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PEACE AND SECURITY

DEC 22 1986

Number 2

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October 1986

## NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND THE AVERTING OF WAR

by Robert W. Malcolmson

*"We have made a thing, a most terrible weapon, that has altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the world."*

J. Robert Oppenheimer,  
physicist,  
November 1945.

*"By adding to the horror of war and therefore to the attractiveness of peace, the discovery of the atomic bomb will aid instead of hinder the diplomacy of peace."*

Jacob Viner,  
economist,  
November 1945.<sup>1</sup>

### THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

One of the wisest judgements ever made about nuclear weapons came early in the Cold War. The author was George Kennan, an influential official in the US State Department who, in the winter of 1949-1950, was about to resign his position. Kennan raised, in a trenchant manner, the question of the role of nuclear weapons in US security policy. There was, he said, one crucial question: "Are we to rely upon weapons of mass destruction as an integral and vitally important component of our military strength, which we would expect to employ deliberately, immediately, and unhesitatingly in the event that we become involved in a military conflict with the Soviet Union? Or are we to retain such weapons in our national arsenal only as a deterrent to the use of similar weapons against ourselves or our allies and as a possible means of retaliation in case they are used?" There was no doubt that *some* nuclear weapons would be retained. "The problem is: for what purpose, and against the background of what subjective attitude, are we to develop such weapons and to train our forces in their use?"<sup>2</sup>

If the role of weapons of mass destruction were strictly deterrent-retaliatory, then their numbers could be limited in accordance with their modest and limited role. The objective would be simply to deter nuclear use by another nuclear power. A large nuclear stockpile would clearly be redundant. If, on the other hand, the intention was, as Kennan put it, "to use weapons of mass destruction deliberately and prior to their use against us or our allies, in a future war, then our purpose is presumably to inflict maximum destruction on . . . the enemy, with the least expenditure of effort. . . . In this case, the only limitations on the number and power of mass destruction weapons which we would wish to develop would presumably be those of ordinary military economy, such as cost, efficiency, and ease of delivery."<sup>3</sup>

It was the latter position that triumphed overwhelmingly, not only in Washington, but also in the capitals of its allies. There was, in fact, during these formative years, a pronounced *nuclearization* of American defence policy. Nuclear weapons emerged as the centrepiece of Washington's national security policy. They were seen as an alternative to universal military training, which was highly unpopular; they were cheaper than other kinds of firepower and thus attractive to fiscal conservatives; and they allowed America to play from strength—the strength of its sophisticated technology and innovative industry—as against Soviet manpower in the form of the Red Army. As the Cold War intensified, increasing reliance was placed on the alleged deterrent power of nuclear weapons and on their supposed value in restraining and perhaps combating Communism. Communism, it was agreed, had to be contained; containment, from around 1950, was increasingly construed in terms of military might (as distinct from political and economic vitality); and the most robust and trouble-free bulwark of freedom was said to be the threat of nuclear use, notably nuclear first-use. The goal was clear:

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