

# THE BANALITY OF DETERRENCE

Just how many variations can the meaning of the word "deterrence" accommodate before it ceases to have any meaning at all?

BY MICHAEL BRYANS

HERE HAS GROWN UP AN enormous gap between the public use of the word "deterrence" – its everyday use in print and broadcast media and by governments explaining their policies – and whatever legitimacy it may have. The fact of this gap is not trivial; when meaning is slippery or vague, words become either useless, since they mean different things to different people, or dangerous; they can be used to manipulate discussion and distort intention.

The popular use of "deterrence" is now so banal as to raise serious questions about its meaning. Consider its infinite variability; it is a verb – you can deter ("discourage or hinder by fear") someone from doing something. It is a noun – you can own it yourself or like a garden hose borrow someone else's; and it is an adjective – as in "Canada must have a deterrent capability."

Deterrence is useful in all kinds of actual or impending military situations at all levels of conflict whether the weapons are missiles with nuclear warheads, speedboats full of enthusiastic soldiers, or even slingshots.

Deterrence even helps sell things: the British shipbuilding company Vickers runs newspaper advertisements extolling the virtues of its submarines in fulfilling the Canadian government's need to "deter intrusions into our waters."

The invention of nuclear weapons probably has a lot to do with the reason deterrence has such wide currency. It was apparent early on that H-bombs were not really useful to fight and win wars, but you could threaten a potential enemy with destruction in order to convince him to do what you wanted

or prevent him from doing something undesirable (like using nuclear weapons on you). While nations used threats in order to influence the decisions of adversaries all through history, nuclear weapons have transformed deterrence into a goal in itself.

This metamorphosis makes sense given the remarkable human capacity for making virtue of necessity. Since what we have with nuclear weapons *is* deterrence, a once rarely employed verb is now an object of desire – a tangible commodity that you can measure like gold or buggy whips. However, there are some academics taking a hard look at our notions of deterrence in a way that deserves serious attention from government and the public. Among this group of deterrence "revisionists" are Richard Ned Lebow of Cornell University and Janice Gross Stein of the University of Toronto. The power of their work comes from their return to the psychological roots of deterrence, using the evidence of historical events combined with what is known about how people make decisions and perceive the world around them. But what they are up against is more than just the muddled use of a handy concept, they are also (whether they realize it or not) confronting myths that are deeply rooted in popular culture.

AMONG NON-EXPERTS THERE ARE two primary – even primal – responses to the invocation of the word "deterrence." The first arises when thinking grownups are confronted with that most rarified form – "nuclear deterrence." At this level, deterrence is not only

entirely psychological but metaphysical as well, since the moment one carries through the threat (blowing up the world) the conflicting interests – however profound – cease to exist. This gives almost any discussion of nuclear deterrence an absurd quality. Fiction captures this lunacy most poignantly – the film *Dr. Strangelove* was so good it spawned an adjective, "Strangelovian," all its own.

More recently the British sitcom *Yes, Prime Minister* ventured into the deep water of deterrence. Here, the ever-scheming civil servant Sir Humphrey explains to the hapless Prime Minister Hacker why Britain must have new ballistic missile submarines (Trident) and how they can be used to frighten (deter) the Russians:

"With Trident we could obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe."

"I don't want to obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe."

"But, its a deterrent"

"It's a bluff, I probably wouldn't use it."

"Yes, but they don't know that you probably wouldn't"

"They probably do."

"Yes, they probably know that you probably wouldn't, but they can't certainly know."

"They probably certainly know that I probably wouldn't."

"Even though they probably certainly know that you probably wouldn't, they don't certainly know that although you probably wouldn't, there's no probability that you certainly would."

While this inspired satire is as lucid an explanation of nuclear deterrence as one is likely to find, *Yes, Prime Minister* is not the reaction governments explaining their policies count on. Instead,

they rely on being able to push another button in the minds of citizens – the one marked "bully in the playground." This reaction is as strong as the first and depends on the hard lessons of childhood.

Common sense tells adults who were child "victims" that looking and acting vulnerable earns the attentions of the bullies of the world. They know that if they had possessed the ability to inflict pain on their tormentors, life as a child would have been a lot easier. They also know that attempting to appease the bully usually failed. A "deterrent capability" in the form of a widely known ability to administer a sharp kick to a soft spot helped get one through the day.

When it comes to international politics, the "playground" caricature of deterrence is nowhere more powerfully etched into the collective memory than with the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the public Cuban missile fable the US catches the USSR at a dirty trick, and a calm, but resolute JFK stares down domineering yet feckless Russians, who, humiliated in world opinion and awed by overwhelming US nuclear superiority, slink home with their tails and missiles between their legs. DETERRENCE 1, APPEASEMENT 0!

In a stroke, we had proof that being tough with, and having more bombs than the Russians meant we could "deter" them from doing things we didn't like. Boy, those were the days.

The result of these and other "lessons" – the often repeated phrase about deterrence having kept the peace for forty years and the pointed analogies with Munich and Neville Chamberlain (the