

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

**Nuclear Weapons: Ours and Theirs**

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## **Nuclear Weapons: Ours and Theirs**

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The future of U.S. nuclear forces faces a very serious challenge. The anti-nuclear lobby in Washington has been bolstered by new activists with a new set of arguments. The new activists are important because some, such as the former head of U.S. Strategic Command, General Lee Butler, seemingly have impeccable credentials on the subject of nuclear weapons.

There are at least three reasons to respond vigorously and publicly to the new anti-nuclear activists. First, unless a coolly reasoned response is presented, their agenda will appear to be the only game in town. Second, contrary to the hopes of senior bureaucrats in the Pentagon, anti-nuclear activism will not “just go away”—it is too politically fashionable and too well financed by liberal foundations for that happy outcome. Third, available evidence demonstrates persuasively that the new anti-nuclear arguments suffer from gross errors of fact and logic. The error of each can easily be demonstrated.

Argument 1: For the post-Cold War era, deterrence of regional aggressors such as Iraq is the most obvious mission. Yet “everyone knows” that U.S. nuclear threats are incredible for regional deterrence, and incredible threats do not deter. Why continue to pay the price—economically and politically—for a useless nuclear deterrent?

Reality: The U.S. nuclear deterrent can be credible, and extraordinarily valuable. During the Gulf War Saddam Hussein did not use the chemical or biological weapons available to him, according to senior Iraqi civilian and military wartime leaders, because of the U.S. (and possibly Israeli) *nuclear* deterrent. During the war, Bush Administration officials made several implicit nuclear threats, and Saddam found those threats to be sufficiently credible to be deterred. At least some regional aggressors will judge U.S. nuclear threats to be credible, and deterrence “working” on those occasions could save hundreds of thousands of lives.

Argument 2: U.S. deterrent requirements can be met by advanced conventional forces alone. Why rely on nuclear deterrence when conventional forces are adequate?

Reality: Some aggressors are willing to take great risks and accept great costs. In such cases only very severe threats provide the possibility for deterrence. Nuclear weapons serve that purpose. This is not speculation. During the Gulf War, Iraqi leaders told their American counterparts and demonstrated by their actions that they would not bow to U.S. conventional threats. Implicit U.S. nuclear threats, however, had an altogether more deterring effect. As U.S. troops increasingly confront the risk of chemical and biological attack, the value of nuclear deterrence will grow.

In addition, conventional weapons cannot replace nuclear weapons. Even the most advanced conventional forces remain incapable of destroying some targets with certainty, such as underground chemical or biological weapons storage sites. Because a prompt and certain threat to such targets is necessary, so are nuclear weapons.

Argument 3: The U.S. nuclear deterrent promotes nuclear proliferation by “legitimizing” a role for nuclear weapons. U.S. nuclear disarmament will help prevent proliferation by demonstrating the lack of value Washington attaches to nuclear forces.

Reality: Developing countries simply do not take their cues from Washington with regard to nuclear weapons. As India’s recent series of nuclear tests clearly demonstrates, foreign leaders reach their own conclusions about the value of nuclear weapons for their particular security concerns. Anti-nuclear, non-proliferation moralizing in Washington hardly is persuasive to foreign leaders who view nuclear weapons as their security guarantee in a dangerous world.

In fact, U.S. deep nuclear reductions would likely encourage proliferation among both friends and foes. Political leaders in key allied countries, such as Japan and South Korea, have explicitly stated that if they no longer can rely on the U.S. “nuclear umbrella,” their countries will be compelled to “go nuclear.” German military experts have made the same point. It is difficult to imagine a greater spur to nuclear proliferation than reduced confidence in U.S. nuclear guarantees.

In addition, at relatively high U.S. nuclear force levels, regional great powers can have little hope of successfully competing with the United States. Deep reductions in the U.S. arsenal could, however, offer the vision of nuclear superpower status for challengers who otherwise could entertain no such a hope. U.S. policy should provide no such encouragement.

Argument 4: The United States can drastically reduce its nuclear arsenal without undermining its deterrent.

Reality: No one knows how many nuclear weapons of what type are necessary for deterrence. No one can possibly know what will be necessary to deter an unfamiliar future aggressor, from taking unknown actions, involving unknown stakes, at an unknown future time. Prospective aggressors themselves probably do not know what would deter them because the necessary severity of a threat almost certainly changes over time, depending on the circumstances. Deterring Hitler in 1937, for example, probably would have been a much different proposition than deterring him in early 1941, or in his bunker in 1945. The U.S. nuclear arsenal may be called upon to deter a wide spectrum of future possible aggressors—from the highly determined and confident to the desperate. Given the potential stakes involved, this is not an issue to risk error on the low side. Faltering U.S. will in this area and low force numbers could easily combine to encourage challengers who otherwise would remain quiescent.

In addition, at very low force numbers, U.S. threat options become limited. It is no coincidence that, when pressed, those who advocate drastic nuclear reductions, such as former CIA head Stansfeld Turner, speak only of threatening an opponent's cities. Cities are easy targets—big, soft, and relatively few in number. A very modest nuclear arsenal can, in fact, threaten cities. Effectively constraining the U.S. nuclear threat to “city-busting,” however, is as morally repugnant as it sounds and may not be an effective deterrent.

Argument 5: The threat of an accidental, mistaken or unauthorized Russian missile launch is most serious. To address this threat U.S. forces should be taken off alert, or off their “hair trigger.” The Russians, following this friendly example, may then take their own forces off alert, reducing the chances for a mistaken launch. Safety can be strengthened in this fashion with no regrets because the deterrent role for nuclear weapons is now so limited.

Reality: Russia has recently placed greater, not less reliance on nuclear deterrence. On December 17, 1997, for example, President Yeltsin signed Decree 1300, the new blueprint for Russian security. This blueprint places extraordinary reliance on nuclear weapons for the deterrence of nuclear, conventional, and regional threats. Russian conventional forces are in such a state of disrepair that Moscow feels compelled to rely increasingly on nuclear deterrence. This situation is unlikely to change for years. To suggest that under these circumstances Moscow would follow Washington in real “de-alerting” to ease U.S. fears of accidental launch is nonsense. Far more reasonable to guard against this possibility is limited National Missile Defense.

In addition, the U.S. deterrent must be as foolproof as we can make it. “De-alerting” our nuclear forces could easily undermine their deterrent effect. The

weeks-to-months long delay in their availability if de-alerted could easily encourage a challenger by lending credence to a strategy of presenting Washington with a *fait accompli*, as the Japanese and Hitler hoped in 1941 and as Saddam hoped in 1990.

In conclusion, the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons is attractive. Some civilian leaders in Washington like this vision because it offers feel-good politics and they do not comprehend the cost. Playing politics with nuclear disarmament, however, is irresponsible even by Washington standards. Let's move beyond the five bogus arguments of the new anti-nuclear activists, recognize that nuclear weapons remain critical to the U.S. deterrent, and understand that some foreign leaders will seek them for their deterrent value, just as we did.