

# Indignation, influence and strategic studies

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In his Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of Military Studies at King's College in January 1927, Sir Frederick Maurice developed his case for equipping 'the young men who came to our great universities with the ambition to take part in public life' with the means of studying war:

No one has ever suggested that epidemic disease or pauperism or any other such evil could be abolished or reduced without an examination of the causes, or application of the remedies by experts, and the education of public opinion. Only in regard to one of the greatest social evils of all—war—have these processes been but very partially applied.

Thirty-seven years later, in his Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of War Studies, Professor Michael Howard found the situation much the same:

Pronouncements about military power and disarmament are still made by public figures of apparent intelligence and considerable authority with a naïve dogmatism of a kind such as one finds in virtually no other area of social studies or public affairs.

Almost two decades on there is no doubting the growth of academic activity in this area. To what extent this has been fed into policy, let alone how far there has been a commensurate improvement in policy itself, is debatable. It may be that any meeting between the worlds of scholarship and of policy is doomed to be awkward and unsatisfactory. To the hard-pressed official, much academic advice inevitably appears as discursive, unfocussed and innocent of political realities. The academic, for his part, may well feel that the issues of war and peace can only be properly illuminated by taking the widest possible historical and social perspective. Such an approach contributes most to a policy debate by broadening it, which is why it may not always be well received in government. But the academics cannot be expected to sacrifice content in order to cultivate influence.

It is often argued, however, that there does exist a compelling example of how matters might be organized differently. In the United States remarkably close ties have developed between the strategic studies community and policy-makers. Differences between the two political and administrative systems make this an inappropriate model for Britain; it is at any rate a product of particular historical circumstances. Moreover, the US experience suggests that such an intimate relationship is hardly an unmixed blessing, and may not have done either academic study or public policy as much good as is often supposed. The relevance of the American experience is that it has shaped to a remarkable extent the development of both the theory and the practice of contemporary strategy, and not just in the United States. The consequences are evident in the current debate raging in the West on nuclear weapons. Indeed, this debate has created as much of a crisis for strategic studies as it has done for Western policy.

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The crisis affects the self-image of strategic studies, forged and bolstered through years of influence, as a dispassionate policy science. The role of strategic studies, according to this point of view, is not so much to broaden the policy debate as to keep it focussed. The issues of war and peace are naturally vulnerable to the influence of strong passions, to displays of indignation. In the nuclear age, with so much at stake, to allow such passions to reign unchecked is extraordinarily dangerous. Strategic studies must therefore serve as an alternative source of policy to fear, rage and instinct. The specialists must keep their emotions in check and provide policy-makers with a full range of options, some possibly quite unpleasant, so that choices can be made on the basis of the best possible information and a complete appreciation of the full implications of any course of action. This article is concerned to explain how this view of strategic studies took root, the consequences of its application and the reasons why it may now be untenable.

It has long been expected of strategic studies that they will be tailored to meet the direct needs of policy-makers. The great postwar expansion of the subject was a response to the novel and awesome challenges of the nuclear age, as the pursuit of national security became a far more demanding and hazardous exercise than ever before. Academics were not, by and large, drawn to the subject as disinterested seekers after truth. They were impelled by the thought that here their labours might be put to good use—and perhaps also a sneaking suspicion that if war was now too important to be left to the generals, and even to the politicians, it might just about be safe with the professors.

Contemporary strategic studies developed in the 1950s in the United States as part of the reaction to the Eisenhower administration's policy of 'massive retaliation'. This policy appeared to threaten nuclear hostilities in response to quite modest provocations. Once the Soviet Union acquired an equivalent capacity to deliver nuclear weapons, for the United States to implement a strategy of 'massive retaliation' would be suicidal and so to threaten it would be incredible. The resultant combination of illogicality and recklessness was almost designed to incite academics, who, spurred on by public concern over the immediate state of the arms race, as well as over its ultimate logic, moved into the hitherto underpopulated area of strategic studies. They began to examine in detail the contradictions of the Eisenhower administration's policy while exploring a whole range of alternative policies that might restore credibility to deterrence by means of anything from technological fixes to artful tactics.

Few problems could be as perplexing as that of how real political and military muscle can be extracted from a nuclear arsenal that is in the process of being neutralized by the main adversary. It was a problem that was not only the most pressing facing the nation, and indeed all mankind, but which also involved a close association with some of the more dramatic areas of technological advance. Nuclear strategy was to be played for the highest of stakes, at the frontiers of knowledge, with the most fantastic and awesome of instruments and at an unusually demanding intellectual level. The demands of the nuclear age on defence policy were so unique that not even the experience of warfare or responsibility for the weaponry ensured any useful insights. Indeed, any assumption of continuity from the pre-nuclear age might lead to disastrous misjudgements. Even in military affairs, brawn had to give way to brain.

Contemporary strategic studies was based on this exhilarating prospect, and from the start it took the form of the mobilization of civilian intellectual resources to serve

the higher goals of national security policy. The effort was organized through specially constituted 'think tanks', the most notorious of which was the Rand Corporation. Here fine and committed minds could be brought together. The large issues could be addressed without the hindrances of academic life such as students, committees, the rigid confines of the established disciplines and the need to spend time with people with quite different interests and concerns to one's own! Through the think tanks, access to classified information and the channels of communication to the government apparatus could be readily arranged. Soon these new strategists were losing contact with the wider academic community, drawing on information that their former colleagues could not share to write reports that they could not read. The work had to be presented in such a way as to impress itself on busy officials rather than earn plaudits in scholarly journals.

By the beginning of the 1960s members of the American strategic studies community were already making a distinct contribution—as both critics and consultants—to American policy. With the start of the Kennedy administration in 1961 they achieved a greater influence. Strategic studies became not just a special sort of discipline, but also a route to high office. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, sought to fight prejudice and self-interest in the Pentagon with ruthless logic. He saw the new academic strategists as the source of this logic. The generals and admirals, protecting their service traditions and interests, and the businessmen and lawyers, doing their stints of public service, were displaced. In came earnest young men, sporting doctorates instead of campaign medals and club ties. Instead of playing the old routines of budgetary fudging and political fixing, they wielded new-fangled tools of analysis, normally involving quantification. This revolution was accompanied by cries of rapture from other academics in the fields of business administration and political science, who saw in it a model by which all policy-making might be put on a rational technocratic basis.

By the end of the decade these same students of administration and politics were less sure. They were wondering at the revelation that policy output could still be usefully understood as the product of a bargaining process between competing interests rather than as the application of refined methodology. It transpired that McNamara's opponents, working on the principle of 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em', had realized that his major innovation had been to change the rules of the old game. To play by these rules merely required the acquisition of civilian strategists of a congenial disposition who understood the new jargon, could manipulate the new techniques and could trade statistics with the best.

One net result of the policy-making revolution was to generate a requirement for every point of view to be supported by some impressive-sounding strategic analysis. Another lasting result, of which more below, was that the conceptual framework within which the security debate took place had been narrowed and recast according to the requirements of the new strategic studies.

What I have been describing has been largely an American experience. Elsewhere the political culture or the organization of the bureaucracy militated against such a development, and somewhat broader and less focussed forms of strategic studies evolved. Nevertheless, the influence of the American community has hardly been confined to Washington. It has succeeded in shaping the way that most Western governments view their security problems, especially where nuclear weapons are concerned. Furthermore, it is through the American experience that the scope and character of contemporary strategic studies was defined. It came to be seen as policy

science, preoccupied with reformulating some of the most fundamental and complex issues of our time into sets of technical propositions. This, it was hoped, would provide an invaluable aid to those responsible for managing the unusually dangerous international system.

This role for strategic studies has long been questioned. As its exponents became more prominent in policy-making they came under criticism for the narrowness of their vision and their over-reliance on sophisticated techniques. This particular line of criticism was highlighted by the association of many of the stars of the strategic studies community with the Vietnam disaster. Now, the criticism is of helping to promote the arms race.

A recurrent theme has been the charge that influence has been cultivated by suppressing the indignation that ought to form part of any human being's reaction to the nuclear age. The guilty strategists treat nuclear weapons as normal and acceptable instruments of power politics. They tolerate an international structure underpinned by a capacity for mutual assured destruction. They describe this awful state of affairs and devise plans to work within it using sanitized language and concepts that obscure the horrendous implications of what is going on. The incapacity of indignation has become a professional distortion, and because of the influence of the nuclear strategists this distortion is transmitted to the political system as a whole.

This indictment was developed as soon as nuclear strategy looked like becoming respectable. It has been revived with renewed vigour in recent years as part of the general challenge being mounted in the West to the artefacts of the nuclear age. The familiarity of the indictment has resulted in a well-rehearsed defence. It is agreed that strategic studies does present itself as an attempt at dispassionate analysis. However, it is argued that this attempt is wholly to be welcomed because any alternative approach would be much more dangerous. The emotions that could soon be brought to bear on policy might not only be an understandable revulsion at weapons of terror and genocide, but also the most crude and aggressive forms of jingoism. Those who provided the early resistance to the rise of nuclear strategic studies were hawks much more than doves. They were appalled at the suggestions that the adversary might be something other than brutish, capable of rational calculation, and with whom there might be in some areas a coincidence of interests. Popular indignation has swept nations to war in the past. A movement from another direction that might restrain governments from acting firmly in pursuit of national interests is merely the other side of the same coin. A set of casualty figures can produce one cry demanding that the madness stop at once before more young men fall; another that the military effort be redoubled to ensure that the deaths were not in vain and would be avenged.

Strategy is about the pursuit of political ends with military means in the international environment. It requires judgements as to when to hold back and when to go forward; it involves a realistic appreciation of the relative power of oneself and an adversary, and of the likely respective skill in wielding this power. Such assessments need to be made with care; they are best made without the intrusion of excessive bravado, anger or fear.

In the nuclear age fear might seem the only honest reaction. But, the new strategists warned, that could give an unscrupulous power capable of manipulating this fear a dangerous advantage. As the margins of safety contracted the need was for more, not less, dispassionate analysis; a continuing and most careful calculation of the balance of risks. When two hostile, nuclear-armed camps confronted each other, so the argument went on, the balance of terror could be tilted by the prospect of terror

making a deeper impression on one side than on the other. Part of the analytical effort, therefore, must be to keep the risk of terror in perspective and to examine thoroughly all means of alleviating the terror should it occur. If policy came to be overwhelmed by a revulsion and horror at nuclear weapons then the United States could be placed at a strategic disadvantage. If discussion of civil defence was abjured because it was repellent to address the details of the holocaust, then not only might an important source of advantage be lost but the nation would be ill-prepared should there be, by some mischance, a disastrous strategic failure. If discussion of alternative nuclear strategies was resisted, because contemplating the use of just one of these things was abhorrent, then should deterrence fail governments might find themselves drawn into massive genocidal attacks because that was the only way that the system had been programmed. So the defence was not just that indignation interfered with the effective study of strategy; it was a positive handicap. It was necessary, in the words of Herman Kahn that became almost a motto for the new strategy, to 'think the unthinkable'.

The particular circumstances of the nuclear age thus encouraged an unusually clinical approach to strategic studies. Because of the aspirations to the status of policy science and the nature of the clientele, work was expected to be rigorous and analytical and to betray few strong feelings. The powerful emotions brought forth by the prospect of nuclear war seemed to make this approach even more necessary. Otherwise, these emotions might overwhelm all thought, and in the resultant paralysis nations would soon become victims rather than masters of events. Victory could well go to an enemy whose political structure made him far more able to suppress indignation. The new strategists insisted that it was necessary to look carefully at nuclear battle plans, not because it was thought likely that they would ever be needed, but because the quality of peace-time deterrence depended largely on a convincing answer to the question of what was to be done if deterrence failed.

There are a number of familiar complaints about this clinical approach: that it is wrong to serve governments in their most dubious pursuits; that it is foolish to rely on abstract models and quantitative techniques, so misleading in their apparent precision; that the scientific affectations exclude moral values; that in thinking about the 'unthinkable' the strategists render it thinkable for everyone else. Accusations of this sort are often misplaced, overstated or unfair; they were dealt with effectively some time ago by Hedley Bull.<sup>1</sup> Nuclear strategy is a legitimate area for study, and it is of such importance that one dare not preclude any particular methodology; and the fruits of any study should be available to governments. It is, however, worth asking whether the cumulative effect of decades of clinical, policy-orientated analysis has been to encourage a systematic distortion in our understanding of the basic problems of military power and international order; whether there is now some kind of institutionalized bias in the strategic studies community which makes it difficult to appreciate many of the key factors that shape and temper conflict in the modern world. In particular, this community has taken a proprietary interest in the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence. Is this a subject susceptible to a clinical approach?

It is necessary to go back to the formative years of the 1950s, when strategic studies was already displaying an inclination towards sophisticated techniques, towards the calculable factors of hardware and force levels in preference to the less calculable factors of history and culture. But these factors were qualified by a political context that was so unsettled that it could not be ignored. When Dulles made nuclear

1. Hedley Bull, 'Strategic studies and its critics', *World Politics*, July 1968, No. 4, pp. 593-605.

deterrence the centrepiece of US security policy in the first half of the 1950s he was acting in the traditional manner of a diplomat, seeking to employ available military power with particular problems—such as Korea and Indo-China—very much in mind. Even the elaboration of the more complex and abstruse theories of the Kennedy administration was tuned to the crises over Berlin and Cuba. (It is of note that, in both cases, the immediate logic of the crises severely qualified and overrode the internal logic of the long-term strategy.) Thereafter, as the Soviet military build-up swept away the traces of superiority, American policy-makers found that the detail of the strategic balance was of only marginal relevance to the conduct of diplomacy and even of war. The loss of nuclear superiority may have contributed to America's troubles, but, as it could not be retrieved, it had to be replaced by something more appropriate to the new situation.

If nuclear deterrence was no longer so closely tied to immediate crisis management, it was still very much a part of protecting the United States itself from nuclear attacks and of sustaining the network of alliance commitments that had been taken on in easier times. These commitments meant that the United States had to be prepared to use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack on a third party. This might have seemed plausible enough when the United States enjoyed a comfortable margin of superiority; it required much more of an act of faith to take it seriously once it was realized that there was no obvious route to victory in a nuclear war. Getting in with a first strike could not disarm the enemy of all his means of retaliation and so was likely to lead to the devastation of American territory. With the passing of superiority, then, the American nuclear guarantee became patently less credible; yet, so long as there was some risk that the Americans might do what they said they would do, deterrence could hold. Among the allies no clearly preferable or generally available alternatives to the guarantee emerged, so they stuck with it as an act of faith. For their part, American governments were unprepared to set in motion the international upheavals likely to follow on withdrawal from the nuclear commitments.

In this way the political environment in which the early theories of nuclear deterrence had been forged was frozen. The people of Europe adjusted to the postwar arrangements and organized their life accordingly; these arrangements were sanctified by international agreements, so that they were no longer questioned as part of the diplomatic routine but only at the margins of political rhetoric. Despite all this, the essential security problem was assumed to be the same. How could the Soviet Union be prevented from exploiting some local turbulence and launching a full-blooded invasion to establish dominion over the continent? The fact that it became progressively more difficult to imagine the circumstances in which this might come to pass could be taken as a testament to the success of the original policy. But the success of containment and deterrence could only be partial. The problem had been held in check, not eliminated. Remove the military pillar and the whole edifice of security might crumble. In the Kremlin, a similar assessment was made. Soviet forces provided garrisons for the Eastern Europe satellites and were viewed by their masters as a necessary deterrent to NATO.

So the two blocs became frozen in the postures that they had adopted in the 1950s, destined to glower at each other forever with fists held raised like two petrified victims of Vesuvius. Neither dared lower its guard because it could not be sure that the other would remain motionless if it did. Outside of this ossified structure in Europe, profound changes were under way. New states were created through decolonization; new forms of power based on oil and economic strength emerged; new

political groupings and new regional powers came to the fore; and the Soviet Union achieved strategic parity. This last fact at least might have been expected to qualify the American nuclear guarantee to Western Europe, but that guarantee was now fixed in place as part of the ossified European structure and could not be easily challenged. Whether it was really the case that the whole structure depended on this guarantee may have been doubtful. There was certainly little inclination to find out.

As the strategic studies community addressed the dilemma of attempting to extend deterrence in circumstances of nuclear parity, they discovered just how rigid NATO had become. All the major options for resolving the dilemma were ruled out of order. A drive to retrieve superiority by developing a true first strike capability was ruled out not only because it was technically extremely difficult, maybe impossible, but because the very effort was unsettling. The American government was unwilling to embark on the endless arms race that might ensue. Also, it was nervous about the development of the sort of delicate relationship that might turn a limited superpower skirmish anywhere in the globe into a massive nuclear exchange. Later on, the West Europeans argued against any visible drive for strategic superiority as being provocative and liable to interfere with the arms control and political dialogue that they saw as a parallel source of stability to that of military strength.

The removal of the dependence on the threat to use nuclear weapons first was unacceptable to NATO governments unwilling to fund the forces required to support full conventional deterrence, and worried that the effort would serve as an excuse for the Americans to remove all nuclear protection. Even the more efficient use of existing conventional resources was frustrated because of the demands of the national defence industries, and the need to demonstrate to West Germany a commitment to the defence of every inch of its territory, so that space could not be traded for time. On the other hand, the virtually automatic early use of nuclear weapons against invading enemy forces also could not be permitted because the Europeans were understandably nervous lest their continent be turned into a nuclear battlefield. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by West Germany, in many ways the simplest answer to the problems of the central front, alarmed all those in East and West with vivid memories of past offensives launched from Germany.

Thus it was not that the strategic studies community operated in a political vacuum: rather, the constraints of the political context of an established alliance forced them to seek answers to the basic dilemma in politically non-controversial areas. One key question was rarely asked directly. The politicians found it easier to live without a satisfactory solution to the dilemma of an incredible nuclear guarantee, than to contemplate the upheaval necessitated by following one of the possible solutions. Was this, in itself, a piece of evidence of considerable importance?

To give flavour to their analyses, the strategists would devise a scenario, usually some conjunction of otherwise unrelated events that together would provide an explosive mixture. Increasingly it was found that analysis that tried to plot the course of a conflict was, to quote the jargon, 'scenario-dependent'. Yet few seemed to have realized that they might be illustrating a point of strategic significance when it turned out that most of their scenarios were far-fetched and even preposterous. Furthermore, analyses of future wars played only a small part in the shaping of strategic policy. Much more important were the immediate requirements of alliance. American nuclear forces in Europe were viewed as symbols of a commitment to the continent, rather than as a means of bringing certain Warsaw Pact targets into range. The procedures that governed their release were designed to serve as a reassurance

against recklessness, though the delays inherent in those procedures diminished their likely value in battle. NATO policy became designed to spread the risks and responsibilities of alliance and to accommodate a variety of distinct national requirements. Such schemes as the Multi-Lateral Force could only be understood as complicated political statements: certainly not as serious preparations for conflict.

Even in the fundamental area of the strategic balance the requirements of peacetime overrode those of wartime. US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara began the 1960s with changes in US targeting policy and force planning designed to give the American President a variety of nuclear options in war. He soon concluded that this attempt was creating unrealistic—and unhealthy—expectations, and argued instead for recognizing the virtues of a stable strategic balance, calming the arms race and creating few incentives to pre-empt in a crisis. It was McNamara who set in motion the strategic arms control process by which the superpowers sought to consolidate this stability. The process went off in unexpected directions, but it still cast nuclear weapons in essentially political roles as counters in a self-serving negotiation or as an index of power and status.

As a result of all this, by the mid-1960s the theory of deterrence was no longer being developed and informed by the experience of severe international crisis. The political factors that shaped it were related to the maintenance of alliance solidarity and the sustenance of an emerging superpower detente. Where, then, did this leave the clinical strategists? By this time most of the interesting things about nuclear strategy had been said and the key concepts had been developed. The enormous creativity of the earlier years had been spent or frustrated by political constraints. The attempt to apply the techniques of strategic studies to the Vietnam War hardly did anything for their reputation; indeed, the unpopularity of the war soon rubbed off on all those associated with the military establishment. Strategic studies had never appeared particularly wholesome; it was now considered downright sinister. The environment was one in which speculation as to the conduct of nuclear war was considered neither necessary nor illuminating. It was presumed that the inevitable conclusion of such a war would be utter and complete devastation. When the 'unthinkable' of all-out nuclear war had strayed into the realm of possibility then there had been good reason to give it thought. With a durable balance of terror now firmly in place that requirement had diminished.

The only question mark against the general sense of a comfortable strategic stability was the disruptive impact of technology. Might not some dramatic new development—as spectacular and as far-reaching in its implications as radar, the atom-bomb, the thermo-nuclear bomb and the ICBM had been in their day—suddenly transform the situation? For example, if a truly watertight defensive system could be devised, would that not create a decisive strategic advantage? This effort might fail itself but nevertheless stimulate counter-measures, provoke an arms race and undermine the political understanding between the superpowers.

The same urge towards precision which had led Robert McNamara and his associates to set exacting standards for nuclear war-fighting early in the 1960s led this group to set equally exacting standards for a stable nuclear balance later on in the decade. A level of unacceptable damage to the Soviet Union was set; US forces had to be able to inflict such damage even after absorbing a surprise first strike. So long as destruction could be assured it was believed that deterrence was operating. It would do no harm, and even some good, if the Soviet Union could confidently judge its forces satisfactory by the same standard.



By this method the military aspect of a wider political stand-off was put in a typically systematic form. However, McNamara's approach failed to relate the strategic stalemate to the wider context. Deterrence involves a complex and interrelated set of factors—political, economic and organizational as well as military—that serve to introduce a healthy measure of caution and circumspection into the risk calculus of the major powers. The focus on the state of the strategic balance meant that deterrence came to be seen instead as a function of a particular relationship of military forces. In principle it could break down should anything happen to disturb that military balance.

With vast and diverse reserves of offensive nuclear power available to both sides there was no reason to believe that the balance was at all delicate. That was McNamara's basic message. But in his methodology and his pronouncements he had accepted that this balance could not be taken for granted and that it might be vulnerable to technological change. Given the expectation created during two decades of the arms race, with one dramatic breakthrough following another, it would probably have been politically difficult to adopt any alternative assumptions, even though the overall balance was becoming far less sensitive to such breakthroughs. Technology was now considered the greatest threat to deterrence. It became the business of the strategic studies community—and it turned out to be good business—to monitor technological innovation for its likely impact on the strategic balance. Thus technology replaced academic imagination and political experience as the source of fresh ideas and insight in the study of strategy. The mysteries of research and development, the impact of scientific enthusiasms, the industrial interests involved and the ten-year gap between the conception of a new system and its birth all contrived to give the process of innovation in weapon design and production a quite independent character, apparently well removed from deliberate political choice. The mechanistic treatment of the strategic balance, the concentration on technological innovation and the neglect of political context accentuated the worst features of strategic studies. Without political criteria by which to assess the 'decisiveness' of some new development, there was no way to distinguish a serious instability from a trivial disparity in force levels.

If McNamara's permissive criteria had been sustained then there would have been no problem. The balance of terror remained remarkably indelicate. But as the number of nuclear warheads and their individual accuracies increased, imaginations began to play with all sorts of offensive tactics that might secure a winning advantage despite the apparent stalemate. If it was the case that the state of the strategic balance was the fundamental factor governing the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and if it was possible to discern some trend making possible some tactic that might just create a real advantage, then the United States could be in trouble. Such an advantage could only make itself felt in war. Following this line of thought led soon to a questioning of whether nuclear war was really inconceivable or whether, at least, it was prudent to act on that assumption.

The American pledge to use nuclear weapons first on behalf of its allies in the event of war was presented as the essential underpinning of European security. If the advertised result of the implementation of this pledge was going to be mutual assured destruction, then this had obvious implications for its quality. We have seen how this credibility problem was tolerated out of a sense of the overall stability of the European security system and the feeling that even if the US guarantee was little more than a gigantic bluff, this was not the sort of bluff that any prudent Soviet leader was going

to be inclined to call. But impose a strict logic on this problem and a deterrent threat that is palpably incredible seems bound to fail. Without the necessary capabilities and doctrine to back up the nuclear guarantee, the allies would have to act on the assumption that the United States was unreliable and make other arrangements. Add to that fear a sense that new technologies were creating sources of strategic advantage that the Soviet Union might be better placed to exploit, and the policy of deterrence was close to failure—unless corrective measures were taken early on.

Events in the 1970s conspired to give this approach to strategy far more authority than it deserved. An apparently relentless Soviet military build-up; the discovery of aspects of Soviet doctrine at variance with the prevailing American view on the non-usability of nuclear power; the disappointment with the meagre results of detente; a series of irritating Soviet excursions into Third World trouble-spots—all this created an impression that the Soviet Union was seeking to free itself from any constraints imposed upon it by American nuclear strength. Confidence in the robustness of the established framework declined. The 'unthinkable' moved back into the realm of possibility.

That the Soviet Union had been emboldened by the clear loss of American nuclear superiority may have been the case. That it was being tempted to push its luck out of a belief in favourable trends within the strategic balance was far more questionable. Explanations for the troubles of the 1970s would have been better sought in the processes of change in the Third World, and the relative Soviet and American abilities to cope with these changes. The ascendant right wing in American politics, however, assigned the blame for the troubles and frustrations of the decade to unfavourable and dangerous trends in the strategic balance. Perhaps this was because such a simple explanation permitted a simple solution—rearmament. Perhaps it was the prominence of arms control as the centrepiece of detente which drew attention to these strategic trends. The strategic arms limitation talks were based on those presumptions of assured destruction that were becoming increasingly discredited. At any rate, the challenge to the East–West policies of the Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter years reached a crescendo with the opposition to the 1979 SALT II treaty.

The impact of all this on the strategic studies community was profound. The community itself had expanded and in its character and its output reflected the concern with technology and the details of arms control. As the issues of nuclear strategy moved to the centre of the political stage, so did the number of government agencies, congressional offices and pressure groups interested and involved—and they all wanted the appropriate expertise on their staff. The security debate was being conducted using the terminology and concepts of clinical strategic studies and the participants wanted to be properly briefed. The profession was now of undoubted influence. Its products still consisted of abstract, speculative theorizing about unlikely contingencies, bolstered by technical details and force comparisons. Yet while its products retained their clinical appearance they were now politically loaded. Moreover, many of those involved, particularly those of a hawkish disposition, knew exactly what they were doing. If their analyses were right then the past years had involved monumental folly. Appalled by those of their fraternity who had enjoyed the greatest influence over policy during the 1970s despite clinging to the imagery of a stable balance, and frustrated by their own lack of influence, these professional strategists put themselves to the fore of a political movement. The strategists, having lost their professional detachment, were now moved by a sense of indignation.

It did not seem to matter that the strategic analyses now wielded as potent political

weapons were often quite dubious. They depended on questionable assumptions about the reliability and performance of unproven new technologies, about the implementation of subtle and ingenious tactics in the most fraught military environment imaginable, and about the attitudes and behaviour of national leaders in the most extreme circumstances. In the willingness to explain and predict great and disastrous international events on the basis of tenuous logic, the effect was reminiscent of Stephen Potter's advice on Gamesmanship in chess. Potter advises White to make three moves at random, then to resign. White then establishes his psychological superiority by explaining to his bewildered opponent how a brilliant checkmate by Black was inevitable in twenty or so further moves, thereby leaving White little choice but resignation. It is made clear to Black that he has only gained victory because his opponent understands the game far better than he.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, at times it seemed as if the strategists were arguing that a virtual American surrender and the collapse of alliances were inevitable on recognition of the full implications of trends in the strategic balance that, thus far, they alone had been able to discern.

When the strategists of this persuasion rose to positions of influence in the Reagan administration, they had the opportunity to put their theories into practice. This is not the place to examine their experience. Suffice it to say that they discovered as many domestic and external political constraints as their predecessors of an earlier generation. NATO allies were as nervous as ever about disturbing the security structures of Europe. These remained in their frozen state, slightly modified only in the political and economic spheres. For domestic and alliance consumption it was still necessary to enter into arms control negotiations at least with the appearance of good faith. The early statements of strategic intent had to be qualified because they generated more alarm than reassurance.

Indeed, the influence of clinical strategic studies has been evident as much in the protest movements opposed to the new American policies as in the policies themselves. The critics have not reasserted a more relaxed, less frenetic view of the strategic balance or argued the danger of a fixation with technology, or the nonsense of exaggerated interpretations of scenarios for a future war. Instead, in their fascination with the aftermath of a nuclear war they have encouraged the view that deterrence is about to fail, and, in their focus on the arms race as the likely cause of this disaster, that a striving for strategic advantage, rather than real political differences, is to blame for the current international malaise. Their literature is replete with the language and concepts of strategic studies. They also argue for a new foreign policy in terms of adjustments to force levels.

In the 1970s the strategists became populists; in the 1980s the populists became strategists. It is not clear which of these developments was the least helpful. The combination of the two has resulted in a wholly artificial crisis of deterrence. It has become accepted in everyday comment, from both ends of the political spectrum, and much in between, that the future of our civilization is dependent on a particular configuration of forces. The only real differences are over just what that configuration should be. It is not that the structure of forces or shifts in the balance are unimportant: in certain circumstances they would be extremely important, but we are nowhere near such circumstances. They are part of the story, but not the whole story. It is the political context that will produce the pressures for war, and it is the nature of these pressures—and its consequences for the cohesion of alliances and the

2 Stephen Potter, *The theory and practice of gamesmanship* (London: Hart-Davis, 1947), pp. 93–5

determination of individual nations—that will shape the course of any war. Whatever else one can predict, it is certain that the political environment on day one of some future war will bear only scant resemblance to that of today.

It is, in fact, a paradox to which this article has been attempting to draw attention that the apolitical character of so much contemporary strategic studies is partly a product of a static political environment. With so much, at least in Europe, so fixed and firmly in place, study of the environment generated few fresh insights. The preference for the familiar and understood, the unwillingness to tamper with the delicate political and doctrinal compromises of years ago, now fortified by institutionalization and inertia, the difficulty of getting a large group of nations to agree together on any dramatic change in policy, provided an unpromising backdrop for anyone interested in strategic innovation. As a result of the ossification of the European security structure, military preparations became steeped in a political symbolism designed to hold the alliance together. This imposed constraints on military policy that were first found irritating and then simply not understood. Strategic studies found it easier to neglect the current political environment and think instead of a future military environment. There was little left for the strategists but to project current policy and inventories forward and to speculate on the impact of new technologies. As this could only be done with a detailed knowledge of the relevant hardware and sophisticated analytical methods, the view of strategic studies as something highly technical was reinforced.

However, the image of a detailed and dispassionate policy science, following the analysis to wherever it led, was soon dispelled. To operate in such a way required the comfortable framework of a political consensus, within which there was sufficient leeway to take account of the more interesting and useful contributions of the strategic studies community. Equally, if the analysis kept on leading to the conclusions that the balance of terror was remarkably stable, and that it could tolerate quite striking variations in force levels, then there was no need to get excited and the political masters could be left alone to use the analysis as they saw fit. Once the political consensus was undermined then the strategists were forced to make overt political judgements. If, then, by imposing one's own political judgements on the strategic analysis the balance seemed to be under threat, then of course it mattered. Because many strategists felt that only they really understood these issues, they felt obliged to draw attention to these dangers, and as the political system failed to respond they became indignant and began to campaign. When even modest proposals faced formidable political obstacles it was tempting to use strategic analysis to generate a sufficient sense of crisis and urgency to get politicians to agree to change.

Those who understood the analysis but disagreed with the conclusions, largely because they imposed alternative political judgements, then began to campaign in opposition. But they campaigned against the strategic analysis, arguing against one set of prescriptions on how to respond to the failure of deterrence with their own set, without asking the prior question of whether deterrence was really close to failure. A debate which really should have been about these alternative political judgements, concerning such matters as the relative risk-taking propensities of the Soviet Union and the United States and the real extent of their conflicts of interest in the various world trouble-spots, got bogged down in arguments over force structures and the conduct of total war.

I argued above that the difficulty in developing convincing scenarios for the outbreak of World War Three was not a professional failure but a strategic fact of

some significance. Equally, the extent to which contemplation of World War Three produces widespread public indignation is also a strategic fact of some significance. If all this fuss has occurred in what are, despite the admittedly harsh international climate, hardly crisis conditions, what would be the state of opinion in a real crisis and how might that affect available strategies? The idea that strategic studies could serve as a counter-influence to public passions in the formation of security policy has therefore fallen on two counts. First, those with sufficiently strong feelings cannot be deflated merely by reciting to them the conclusions of experts. Secondly, the experts have shown themselves to be as susceptible to strong feelings as everyone else. The strategists, or at least forms of strategic analysis, have appeared on the expert wings of broad political movements rather than as independent servants of policy. In this way, strategic studies have served as a source of indignation as well as of influence.

The conclusion I would draw from this experience is that strategic studies must reintegrate politics into its analytical framework. If the analysis is serious then politics is unavoidable. Where this is not recognized then the political judgements involved will be crude and dogmatic. The subject will be vulnerable to the charge of promoting a particular point of view under the cover of spurious expertise. Strategic studies based on political understanding as much as on technical competence may not appear so obviously as a source of specialist advice to policy-makers. But it might be able to make a more constructive contribution to public debate, and the advice that was sought would be more useful. The sort of strategic studies I have in mind must return to its roots in military history and international relations, to the sort of work that for the past three decades has been the business of the Department of War Studies at King's College, London.