological superiority.

Nevertheless, uneasiness persisted. The SALT talks had endorsed, to a degree, the importance of equality. The news media were consequently full of numerical comparisons suggesting that the U.S. arsenal was inferior, and Senate critics jumped on the issue. During ratification hearings nearly all strategic analysts agreed that from a military point of view the accord benefited the United States. Some specialists, however, warned that the treaty's terms could create worldwide an image of the Soviet Union on the rise and could prompt allies to accommodate Soviet wishes during crises and in daily diplomacy. SALT I was approved, but only after the Senate included an amendment, written by the late Washington Democrat Henry Jackson, that requested "the President to seek a future treaty that, inter alia, would not limit the United States to levels of intercontinental strategic forces inferior to the limits for the Soviet Union."

This measure's passage represented a crucial shift. Hitherto the American defense posture had been at least ostensibly rooted in military reality. Traditional deterrence theory recognized the importance of perceptions in nuclear matters but primarily stressed the need for an adversary correctly to recognize American retaliatory capabilities and intentions. But the Jackson amendment demanded equality regardless of its military relevance. From this point perceptional priorities began to drive weapons procurement in a manner increasingly independent of real military considerations.

Tenets of Perception Theory

In 1972, during the SALT I debate, the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) released a report by strategist Edward Luttwak, *The Strategic Balance*, that articulated the key tenets of perception theory. Luttwak recognized that a "near consensus of strategic experts would undoubtedly answer that the United States has in fact conceded nothing" of military significance in the SALT I treaty. Yet such thinking, he argued, "totally discounted" the "prestige effects deriving from the possession of strategic weapons" that are "psychologically by far the most impressive of all instruments of power." He claimed that "with informed public opinion the world over" there is a "definite awareness that one side or the other has more. And 'more' is widely regarded as implying greater power."

Luttwak recognized not only that this balance is essentially a misdirected measure of political power but also that the balance is incorrectly assessed, writing: "Outside the narrow circle of the technical experts the balance of strategic power is not measured in operational terms. Gross numbers and crude qualitative factors provide the only indices of strategic power which are widely recognized."

Rather than decrying the inevitable arms race that arises from this distorted perspective, however, he argued that the arms race is a "natural manifestation of political conflict."

This last conclusion is the core of this version of perception theory: The "natural" response to misperceptions of the strategic balance is not an effort to correct them but an attempt to compete in this realm of perceptions by means of an ongoing arms race.

Such thinking quickly moved into policy circles. Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger enshrined the tenets of perception theory as official U.S. policy in his annual reports to Congress for fiscal years 1975 and 1976. Schlesinger began the fiscal 1975 report by expressing concern about the improvements the Soviets had made in their nuclear arsenal during the 1960s, and he called for appropriate U.S. countermeasures. He recognized that this situation did not create an immediate military threat because the Soviet Union did not and could not hope to be able to launch a disarming first strike. But he added that "there must be essential equivalence between the strategic forces of the United States and the USSR—an equivalence perceived not only by ourselves, but by the Soviet Union and third audiences as well."

It appears that perception theory led many to believe in the illusion that it had so carefully described.

Schlesinger's elaboration of this concern drew on the key ideas of perception theory. He wrote that there is "an important relationship between the political behavior of many leaders of other nations and what they perceive the strategic nuclear balance to be." Rather than correctly perceiving this balance, he said, many leaders "react to the static measures of relative force size, number of warheads, equivalent megatonnage, and so forth." He concluded, therefore, that "to the degree that we wish to influence the perception of others, we must take appropriate steps (by their lights) in the design of the strategic forces." In other words, Schlesinger proposed that the United States adapt the design of its nuclear arsenal to the mistaken perceptual habits of these leaders rather than help them adapt their perceptual habits to reality. He speculated that this perceived imbalance might trigger serious miscalculations:

> Opponents may feel that they can exploit a favorable imbalance by means of political pressure, as Hitler did so skillfully in the 1930s. . . . Friends may believe that a willingness on our part to accept less than equality indicates a lack of resolve to uphold our end of the competition and a certain deficiency in staying power. Our own citizens may doubt our capacity to guard the nation's interest.

Elements of perception theory were also voiced during this period by senior military officers such as Joint Chiefs of Staff chairmen Admiral Thomas Moorer and General George Brown in their statements to Congress.

Meanwhile, CSIS analysts were adding new twists to perception theory. In the 1975 study *World Power Assessment*, CSIS Executive Director Ray Cline argued that "a growing and innovative arsenal will be perceived as more powerful than one which is static—even if the latter still retains an advantage in purely technical terms."

This argument is explained by concern over the fact that as the Soviet Union strove to catch up with the United States, it was improving its arsenal at a faster rate. Even though in absolute terms the United States was still ahead, the fact that its forces were growing more slowly than the Soviets' could be perceptually problematic, and presumably would need to be remedied. Similarly, Luttwak has argued that in the realm of perceptions, "time is discounted." He continued: "The most direct consequence of discounting time is that in determining perceptions of military capabilities the impact of rates of change may equal or outweigh the impact of current capabilities."

To deal with such perceptual complexities, Luttwak proposed that the United States carry out perceptual impact analyses, with an eye to "enhancing the images of power they

generate." He even argued that a cosmetic restructuring of American ground units to make them appear larger in number should not be ruled out. Luttwak reiterated: "Objective reality, whatever that may be, is simply irrelevant; only the subjective phenomena of perception and value-judgment count."[1]

Evidently, even these subtleties of perception theory influenced policymakers. In 1976 a group of hard-line defense analysts convened by the CIA reported that new accounting methods showed that the Soviets were spending twice the percentage of their gross national product on defense as previously estimated. This percentage was also much higher than that of the U.S. defense budget. No new information emerged about the weaponry itself, only that it had cost the Soviets much more than had been thought. Nevertheless, a shrill alarm was sounded: Because Moscow appeared to be spending more on the military than Washington was, the United States should catch up by increasing its defense budget.

After Schlesinger left the Pentagon, perception theory remained a major rationale for weapons deployment. In his fiscal 1978 report to Congress, Schlesinger's successor at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, recognized that not even the Soviet ICBM build-up posed the threat of a disarming first strike. But like Schlesinger and other believers in perception theory, he feared the dangerous international miscalculations these asymmetries might produce. Rumsfeld also reiterated the view that the balance was incorrectly assessed because of failure to make "detailed analyses." Rather than attempting to clarify that asymmetries do not necessarily constitute a military threat, however, he called for "actions to create the necessary perception of equivalence." "Accordingly," he wrote, "U.S. plans and programs for future offensive capabilities must be geared to those of the USSR."

Despite President Jimmy Carter's public recognition that the U.S. arsenal far exceeded the requirements of deterrence, his secretary of defense, Harold Brown, also cited the basic principles of perception theory. Brown wrote in his fiscal 1979 report to Congress, "The United States and its allies must be free from any coercion and intimidation that could result from perceptions of an overall imbalance or particular asymmetries in nuclear forces." Further: "Insistence on essential equivalence guards against any danger that the Soviets might be seen as superior—even if the perception is not technically justified."

When the military makes weapons procurement decisions consistent with the role perception theory wants it to play, it frequently builds weapons that do not make the right perceptual impact.

Naturally, as perceptions became increasingly important in Pentagon planning, attention turned to whether weapons procurements were having the desired perceptual effect on important audiences. To find out, the Department of Defense sponsored several studies that in 1978 were published in a book entitled *International Perceptions of the Superpower Military Balance*. Focusing on audiences in Europe, Japan, the Middle East, the Soviet Union, and the United States, the studies found much evidence that contradicted the assumptions of perception theory. But, adding yet another twist in the logic of perception theory, the authors were able to justify the theory and the weapons procurement once again.

One key question the studies addressed was whether "perceivers tend to think in terms of numerical comparisons of superpower military strength." Based on a variety of evidence the resulting volume concluded that "it is generally felt that both sides have more than enough." The researchers found that some groups even stated directly that it is "moot to ask, 'Who is ahead?' in a situation of mutual nuclear overkill." Perhaps most important, the authors found virtually no evidence to support

[1] *Edward N. Luttwak, "Perceptions of Military Force and U.S. Policy," in Luttwak,* Strategy and Politics: Collected Essays *(New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980), pp. 54–60.*

the idea that America's allies favored greater "accommodations with the Soviets" in response to "perceived shifts in some balances away from U.S. favor." The authors also observed that Soviet officials have recognized that superiority had no real value in the face of mutual assured destruction and that "parity is not the issue at hand."

Yet the authors argued implicitly that it is still important to build arms in light of international perceptions. They suggested that although America's allies and the Soviet Union apparently attach no military importance to the strategic balance in an environment of overkill and do not consider themselves to be affected by whatever shifts they perceive in the balance, some countries nevertheless keep a close eye on the balance and look for signs of U.S. resolve to maintain it. These countries do so because they mistakenly believe that other key audiences regard the balance as militarily significant—even though these countries consider that belief to be wrong. As the authors point out, if the "U.S. resolve to match Soviet military strength" is perceived as weakening, "the end result would be very significant for the United States, whatever its actual or perceived strength compared with the Soviet Union."

The argument strongly suggests that in international power relations, perceptions of the superpower military balance are the coinage of international affairs even though all the key parties involved seem to recognize that the coins are counterfeit. The situation resembles nothing so much as a drawing-room comedy. All of the key characters know a certain secret—that strategic asymmetries are militarily irrelevant in an age of overkill—but because they think that others do not know the secret they act as if they do not know the secret either. A farcical quality emerges as all the characters, more or less unconsciously, collude to establish a norm of behavior based on a failure to recognize the secret. What is particularly striking, though, is that when the main character—in this case the Defense Department—is informed that, in fact, everybody knows the secret, it stiffens its resolve to maintain the charade.

Is Victory Possible?

In reality the dynamic is probably more complex than in this drawing-room comedy. At senior levels in particular there is evidence that some U.S. officials do not really believe in the military value of the weapons they call for even though they present their arguments in the context of certain war-fighting scenarios.

Nevertheless they argue, in a variant of perception theory, that the Soviets' capability to gain an advantage in such implausible scenarios may create serious political problems for the United States. These officials are not satisfied with having a retaliatory capacity effective enough to deter a rational Soviet leader. Instead, they call on the United States to offset the potential Soviet advantage by gaining the capability to end the scenario in an equal or even superior position.

One particularly prominent example is found in an article that Special Adviser to the President and Secretary of State on Arms Control Matters Paul Nitze wrote for *Foreign Affairs* in 1976. The scenario that concerned Nitze was one in which the Soviets would make a major counterforce strike against the United States, followed by an American counterforce retaliation. Nitze was concerned that "the Soviets could, by initiating such an exchange, increase the ratio" of the advantage they held at the start of the exchange in throw-weight—a missile's capacity to lift material into space.

Nitze was not putting forth the absurd proposition that the Soviets might launch an attack simply to improve their throw-weight ratio. Nor was he arguing that this Soviet throw-weight edge might represent a real disarming-first-strike capability. He acknowledged that even after such a strike the remaining American weapons would still "be conducive to continued effective deterrence even if the ratios are unfavorable." Instead, Nitze believed that the Soviets were pursuing a "*theoretical* war-winning capability" and that the Soviets would "consider themselves duty bound by Soviet doctrine to exploit fully that strategic advantage" (emphasis added).

Nitze's argument seemed to focus primarily on the potential effects of intrawar imbalances

on third audiences or perhaps even on the United States. Gradually, though, another argument emerged that focused on the effects that such potential imbalances might have on Soviet willingness actually to initiate a war. This concern was fanned by several articles that presented evidence that the Soviets did in fact believe it was possible to win a nuclear war.

A variant of perception theory soon emerged in response to this concern. Harold Brown expressed concern in his fiscal 1981 report to Congress that the Soviets might be entertaining thoughts that a nuclear war could be won even though "these leaders should know by now, as we learned some years ago, that a war-winning strategy ... has no serious prospect of success." He argued that the United States must "counter" Soviet developments lest Moscow "succumb" to this "illusion." This response went beyond weapons procurement and included developing strategies for winning limited nuclear war by controlling the process of escalation. Yet it seems that Brown did not really believe such a strategy was realistic. He wrote: "In adopting and implementing this policy we have no more illusions than our predecessors that a nuclear war could be closely and surgically controlled." Apparently the purpose of the policy was simply to make a desired perceptual impact.

Other analysts went even further and argued that it is indeed possible to win even a longer nuclear war. Strategic analysts Colin Gray and Keith Payne boldly argued in an article in FOREIGN POLICY in 1980 that "Victory is Possible" and that therefore the United States should have a "victory strategy" that "would contemplate the destruction of Soviet political authority and the emergence of a postwar world order compatible with Western values."

A victory strategy became the equivocal American position after Ronald Reagan became president. The classified version of the 1982 defense guidance statement reportedly called for plans to prevail not only in a limited nuclear war but also in a protracted conflict in which the United States would aim to "decapitate" the leadership of the Soviet Union. In his fiscal 1984 report to Congress, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger wrote that "should deterrence fail, our strategy is to restore peace on favorable terms. In responding to an enemy attack we must defeat the attack."

Even those American analysts who seemed to believe most strongly that a nuclear war could be won now appear to have been following a form of perception theory. In their article, Gray and Payne offered extremely little in the way of explanation of how an all-out nuclear war could be won. The only scenario they described is a traditional limited-war scenario in which intrawar deterrence principles would operate. Instead, their primary argument was that simply having a victory strategy would buttress deterrence. They argued that the Soviet leaders would be "impressed by ... a plausible American victory strategy" and that this would have "the desired deterrent effect."

As perception theory insinuated itself into defense thinking, the efforts to rationalize it became fewer. Weinberger's reports to Congress generally skipped the circuitous perception theory arguments made by his predecessors. Typical is his simple assertion, in his fiscal 1984 report, that "the critical point in deterring war and preventing aggression is maintaining a balance of forces." Weinberger's next sentence, however, reveals a new basis for supporting this statement: "History has shown us all too often that conflicts occur when one state believes it has a sufficiently greater military capability than another and attempts to exploit that superior strength through intimidation or conflict with the weaker state."

Weinberger and other Reagan administration officials were drawing on the traditional concept of the balance of power in international relations. This concept has been applied widely to numerous historical situations in which conventional military imbalances, such as those in Europe during the late 1930s, played an important role in precipitating war.

Yet applying this concept to nuclear superpower relations, especially in an age of mutual overkill, is questionable. In conventional con-

flicts a battle's outcome can often be predicted by comparing such factors as numerical troop strengths of opposing sides. In a nuclear war fought by greatly redundant arsenals, the weapons of both sides can inflict cataclysmic damage regardless of relative force levels.

Perception theory seems to have played a large part in creating this confusion. Perception theory argued that the nuclear balance was politically relevant because people mistakenly believed it was militarily relevant. But from the start, these fine distinctions were blurred, and many strategists and political leaders alike simply asserted that the nuclear balance is intrinsically important, just as a prenuclear conventional balance was. In other words, it appears that perception theory led many to believe in the illusion that it had so carefully described. The balance itself, not retaliatory capability, was portrayed as somehow preventing war. Thus Reagan said in a May 10, 1984, address, "As long as we maintain the strategic balance ... *then* we can count on the basic prudence of the Soviet leaders to avoid [nuclear war]" (emphasis added). British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told the House of Commons, "The principle is a balance in order to deter."[2]

The most dangerous form of this kind of thinking is the belief that balancing one weapon with a similar weapon somehow creates a defense against the first weapon or prevents its usage. Commenting on the Soviet SS-20 missiles, Reagan said that "the only answer to these systems is a comparable threat to Soviet threats." He did not explain, however, why a comparable threat is the best answer, much less the "only answer."

The MX and INF Controversies

No strategic controversies have better demonstrated the importance of perception theory than those over the MX (missile experimental) and intermediate-range nuclear forces (INFs) in Europe. The most persistent rationale for the MX was that it was needed to offset the growing theoretical vulnerability of America's land-based deterrent. MX advocates initially claimed, among other things, that the missile did offer the important military benefit of decreasing the vulnerability of U.S. counterforce weapons and making the Soviets think harder before striking first. By surviving a Soviet knockout attempt, the MX would give a president the classic counterforce option of retaliating against Soviet military targets and would create the possibility that nuclear war could be stopped before attacks on population centers began.

The Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces (the Scowcroft commission), however, clearly rejected this argument. The commission concluded that the MX could not be protected. Thus, virtually the entire military rationale for the MX collapsed. If the Soviets were to launch a first strike, those missiles would be among the first targets hit. The commissioners further de-emphasized the missile's military value by tacitly affirming that without it the United States still had adequate retaliatory capability.

And yet the commissioners concluded that the MX should be built nevertheless. They argued that the Soviet counterforce superiority constituted a "serious imbalance" that "must be redressed promptly." They recognized that "in a world in which the balance of strategic nuclear forces could be isolated from [political considerations], a nuclear imbalance would have little importance." But with an air of philosophical regret they supported building the MX because "the overall perception of strategic imbalance ... has been reasonably regarded as destabilizing and as a weakness in the overall fabric of deterrence." They based their view, in other words, on perception theory.

The deployment of Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Western Europe also was heavily influenced by perception theory. During the mid-1970s the Soviets began replacing their older intermediate-range SS-4 and SS-5 missiles with new SS-20s that were considerably more accurate and that carried more warheads. This step did not immediately convince NATO leaders

[2]*See Strobe Talbott,* Deadly Gambits *(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) p. 172–173.*

or populations, or U.S. leaders, to make some parallel deployment in Western Europe. The United States already had many forward-based weapons, including fighter-bombers deployed on aircraft carriers and ballistic missile submarines in European waters, plus thousands of ICBM warheads that were just 30 minutes' flight time away should a high degree of accuracy be needed. In fact, Washington had decided many years before to remove medium-range Thor and Jupiter missiles from the Continent largely because they were seen as an inferior way to protect Western Europe.

But in 1977, then West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, an original supporter of removing the Thors and Jupiters, called for new American deployments in Europe in response to the SS-20s. In a critical speech in London he said, "SALT neutralizes [the superpowers'] strategic nuclear capabilities. In Europe, this magnifies the significance of the disparities between East and West."

Apparently his logic was derived from the perception theory principle that a missile on one side politically cancels out, or in Schmidt's word, "neutralizes," a missile on the other side. Thus the SS-20s allegedly constituted a major new threat to Europe. But from a military point of view this was clearly not the case. Even under the worst possible scenarios the United States would still have thousands of forward-based and central strategic weapons with which to strike the kinds of targets for which the SS-20s were designed.

Some important military rationales for INF deployments have been advanced. But as Robert Jervis pointed out in his 1984 study *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* the two dominant rationales not only suffer intrinsic problems but also directly contradict each other. One rationale argued that placing missiles in Western Europe would more closely couple U.S. central strategic forces to Western Europe's defense and thus deter the Soviets from invading. A Soviet invasion would supposedly force Washington to use its nuclear missiles or lose them and therefore ensure that a strategic exchange whose consequences neither superpower could escape would take place. Yet aside from its enormous economic and cultural stakes, the United States had already placed many other hostages in Europe in order to preserve coupling: some 350,000 soldiers and thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. It was not clear why intermediate-range weapons would decisively strengthen coupling.

Some INF proponents also claimed that the missiles were needed to fill in gaps in the "ladder of escalation." They stressed that should the Soviets strike Europe with intermediate-range missiles, NATO would need the option of retaliating in kind. Perhaps then the conflict might terminate without pulling in U.S. central strategic forces. Many other analysts noted that this scenario suffered from the same problem as other limited-war thinking. More important, though, this idea directly contradicted the first rationale for putting in the missiles. The limited-war rationale proposed that the United States should hold back and thereby limit the nuclear exchange to Europe—precisely the possibility that the first rationale sought to prevent.

Perception theory, however, offered a rationale that seemed to have fewer problems, and gradually this theory became dominant. In this vein, Reagan asserted that it was not acceptable "to continue to stand there with [the Soviets] having enough warheads to literally wipe out every population center in Western Europe, with no deterrent on our side." Of course, NATO did have a tremendous deterrent but not one that was numerically balanced with the Soviets' in terms of intermediate-range weapons.

Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara joined in the support of INF deployments, explicitly using perception theory arguments. In a 1983 article in *Newsweek* he explained, "There is no military requirement for NATO to deploy the Pershing IIs and cruise missiles.... [T]he Europeans are operating on a misperception, but as long as it is held, it must be treated as a reality." Apparently this kind of thinking was shared by State Department officials. When Richard Burt, assistant secretary of state for European and Canadian affairs, was told that Pershing II deployment might have to be delayed because of continuing technical problems, he reported-

ly said, "We don't care if the goddamn things work or not. After all, that doesn't matter unless there's a war. What we care about is getting them in."[1]

Maintaining Illusions

Perhaps the most striking and questionable feature of perception theory is its recommendation for dealing with the supposedly widespread illusion that nuclear and conventional weapons are not fundamentally different. The idea that the illusion should be actively dispelled seems never to be seriously considered. Instead, perception theorists propose that the informed elite not caught in the illusion should play along with the illusion as if it were real. They sometimes suggest that the illusion must be protected or even actively promoted.

Playing along, however, creates some curious problems. The illusion holds that there is a military requirement for more nuclear weapons. Therefore, the task of the military establishment is a real, business-as-usual military task and not a psychological one. Perception theory calls for the military to carry on in a manner consistent with the illusion in order to create the impression that the United States is moving forward in the arms competition and meaningfully increasing its force effectiveness. Yet as perception theorists have pointed out, frequently the military preoccupation with real force effectiveness leads to weapons procurement decisions that undermine some of the desired effects of perception theory.

A recent example is provided by the furor over the fact that the overall megatonnage and throw-weight of the U.S. arsenal is lower than the Soviets'. Perception theorists have worried about the perceptual impact of this imbalance and have pressed for correcting it. What is rarely mentioned is that in the past the American arsenal boasted three times its present megatonnage. Megatonnage was reduced because it made good military sense to shift to smaller, more accurate missiles as American technological progress afforded this option. Evidently the military was continuing to develop weapons according to military priorities. Yet all the while, perception theorists were arguing that the only cogent rationale for building additional nuclear weapons in a mutual overkill environment was perceptual, and that perceptual priorities would point to different priorities in weapons design.

The problem stems not from faulty communication within the system but from a built-in contradiction in the logic of perception theory. To make the right perceptual impact the military must act as if it believes it is building nuclear arms for traditional military purposes. This leads the military to make decisions like the one to reduce megatonnage in light of improvements in accuracy. But when the military makes weapons procurement decisions consistent with the role perception theory wants it to play, it frequently builds weapons that do not make the right perceptual impact. One can only speculate how many billions of dollars have been spent as the vast defense establishment has loped its way through the endless circles of this logic.

Despite the problems inherent in trying to go along with the illusion, perception theorists have gone to extraordinary lengths to protect it. Supposedly one political problem that perception theory addresses is that the masses and political leaders are caught in the illusion that asymmetries between the superpower arsenals make a real difference for security. The knowledge that this is an illusion is limited to an elite who must perform what Luttwak calls "perceptual manipulations" upon the masses.

So how have perception theorists responded now that large segments of the masses have broken out of this illusion? What have they done when the argument that more nuclear weapons are militarily useless has become the stuff of slogans, picket signs, and bumper stickers? Have they welcomed this general enlightenment? Quite the contrary. Instead, they have mounted a countercampaign to offset what they depict as a dangerous effort to enlighten the rest of the public.

Interestingly, one of the most common epithets hurled at nuclear activists is that they

[1] *Ibid.*, 187.

are naive, not incorrect, in their claims that more nuclear weapons are useless. This seems to imply that the truly intelligent thing to do is not to try to undermine this widely held illusion but rather to quietly join the ranks of the elite who wisely manipulate perceptions within the context of this illusion.

At times, perception theorists go further and even actively promote the illusion. Some defense analysts and certain government officials have played a major role in promoting the idea not only that the military balance is important but also that the American arsenal is dangerously inferior to the Soviet Union's. It was noted in the previously mentioned Defense Department-sponsored study of international perceptions that American spokesmen and publications played a major role in shaping perceptions in Soviet and NATO audiences. But the authors observed that "the tendency of many U.S. spokesmen (particularly government officials at budget time) to emphasize Soviet strengths and U.S. weaknesses often had a negative impact on the perceived U.S. standing."

This behavior seems to contradict completely the principles of perception theory. According to perception theory, what is supremely important for deterrence and for all aspects of American foreign policy is that the United States be perceived by all people of the world as strong and ever capable of launching unacceptably destructive retaliatory attacks. Logically, to maintain this perception, government officials should brag publicly about the extraordinary power and invincibility of the American deterrent, augmenting their claims, of course, by extensive documentation. Presenting the United States as weak and vulnerable should be anathema. The peculiar logic of perception theory, however, has led the defense establishment to do just that.

Schlesinger sought to explain this apparent contradiction. He conceded in an August 1981 *Time* article that this emphasis on American weakness "is a self-inflicted wound," but he went on to say that "one of the penalties of a democracy is that we have to call public attention to the problem in order to get the necessary remedies."

As Arthur Macy Cox noted in his 1982 book *Russian Roulette*, this kind of thinking has led to a Catch-22. The original problem that needs to be remedied, according to perception theory, is the perception of inadequacy, not inadequate weaponry. The purpose of new weaponry is to modify this misperception. But in order to galvanize support for expenditures that are meant to modify this misperception, the misperception is intentionally enhanced. Remedying the problem thus requires making the problem worse.

By framing an issue in terms of indexes in which one's own side is inferior and simultaneously ignoring indexes in which it is superior, superiority can be pursued in the name of equality.

The variant of perception theory that calls for a victory strategy runs into this same problem. According to this idea, to make the desired perceptual impact, one that intimidates and deters adversaries and reassures allies and the public, officials must project the image of believing that a nuclear war can be won. And to maintain the support needed to stay in office and to acquire the weaponry necessary to project this belief, officials must be on good terms with the public. Yet the public becomes uncomfortable when officials talk about winning nuclear wars. Therefore, it is necessary to explicitly disavow any belief that "victory is possible." In short, government officials must create the perception domestically that they believe a nuclear war cannot be won because this is the only way they can obtain the support necessary to build the weapons needed to create the perception globally that they believe a nuclear war can be won.

But what is the alternative to a perception theory saddled with these problems of logic? The answer may be as simple as stating that the emperor has no clothes. Even if perception theorists are entirely correct in claiming that key audiences are caught up in the illusion

that the strategic balance is critical or that a nuclear war can be won, it does not necessarily follow that the best response is to enter into this illusion and compete within it. It is possible to play it straight and effectively work to dispel the illusion.

This would require an active effort to inform all key audiences about the real nature of nuclear weapons, the irrelevance of most asymmetries in the strategic balance in a mutual overkill environment, and the impossibility of winning a nuclear war. Such an effort, of course, would be easily buttressed by a simple presentation of the facts. Most important, though, U.S. weapons procurement and strategy for selecting targets would be adjusted to these realities. Only these concrete adjustments would give American assertions of these realities any genuine credibility.

If the Soviets attempted to gain political advantages by continuing their build-up unilaterally, the United States would respond not by matching the build-up—except to counteract any real military threats to American retaliatory capabilities—but rather by working to actively and publicly dispel any notions that the Soviets were gaining any real military advantage. American restraint and realism would, of course, give this assertion real credibility. Restraint would also put the United States in a strong position to turn world public opinion against such Soviet efforts and could ultimately produce political benefits for America.

Space permits listing only a few key components of a realistic weapons procurement policy. First, the focus would move away from comparing numbers of weapons on each side and instead would center on the number of survivable American warheads in relation to the number of meaningful Soviet targets. The required number might change if the Soviet developments significantly reduced the number of American warheads that could survive a first strike. The American response, however, would emphasize the capability to threaten Soviet targets rather than replicating Soviet weapons.

Second, the strategies for target selection that the procured weapons would support would be based only on plausible scenarios, which are difficult, but not impossible, to define. This standard would permit strategic debaters to clash over the merits of highly flexible counterforce doctrines that tend to lower the nuclear threshold versus assured-destruction-based doctrines that seek to raise it. But the standard would not permit arguing for the necessity of maximum flexibility within the context of extraordinarily implausible scenarios. Nor would it accept arguments for a victory strategy based on scenarios that only an irrational adversary could regard as plausible. As has been frequently noted, deterrence can never be counted on to defend against an irrational adversary. Even if the Soviet Union is simply attempting to gain political advantage by appearing more irrational than America, America need not and should not follow suit. Further, eschewing a victory strategy and introducing corresponding appropriate restraint in U.S. weapons procurement would add credibility to the effort to dissipate any lingering illusions the public might be holding about issues like nuclear victory.

This playing-it-straight approach is less apt than perception theory to drive the arms race on its current dangerous course. The preoccupation with maintaining perceptions of strategic equality between the United States and the Soviet Union seems unexceptionable, but it has become an engine of the nuclear competition. This effect can arise from a genuine failure to understand how the adversary assesses the balance, which leads each side into an endless game of catch-up. But it probably arises more often from an effort to be "more equal" than the adversary. By framing an issue in terms of indexes in which one's own side is inferior and simultaneously ignoring indexes in which it is superior, superiority can be pursued in the name of equality.

Indeed, by placing such a premium on the military balance, perception theory actually hands the Soviets an advantage. It effectively validates the idea that the key arena for superpower competition is one in which the Soviets compete particularly well.

Finally, perception theory ultimately promotes the Soviet war-winning ideas that the

United States has correctly identified as dangerous. True perception theorists claim that the best response to the Soviet belief in war-winning is to project the same belief in the form of a victory strategy and corresponding weapons procurements. If the purpose of American actions is to disabuse the Soviets of this mistaken belief, the United States should not give the idea greater credence by espousing a victory strategy itself. If anything, this course of action is more likely to reinforce mistaken Soviet beliefs and thereby increase the danger that perception theorists want to counteract. A more logical approach would be to state firmly and unambiguously that a nuclear war cannot be won and to make the American arsenal and strategies for picking targets consistent with this belief.

A Quick Fix

But why, if the logic is so dubious, the costs so high, and the benefits so questionable, does the United States play along with the illusion and continue the arms race?

Many suggested answers to these questions stress the sheer momentum of the arms race, the defense establishment's opposition to any letup, and the financial interests of defense industry contractors. Other theories point to the presence, in the Pentagon and especially among Reagan appointees, of an influential group of hard-liners who still hope to win the arms race and somehow bring about the end of the Soviet system. Yet none of these ideas explains why the country as a whole continues to support the arms race.

Perception theory suggests that the public supports the arms race because it does not understand the realities of nuclear weapons. Apparently, however, the public does grasp nuclear realities. In a Public Agenda Foundation poll published in September 1984, 90 per cent of respondents agreed that "we and the Soviets now have enough nuclear weapons to blow each other up many times over"; 89 per cent agreed that "there can be no winner in an all-out nuclear war"; and 83 per cent agreed that even "a limited nuclear war is nonsense." These days, even teenagers grasp these realities with apparent ease.

At the same time, 71 per cent of those polled agreed that the United States should continue to develop "new and better nuclear weapons." Why does the public continue to support an arms race it knows is pointless, and leaders who actively obfuscate the realities of nuclear weapons? What can Americans hope to achieve by fooling themselves into believing that building more nuclear weapons makes them more secure?

Perhaps the answer is this: Americans hope to get relief from the overarching and terrible fact that they face an extraordinary threat to their survival and there is nothing they can do about it. If the Soviets should decide that they want to destroy the United States, they can do so in minutes. America can make counter-threats, but in the final analysis there is no defense against nuclear weapons. Increasing evidence suggests that even the most ambitious conceptions of the Strategic Defense Initiative will not significantly reduce the American population's vulnerability. In the face of this unsettling situation it is nevertheless appealing to believe that there exists some meaningful action that will, however meagerly, enhance the security of Americans.

Psychologists have found that when people face a threat to which they cannot effectively respond, they tend to generate the illusion that there is some meaningful action they can take to reduce the threat. This can lead to certain kinds of irrational thinking in which they believe the threat to be counteracted by actions that do not reduce the threat or that sometimes even exacerbate it. At times, a vague rationality spurs these actions—for example, repeating an action that at one time did, or in other circumstances would, actually reduce the threat. In a similar vein, drug addicts and alcoholics respond to anxiety by ingesting substances that alleviate their anxious feelings, even though at another level they know that they have done nothing to improve their situation.

The American public may be hooked on the quick fix of illusory security that arms building provides. Every report that the Soviets have increased the size of their arsenal makes it almost inconceivable for the United States

not to "do something"—especially since in the past, building more weapons did increase a country's security. Moreover, the enormity of the effort to match the Soviets gives it a certain credibility and, like the "big lie," makes it easier for each person to believe that someone, someplace, must truly understand the point of this excessive arms building. At the same time, however, it appears that Americans do know, at some level, that building more arms is not really enhancing their security. Expanding nuclear arsenals at best only makes them think that this is so.

Thus perhaps the arms race has not been foisted on a passive American public. Perhaps the defense establishment has actually responded to a subtle mandate to obfuscate the reality of American vulnerability. Perhaps the defense that Americans wish the Pentagon to maintain is less a military defense against foreign aggressors than a psychological defense against an awareness that they have not yet assimilated.

Of course, if this awareness should take root, the implications would be profound. It could well lead to a greater realization that nuclear weapons, by making the major countries so vulnerable to each other, have altered the systemic features of geopolitical reality. What is required, then, is no less than a reconsideration of the role of force in international relations. The extent to which Americans and others avoid the awareness of this vulnerability suggests real apprehension about the changes this realization would entail. There are no simple solutions and no one can blindly claim that the future will be better. Consequently, eschewing the ineffective placebo of reflexive arms building may create some anxiety. But perhaps, by finally swallowing the medicine of vulnerability, humanity will at least greet the future having removed some of these veils of self-deception from its eyes.

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The hubris at heaven's door

By Jeremy Seabrook

EVERYONE in Britain shares the sorrow at the deaths of the seven Americans in the destruction of the Challenger space shuttle; but there has been some — understandable — resistance in this country to media responses that give the impression that it is for us a national disaster. There has been, it seems, a distinct attempt to make us identify ourselves, not with the human grief (for that requires no forcing), but with the wound to a pride and sensibility that is specifically American. The Daily Telegraph, for instance, said "The United States have been pathfinders for the West. The cost, the risk, the glory have been theirs." Mrs Thatcher, too, was swift to associate Britain with the American experience, and in a way that acknowledged our subordination. Not only did she see in Challenger the spirit of the people of America, but also the spirit of freedom itself. This was presumably taken for granted by television: all it could do was show repeatedly — seven or eight times within two hours — that image of the catastrophic gold flower that bloomed on its long white stalk after lift-off.

That we have such an insignificant part to play in the imperial push towards the heavens arouses conflicting sentiments in Britain. Perhaps we can console ourselves with the idea that the Americans are our heirs, the inheritors of that pioneering temper, that intrepidity which, in another age, did not falter at the confines of the known world. President Reagan suggested this when he reminded Americans that the accident occurred on the 390th anniversary of the death of Sir Francis Drake off the coast of Panama. We know that we are too old and infirm to follow them in their heroic thrust; but we have the satisfaction that progenitors have, the begetters of a spirit that lives on in their vital and engergetic society. We colonised much of the earth; let theirs be the skies.

Perhaps the reserve in Britain comes from an unspoken sense that something else also lies concealed in the rhetoric about a nation in mourning, the evocation of earlier adventures and heroes, the sense of continuity with pioneers on other frontiers, the tributes to the — undoubted — courage of those who died.

What gave the disaster a particular poignancy was the role of the schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe; not only had she won the flight in competition with 11,000 other teachers (and what clearer example could there be of the cultural difference between Britain and the United States than this: is it conceivable that a teacher could be the first ordinary citizen in space if the enterprise had been British?), but she was also, as the Daily Mail puts it, in terms curiously reminiscent of the Soviet Union, "a model citizen." "Teacher Dies Living The American Dream."

She had become familiar to everyone in the United States: all knew her lifestory. In her had been vested the aspirations and feelings of millions of people.

She was yet another living demonstration that "anyone, however humble, can play a starring role in their nation's history"; she was, as it were, the ambassadress into space of all those to whom no such adventure could ever be vouchsafed, but whose close identification with her permitted them to accompany her in imagination. It was another scene in the permanent morality play of the American spectacle about the limitless possibilities in people's lives — the moral being principally aimed at those for whom such achievements will never exist. And such people were also offered the unexpected comfort, at that searing moment of disaster, of relief that so high a destiny had not been theirs: the consolation of being a nobody could have received no more dramatic illumination.

There is something in the American sadness, although totally sincere, that is less innocent than it appears. The shared emotion is a strong cathartic influence, but it also acts as a convenient distraction from some of the implications of what the shuttle is all about. The urgency of the accelerating programme scheduled for 1986 comes from its function in the proposed Strategic Defence Initiative. This means that for all the elevating rhetoric about the questing spirit, the fearless probe into the unknown, the determination to carry on "for their sake," the series of "missions" also involves the launch into space of conflicts and contests that are all too familiar and terrestrial. The spirit of adventure is one thing; but its outcome, in this context, is unlikely to be half so noble and altruistic as the comment on this unhappy event would have us believe. Thus, the conquest of the cosmos is a logical extension of struggles in a world whose very furthest corners have been penetrated by ideological wars. Indeed, mere dominion over the planet is no longer enough; nothing less than infinite space becomes the object of victory.

The images of the thrust into space do arouse in most of us contradictory responses: exaltation at human achievement, but at the same time a sense of violation by that brutal male symbol cleaving the skies. Outer space has become one of the most important metaphors in our culture: the drawings of even the youngest children are full of rockets, spacecraft, exploding meteors and unvisited planets, moonscapes and creatures from other worlds. Outer space remains the sole region unspoiled by the ravages of human beings. The reference in frontier ideology is to humankind's *"last* frontier," with its suggestion of a final chance for hope and optimism in a world that is being laid waste, and which faces the distinct possibility that it will be returned to the chaos from which the Creation was believed to have delivered it. This lesson was demonstrated by the annihilation of the frail human beings on board Challenger. The Daily Telegraph spelled it out: "Mid-air blast like A-bomb." The need to transcend the awesome idea that the earth could be made uninhabitable by our own actions gives a powerful impulse to the need to believe in human survival ouside this earth, *above* it, in the heavens, the empyrean; on a higher plane than this one. It is the idea of salvation; the purpose of the "mission." It is almost as though we feel we could blast our way to heaven.

There is at least one other important emotional charge carried by the notion of outer space: it offers a refuge from the cluttered, overburdened and colonised inner spaces, with their freight of consciousness — those places which at earlier times had offered respite from the horrors of the world. Outer space is a compensation for the decay of the life of the spirit, crowded out by the insistent materialism of all industrial societies, capitalist no less than socialist. It is the supreme escape route for the most escapist culture the world has ever produced.

In this way, religious quest and power politics are inextricably mingled: the elegiac recurrence to "the grief of a nation," "mourning," "keeping faith with those who died," "touching the face of God," helps to isolate only the purest elements from this complexity; something lucid and beautiful to be salvaged from the debris of the spacecraft scattered over so many miles of the Atlantic.

The impulse to "humanise space," as Christa McAuliffe declared her aim to be, is a valiant enterprise; but to humanise the vast chimera of Reagan's defensive shield around the earth, with its consequence of militarising the furthest reaches of space, cannot be humanised, for it is an unhuman project, and as fallible, no doubt, as the doomed voyage of Challenger. It is impossible not to observe the contrast between the images returned from Voyager II only a few days earlier of the mysterious milk-blue moons of Uranus and the cruel spectacle of destruction of Challenger. Voyager retains a proper sense of awe and respect for the universe, which is the very opposite of the act of hubris which underlies the purposes to which the space shuttle is being harnessed.

The following is an excerpt from
F.A.S. PUBLIC INTEREST REPORT
Journal of the Federation of American Scientists
Volume 38, No. 3, March 1985 (the concluding two paragraphs of the editorial by Jeremy J. Stone, Director, p. 2):

The Strategic Defense Initiative, insofar as it goes beyond prudential research to keep abreast of the impact of new technologies, is misconceived in every possible way. It addresses the wrong problem, gives every indication of making that problem worse, and makes inadvertent escalation in crises more likely rather than less.

The President, a political figure, is calling upon scientists to come up with a technological solution to what is, obviously, a political problem. No doubt many scientists will find it stimulating to work on these problems. No doubt, narrowly conceived, some of the problems put to them will eventually be solvable. But no amount of progress on the wrong road will help us to the right destination. Our goal is a world in which, by treaties and through psychological and political adjustment to the nuclear threat, the danger of nuclear war is moving steadily down rather than up.

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