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THE HUMAN FACTOR IN ACCIDENTAL WAR

The fifth and final day of the conference was devoted to a discussion of the role played by human error in creating a risk of accidental war. A central theme was the difficulty experienced by military and political institutions in weeding out substandard performers from positions of nuclear responsibility. A second theme was the problem of leadership performance in cases of extended deterrence.

Presentations were given by Dr. Bruce Russett and Mr. Paul Huth, Dr. Lloyd Dumas, Dr. Dean Babst, and Drs. Luc de Seguin and Michel Haag. The commentators were General Mikhail Milstein and Dr. Russell Leng.

Lloyd Dumas argued in his paper that human operators were an integral part of the nuclear military system and that they behaved in specific ways which introduced an element of unpredictability.

Individual components of the system can be tested fairly readily, but as they are combined into complex systems it becomes less and less feasible to test them under realistic operating conditions. We cannot start a nuclear war in order to make predictions about the system's reliability.

Dumas pointed out that the behavioural sciences are notoriously weak in their ability to predict; he used his own field, economics, as an example. Economics is supposed to be the study of the most rationally-driven of all human activities, yet economists have difficulty in predicting the behaviour of the economy. Thus, disciplines such as psychology and sociology, which deal with emotional as well as rational behaviour, are even less likely to make firm predictions. Yet it is they, rather than economics, which are most relevant to the behaviour of the human operators of nuclear weapons. No behavioural science has yet approached the natural sciences or engineering in its ability to make predictions.

Dumas outlined several aspects of the problem of human reliability in the nuclear military. He showed that alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness were present among military personnel, described how working conditions could adversely affect the behaviour of employees, and gave details of the way in which hierarchy and bureaucracy could reduce human reliability. While he used mainly US examples, since Soviet examples were rarely available, he suggested that there was every reason to believe that Soviet problems were as bad, if not worse.

Because alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness are widespread in the population as a whole, it is impossible to completely screen these problems out of a large organization such as the military. A 1982 US Department of Defense worldwide survey of drug and alcohol abuse among US military personnel estimated that: