

DEATH BY DETERRENCE

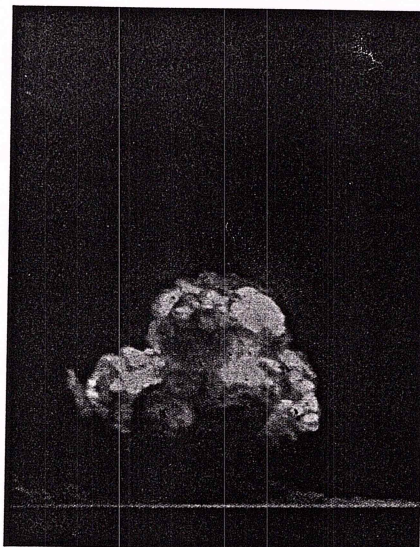
GENERAL LEE
BUTLER

I HAVE TWO ROLES to serve this afternoon. I intend to address two matters that go to the heart of the debate over the role of nuclear weapons: why these artifacts of the cold war continue to hold us in thrall; and the severe penalties and risks entailed by policies of deterrence as practised in the nuclear age.

It is distressingly evident that for many people nuclear weapons retain an aura of utility, of primacy and of legitimacy that justifies their existence well into the future. The persistence of this view, which is perfectly reflected in the recently announced modification of US nuclear weapons policy, lies at the core of the concern that moves me so deeply. This abiding faith in nuclear weapons was inspired and is sustained by a catechism instilled over many decades by a priesthood which speaks with great assurance and authority. I was for many years among the most avid of these keepers of the faith in nuclear weapons. Like my contemporaries, I was moved by fears and fired by beliefs that date back to the earliest days of the atomic era. We lived through a terror-ridden epoch punctuated by crises whose resolution held hostage the saga of humankind. For us, nuclear weapons were the saviour that brought an implacable foe to his knees in 1945 and held another at bay for nearly half a century. We believed that superior technology brought strategic advantage, that greater numbers meant stronger security, and that the ends of containment justified whatever means were necessary to achieve them.

These are powerful beliefs. They cannot be lightly dismissed. Strong arguments can be made on their behalf. Throughout my professional military career, I shared them, I professed them and I put them into operational practice. And now it is my burden to declare with all of the

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The First Atomic Bomb

PHOTOGRAPH: JACK AEBY

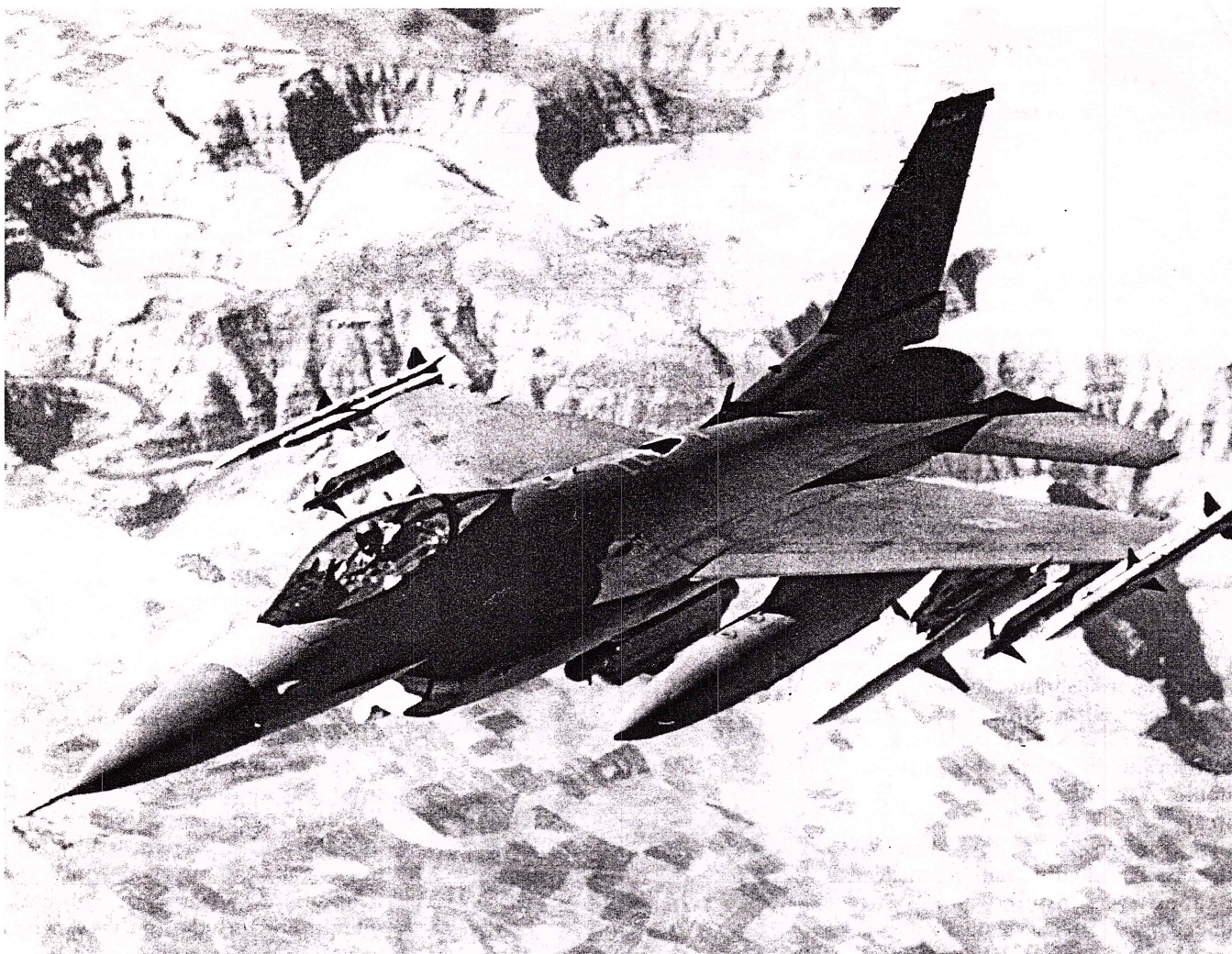
conviction I can muster that in my judgement they served us extremely ill. They account for the most severe risks and most extravagant costs of the US-Soviet confrontation. They intensified and prolonged an already acute ideological animosity. They spawned successive generations of new and more destructive nuclear devices and delivery systems. They gave rise to mammoth bureaucracies with gargantuan appetites and global agendas. They incited primal emotions, spurred zealotry and demagoguery, and set in motion forces of ungovernable scope and power. Most importantly, these enduring beliefs, and the fears that underlie them, perpetuate cold-war policies and practices that make no strategic sense. They continue to entail enormous costs and expose all

humankind to unconscionable dangers. I find that intolerable. Thus I cannot stay silent. I know too much of these matters: the frailties, the flaws, the failures of policy and practice.

THE MOMENT I entered the nuclear arena I knew I had been thrust into a world beset with tidal forces, towering egos, maddening contradictions, alien constructs and insane risks. Its arcane vocabulary and apocalyptic calculus defied comprehension. Its stage was global and its antagonists locked in a deadly spiral of deepening rivalry. It was in every respect a modern-day holy war, a cosmic struggle between the forces of light and darkness. The stakes were national survival, and the weapons of choice were eminently suited to this scale of malevolence.

As my own career progressed, I was immersed in the work of all these cultures, either directly in those of the Western world, or through penetrating study of communist organizations, teachings and practices. My responsibilities ranged from the highly subjective, such as assessing the values and motivation of Soviet leadership, to the critically objective, such as preparing weapons for operational launch. I was engaged in the labyrinthian conjecture of the strategist, the exacting routines of the target planner and the demanding skills of the aircrew and the missileer. I have been a party to their history, shared their triumphs and tragedies, witnessed heroic sacrifice and catastrophic failure of both men and machines. And in the end I came away from it all with profound misgivings.

Ultimately, as I examined the course of this journey, as the lessons of decades of intimate involvement took greater hold on my intellect, I came to a set of deeply unsettling judgements. That from the earliest days of the nuclear era, the risks



US bomber dominating the landscape

PHOTOGRAPH: VINCENT PARKER / PA NEWS

and consequences of nuclear war have never been properly weighed by those who brandished it. That the stakes of nuclear war engage not just the survival of the antagonists, but the fate of humankind. That the likely consequences of nuclear war have no politically, militarily or morally acceptable justification. And, therefore, that the threat to use nuclear weapons is indefensible.

These judgements gave rise to an array of inescapable questions. If this be so, what explained the willingness, no, the zeal, of legions of cold warriors, civilian and military, not just to tolerate but to multiply and to perpetuate such risks? By what authority do succeeding generations of leaders in the nuclear weapons states usurp the power to dictate the odds of continued life on our planet? Most urgently, why does such breathtaking audacity persist at a moment when we should stand trembling in the face of our folly and united in our commitment to

abolish its most deadly manifestation?

These are not questions to be left to historians. The answers matter to us now. They go to the heart of present-day policies and motivations. They convey lessons with immediate implications for both contemporary and aspiring nuclear states. As I distil them from the experience of three decades in the nuclear arena, these lessons resolve into two fundamental conclusions.

First, I have no other way to understand the willingness to condone nuclear weapons except to believe they are the natural accomplice of visceral enmity. They thrive in the emotional climate born of utter alienation and isolation. The unbounded wantonness of their effects is a perfect companion to the urge to destroy completely. They play on our deepest fears and pander to our darkest instincts. They corrode our sense of humanity, numb our capacity for moral outrage, and make

thinkable the unimaginable. What is anguishingly clear is that these fears and enmities are no respecter of political systems or values. They prey on democracies and totalitarian societies alike, shrinking the norms of civilized behaviour and dimming the prospects for escaping the savagery so powerfully imprinted in our genetic code. That should give us great pause as we imagine the task of abolition in a world that gives daily witness to acts of unspeakable barbarism. So should it compound our resolve.

THE EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT this conclusion is palpable, but, as I said at the outset of these remarks, for much of my life I saw it differently. That was a product of both my citizenry and my profession. From the early years of my childhood and through much of my military service I saw the Soviet Union and its allies as a demonic threat, an evil empire bent on global domination. I was

commissioned as an officer in the United States Air Force as the cold war was heating to a fever pitch. This was a desperate time that evoked on both sides extreme responses in policy, in technology and in force postures: bloody purges and political inquisitions; covert intelligence schemes that squandered lives and subverted governments; atmospheric testing with little understanding or regard for the long-term effects; threats of massive nuclear retaliation to an ill-defined scope of potential provocations; the forced march of inventive genius that ushered in the missile age arm-in-arm with the capacity for spontaneous, global destruction; reconnaissance aircraft that probed or violated sovereign airspace, producing disastrous encounters; the menacing and perilous practice of airborne alert bombers loaded with nuclear weapons.

By the early 1960s, a superpower nuclear arms race was underway that would lead to a ceaseless amassing of destructive capacity, spilling over into the arsenals of other nations. Central Europe became a powder keg trembling under the shadow of Armageddon, hostage to a bizarre strategy that required the prospect of nuclear devastation as the price of alliance. The entire world became a stage for the US-Soviet rivalry. International organizations were paralysed by its grip. East-West confrontation dominated the nation-state system. Every quarrel and conflict was fraught with potential for global war.

This was the world that largely defined our lives as American citizens. For those of us who served in the national security arena, the threat was omnipresent, it seemed total, it dictated our professional preparation and career progression, and cost the lives of tens of thousands of men and women, in and out of uniform. Like millions of others, I was caught up in the holy war, inured to its costs and consequences, trusting in the wisdom of succeeding generations of military and civilian leaders. The first requirement of unconditional belief in the efficacy of nuclear weapons was early and perfectly met for us: our homeland was the target of a consuming evil, poised to strike without warning and without mercy.

For all of my years as a nuclear

strategist, operational commander and public spokesman, I explained, justified and sustained America's massive nuclear arsenal as a function, a necessity and a consequence of deterrence. Bound up in this singular term, this familiar touchstone of security dating back to antiquity, was the intellectually comforting and deceptively simple justification for taking the most extreme risks and the expenditure of trillions of dollars. It was our shield and by extension our sword. The nuclear priesthood extolled its virtues and bowed to its demands. Allies yielded grudgingly to its dictates even while decrying its risks and costs. We brandished it at our enemies and presumed they embraced its suicidal corollary of mutually assured destruction. We ignored, discounted or dismissed its flaws and cling still to the belief that deterrence is valid in a world whose security architecture has been wholly transformed.

BUT NOW I SEE IT differently. Not in some blinding revelation, but at the end of a journey, in an age of deliverance from the consuming tensions of the cold war. Now, with the evidence more clear, the risks more sharply defined and the costs more fully understood, I see deterrence in a very different light. Appropriated from the lexicon of conventional warfare, this simple prescription for adequate military preparedness became in the nuclear age a formula for unmitigated catastrophe. It was premised on a litany of unwarranted assumptions, unprovable assertions and logical contradictions. It suspended rational thinking about the ultimate aim of national security: to ensure the survival of the nation.

How is it that we subscribed to a strategy that required near perfect understanding of an enemy from whom we were deeply alienated and largely isolated? How could we pretend to understand the motivations and intentions of the Soviet leadership without any substantive personal association? Why did we imagine that a nation which had survived successive invasions and mind-numbing losses would accede to a strategy premised on fear of nuclear war? Deterrence in the cold-war setting was fatally flawed at the most fundamental level of human psychology in its projection of Western

reason through the crazed lens of a paranoid foe. Little wonder that intentions and motives were consistently misread. Little wonder that deterrence was the first victim of a deepening crisis, leaving the antagonists to grope fearfully in a fog of mutual misperception. While we clung to the notion that nuclear war could be reliably deterred, Soviet leaders derived from their historical experience the conviction that such a war might be thrust upon them and if so, must not be lost. Driven by that fear, they took Herculean measures to fight and survive no matter the odds or the costs. Deterrence was a dialogue of the blind with the deaf. In the final analysis it was largely a bargain we in the West made with ourselves.

Deterrence was flawed equally in that the consequences of its failure were intolerable. While the price of undeterred aggression in the age of uniquely conventional weaponry could be severe, history teaches that nations can survive and even prosper in the aftermath of unconditional defeat. Not so in the nuclear era. Nuclear weapons give no quarter. Their effects transcend time and place, poisoning the Earth and deforming its inhabitants for generation upon generation. They leave us wholly without defence, expunge all hope for meaningful survival. They hold in their sway not just the fate of nations, but the very meaning of civilization.

Deterrence failed completely as a guide in setting rational limits on the size and composition of military forces. To the contrary, its appetite was voracious, its capacity to justify new weapons and larger stocks unrestrained. Deterrence carried the seed, born of an irresolvable internal contradiction, that spurred an insatiable arms race.

I WAS PART OF ALL THAT. I was present at the creation of many of these systems, directly responsible for prescribing and justifying the requirements and technology that made them possible. I saw the arms race from the inside, watched as intercontinental ballistic missiles ushered in mutually assured destruction and multiple warhead missiles introduced genuine fear of a nuclear first strike. I participated in the elaboration of basing schemes that bordered on the comical and force

levels that in retrospect defied reason. I was responsible for war plans with over 12,000 targets, many struck with repeated nuclear blows, some to the point of complete absurdity. I was a veteran participant in an arena where the most destructive power ever unleashed became the prize in a no-holds-barred competition among organizations whose principal interest was to enhance rather than constrain its application. And through every corridor, in every impassioned plea, in every fevered debate rang the rallying cry, deterrence, deterrence, deterrence.

Deterrence is a slippery conceptual slope. It is not stable, nor is it static; its wiles cannot be contained. It is both master and slave. It seduces the scientist yet bends to his creation. It serves the ends of evil as well as those of noble intent. It holds guilty the innocent as well as the culpable. It gives easy semantic cover to nuclear weapons, masking the horrors of employment with siren veils of infallibility. At best it is a gamble no mortal should pretend to make. At worst it invokes death on a scale rivalling the power of the creator.

Is it any wonder that at the end of my journey I am moved so strongly to retrace its path, to examine more closely the evidence I would not or could not see? I hear now the voices long ignored, the warnings muffled by the still-lingering animosities of the cold war. I see with painful clarity that from the very beginnings of the nuclear era, the objective scrutiny and searching debate essential to adequate comprehension and responsible oversight of its vast enterprises were foreshortened or foregone. The cold light of dispassionate scrutiny was shuttered in the name of security, doubts dismissed in the name of an acute and unrelenting threat, objections overruled by the incantations of the nuclear priesthood.

The penalties proved to be severe. Vitally important decisions were routinely taken without adequate understanding, assertions too often prevailed over analysis, requirements took on organizational biases, technological opportunity and corporate profit drove force levels and capability, and political op-

portunism intruded on calculations of military necessity. Authority and accountability were severed, policy dissociated from planning, and theory invalidated by practice. The narrow concerns of a multitude of powerful interests intruded on the rightful role of key policy-makers, constraining their latitude for decision. Many were simply denied access to critical information essential to the proper exercise of their office.

Over time, planning was increasingly distanced and ultimately disconnected from any sense of scientific or military reality. In the end, the nuclear powers, great and small, created astronomically expen-



US nuclear rocket

PHOTOGRAPH: RENE BURRI / MAGNUM

sive infrastructures, monolithic bureaucracies and complex processes that defied control or comprehension. Only now are the dimensions, costs and risks of these nuclear nether worlds coming to light. What must now be better understood are the root causes, the mindsets and the belief systems that brought them into existence. They must be challenged, they must be refuted, but most importantly, they must be let go.

SAD TO SAY, the cold war lives on in the minds of those who cannot let go the fears, the beliefs, and the enmities born of the nuclear age. They cling to deterrence, clutch its tattered promise to their breast, shake it wistfully at bygone adversaries and balefully at new or imagined ones. They are gripped still by its awful willingness not simply to tempt the apocalypse but to prepare its way.

What better illustration of mis-

placed faith in nuclear deterrence than the persistent belief that retaliation with nuclear weapons is a legitimate and appropriate response to post-cold-war threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. What could possibly justify our resort to the very means we properly abhor and condemn? Who can imagine our joining in shattering the precedent of non-use that has held for over fifty years? How could America's irreplaceable role as leader of the campaign against nuclear proliferation ever be re-justified? What target would warrant such retaliation? Would we hold an entire society accountable for the decision of a single demented leader? How would the physical effects of the nuclear explosion be contained, not to mention the political and moral consequences? In a singular act we would martyr our enemy, alienate our friends, give comfort to the non-declared nuclear states and impetus to states who seek such weapons covertly. In short, such a response on the part of the United States is inconceivable. And as a nation we have no greater responsibility than to bring the nuclear era to a close. Our present policies, plans and postures governing nuclear weapons make us prisoner still to an age of intolerable danger.

We cannot at once keep sacred the miracle of existence and hold sacrosanct the capacity to destroy it. We cannot hold hostage to sovereign gridlock the keys to final deliverance from the nuclear nightmare. We cannot withhold the resources essential to break its grip, to reduce its dangers. We cannot sit in silent acquiescence to the faded homilies of the nuclear priesthood. It is time to reassert the primacy of individual conscience, the voice of reason and the rightful interests of humanity. ●

General Lee Butler was Commander-in-Chief of the United States Strategic Command Offnut Air Base, Nebraska. He had the responsibility for all US Air Force and Navy strategic nuclear forces. He retired in 1994.

The above article is an edited extract from a speech given to the National Press Club, USA.