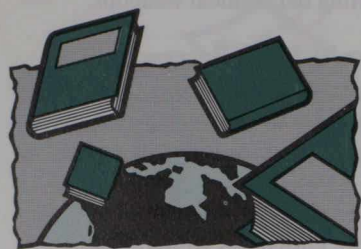


REVIEWS



Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance

Richard K. Betts

Washington D.C.: *The Brookings
Institution*, 1987, 240 pgs.,
US \$28.95 cloth

■ Of what use are nuclear weapons in deciding confrontations involving the great powers? Does the nuclear balance of power play a role in deciding the outcome of these confrontations? How does the balance influence the propensity of decision-makers to consider using nuclear weapons or to threaten adversaries with their use? These questions lie at the heart of this study of nuclear diplomacy by Richard Betts. For answers, Betts draws on recently de-classified US government documents, and surveys over a dozen cases in which the superpowers considered using nuclear weapons or engaged in nuclear brinkmanship. The results are often surprising as well as sobering.

Betts finds that the inclinations of US leaders or their chief advisors to introduce nuclear threats into military confrontations have never been strongly tied to whatever the nuclear balance was at the time. He points out that US officials have never been confident that the balance was so favourable as to prevent the enemy from inflicting crippling damage on the West if nuclear war started. In general, US decision-makers have been unwilling to think through whether they would escalate to nuclear conflict much less address the consequences if they did. Nevertheless, the importance of the political stakes and interests perceived to be involved in such conflicts has often prompted these same leaders to resort to nuclear threats.

This uneasy combination of vulnerability and political necessity has conditioned US nuclear brinkmanship – giving it a hesitant, often tentative quality. Frequently vague and elliptical in character, US nuclear threats often fall, according to the author, “halfway between shifty bluff and stark blackmail.”

Whether American nuclear diplomacy was effective, and whether the nuclear balance influenced the behaviour of US adversaries, are questions which the author concedes defy strong conclusions – particularly in the absence of data on Soviet and Chinese decision-making. Still, Betts indicates that both Chinese and Soviet leaders seem to have placed greater importance on the balance than their American counterparts, and have behaved accordingly. Particularly noteworthy is his observation that while Soviet stakes in many of the conflicts surveyed were not necessarily inferior to those of the US, the relatively “accommodative” tendencies which the Soviets displayed in crisis situations began to wane only with the passing of US nuclear superiority in the early 1970s. Indeed, Betts sees far less evidence of the Soviets being impressed with US nuclear leverage since that time.

Betts’ findings are clearly disturbing. Parity in nuclear capability seems to have instilled greater confidence in Soviet leaders to stand firm in confrontations, but has failed to eliminate the possibility of the US resorting to nuclear threats to protect interests it sees as vital. Not only does this hold open the possibility of a future superpower confrontation, but also the danger that when it occurs neither side will back down easily and accept defeat – particularly if the relative stakes involved are unclear. Consequently, Betts recommends that in future, the US nuclear sword must be used more sparingly, and only in the most

dire circumstances. Although American nuclear guarantees to NATO and Japan are still acceptable, military confrontation in all other regions should be dealt with largely through the use of improved conventional capabilities.

While Betts has done well in examining the efficacy of nuclear threats in securing immediate foreign policy objectives, he has unduly neglected the possible effects which superpower nuclear diplomacy may have had on longer-term goals. How, for instance, have examples of superpower nuclear brinkmanship influenced other states on the question of whether to acquire their own nuclear arsenals? The answer to such a question would add a great deal to the author’s already incisive observations regarding the dangers of nuclear diplomacy.

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A General for Peace

Leonard V. Johnson

Toronto: *James Lorimer*, 1987,
176 pgs., \$16.95 paper

■ Len Johnson, retired major-general and recently declared contender for a New Democratic Party nomination in the next Federal election, has written a book about how sweet it is to make a living flying airplanes, how frustrating to be a staff officer in the military, and how important to find a better system for international security than nuclear deterrence.

It is the last topic that gives the book its authority but the author’s early life and military career comprise more than half its content. His delight in flying is frequently in evidence, including later years when the reader encounters such statements of quiet pride as “I flew all the airplanes in [my] command.”

Like most career officers he roundly castigates Paul Hellyer for the damage done to the services by unification. Later, when the risk of Canadian troops being used in combat increased as a result of the

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Major-General (as he was by then) Johnson was probably the only military officer whose frustration over inadequate measures to improve the sad state of the forces led him to write personally to political party leaders, MPs, relatives, friends, retired officers and everyone else he could think of, urging a substantial and immediate increase in defence spending. Canadian military officers just don’t do that sort of thing – the maverick streak was already in evidence.

His views on purely military matters have not changed very much; it is on deeper issues of policy and strategic security that he has since broken ranks with many of his peers although even here some nuances have apparently been missed by his critics.

I was one of his three directors at the National Defence College when, as Commandant, Johnson was undergoing the private soul searching that led to his decision to become a full-time peace worker upon retirement. One of the central messages we attempted to impart to course members at the College was the dangers of what we termed ethnocentrism: the inevitable distortions that come from seeing the world entirely from a Canadian perspective. We didn’t know then that the most apt student was our own leader.

Johnson now believes that the military confrontation between East and West is caused primarily by misperceptions on both sides and true security can only result from better mutual understanding. Those who already realize that there is no deliberate threat either way can confidently call for measures of arms reduction, disarmament and exclusively defensive military doctrine such as no-first-use of nuclear weapons, the removal of foreign-based troops and abolition of NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization.

Johnson’s programme for Canada is described briefly in the last pages of the book. He calls for a