

MORAL VIRTUE AND NUCLEAR STRATEGY

The American disposition to moralize nuclear politics at the expense of realistic analysis has undermined the security of the West.

BY ROBERT W. MALCOLMSON

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE Cold War, in the early 1950s, the distinguished political scientist and exponent of "realism," Hans Morgenthau, pointed to a crucial dimension of US foreign policy. He said of his government: "We have acted on the international scene, as all nations must, in power-political terms; but we have tended to conceive of our actions in non-political, moralistic terms." This has not been simply a matter of treating one's own intentions kindly, an understandable and virtually universal conceit. Rather, it has involved a persistent inclination to *moralize* relations of power at the expense of realistic analysis. This moralizing, however comforting in the short term, has not served the West well.

Weapons of destruction are inherently amoral. They acquire "moral" significance only contextually and as instruments of political purpose. This has always been so. Nuclear weapons are novel in only one fundamental respect: They make mass killing spectacularly easy. There is no longer any technical constraint on the capacity to kill. The power to destroy is so unlimited – so unbounded, so expansive, so nearly instantaneous – that no defence is possible. Indeed, in the face of such lethal power the notion of "defence" has no meaning. Destruction has become so easy that unilateral defence in any meaningful sense is not simply difficult, it is logically impossible (barring perfection). This is the new technological reality of the late twentieth century. It has nothing to do with morality, religion, or any other values.

The West got a head start in the possession of weapons of mass destruction. Air power was a traditional Anglo-American strength and saturation bombing was central to the Western Allies' conduct of the Second World War. The USSR and (for a while) Germany had strength on the ground, but overwhelming air-superiority was enjoyed by the West. The atomic bomb reinforced this American commitment to a security policy premised on the pre-eminence of air power. Given the mailed fist of postwar Stalinism, the policy of containment primarily through air-atomic supremacy seemed to most citizens in the United States and the rest of the West to be warranted, convenient (it was relatively cheap), coherent, and in the light of Stalin's tyranny, at least adequately moral.

Serious problems only arose when, as scientists and a few others had predicted in 1945, the capacity for massive destruction spread quickly from West to East. Air-atomic supremacy lasted for less than a generation. The Americans didn't lose this supremacy; the Soviets took it from them, and there was nothing that Washington could have done about this development, aside from launching a preventive war. The newly-discovered ease of killing meant that the details of weapons systems lost much of their importance, for the essential mutuality of vulnerability was not (and still is not) amenable to purely technical change. The goal of "technological superiority," though still espoused rhetorically, was largely drained of political-strategic significance. The USSR created for itself essentially the

same destructive capacities as the United States had. On this level it became an equal. But in most other respects, in American eyes, it remained unequal and inferior, especially in terms of its intentions and "morality."

HERE, THEN, WAS THE SOURCE OF much befuddlement. The Soviet Union had once been seen as inferior in both intentions and capabilities. This congruence served to simplify policy-formation. But how should Washington deal with a rival great power that had overcome the latter liability but was still perceived by many Americans as being beyond the moral pale?

In response to the emerging reality of Soviet nuclear might there was a kind of bifurcation in American thinking. One tradition took shape that accepted Soviet nuclear capability as a fact of life. This capability was seen as a given that could be neither wished away, nor defeated, nor in any meaningful sense overcome; it could only be offset. Whatever America's views of the men in the Kremlin and their domestic agenda, it was argued, the state they ruled possessed the power to command political respect abroad. Moral preferences were, for the most part, irrelevant to one's understanding of this relationship of power between mighty states. The point was to manage the relationship prudently and to prevent it from degenerating into the sort of cataclysmic war that now loomed large as an ever-present possibility. The nuclear threat (known as "our deterrent"), according to this view, was inescapable but insufficient; this weaponry would have to be supplemented by arms control, agreements for mutual restraint,

and other strategies of collaboration for survival. Moreover, there were signs, it was said, that Moscow had come to similar conclusions and was shedding crude Stalinism in favour of policies of peaceful (though still competitive) coexistence.

The other dominant outlook rejected or at least depreciated these conclusions. In most respects it was a continuation of the Cold War thinking that had flourished during the early 1950s and which embraced a deeply Manichaean view of the world. The starting point for these thinkers and their followers was not power but morality. Their political arguments were normally framed primarily in terms of values, and "freedom" was the value most often mentioned. Values – or at least certain values – were and are at the centre of world politics, not material interests or self-centred ambitions or embodiments of physical power. The world, according to this view, is the arena for a kind of moral struggle, a contest between incompatible value-systems. Nuclear weapons are seen to derive their political meaning, not so much from their intrinsic lethality, but rather from the presumed moral purposes of their possessors.

THIS MORALIZED CONCEPTION OF nuclear weaponry was enunciated before World War II had even ended. On 9 August 1945 President Truman, in a radio address, said to his countrymen: "We must constitute ourselves trustees of this new force – to prevent its misuse, and to turn it into the channels of service to mankind. It is an awful responsibility which has come to us. We thank God that it