

A ROBUST NUCLEAR DETERRENT: A FORCE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

REBECCA L. HEINRICHS

Over the past several decades, the number of Christian churches that support the goal of global denuclearization and oppose U.S. nuclear policies has grown considerably. The World Council of Churches, which includes more than 300 evangelical and Protestant churches, has urged global disarmament, although the member churches have varying positions on what that means practically.

The more theologically liberal churches like the Methodists and Episcopalians oppose the very possession of nuclear weapons, even for deterrence purposes. But it is more common for Christian denominations to hold positions similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, which opposes the use of nuclear weapons, urges eventual global disarmament, but allows for nuclear weapons to exist for the purpose of deterrence based on the “balance” model of strategic stability. Pope Francis, however, has made denuclearization one of his personal top priorities. Archbishop Benedito Auza, the Holy See’s Ambassador to the UN, recently explained, “Today there is no more argument, not even the argument of deterrence used during the Cold War, that could ‘minimally

morally justify’ the possession of nuclear weapons. The ‘peace of a sort’ that is supposed to justify nuclear deterrence is specious and illusory.”¹

To the contrary, to support moving toward an increasingly smaller arsenal of nuclear weapons is to necessarily embrace the immoral and highly unstable policy of Minimum Deterrence and its corollary policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. Not only is the United States morally justified to possess nuclear weapons and to credibly threaten their employment, it would be *immoral* and inimical to the principles of Christian just war theory for the U.S. government to adopt the disarmament agenda.

First, it is important to keep in mind the explicit purpose of government as instituted by God. The Scriptures show that God's purpose for government is to commend what is good and punish what is evil. In other words, it is to seek justice, order, and peace and, thereby, to protect the innocent. God has given government the prerogative to use lethal force in its path of obedience.² Christian just war theory remains the guide for how Christians have traditionally thought about how and when the government can wield the sword in the way God intended. Just war theory allows for the use of force as long as it meets the criteria for justly entering into war (*jus ad bellum*) and the criteria for justly waging the war (*jus in bello*).

Antinuclear Christians often argue that the employment of nuclear weapons necessarily violates at least two principles that disqualify the just use of nuclear weapons—discrimination and proportionality. The use of force must discriminate combatants from noncombatants and, furthermore, take into consideration what is being destroyed for the sake of what is being protected.³ However, it is possible, and in fact necessary, to both uphold those principles and maintain a preeminent nuclear force. Unfortunately—and dangerously—ideological opposition to nuclear weapons often precludes a reasoned discussion on the matter.

MINIMUM DETERRENCE BASED ON IDEOLOGICAL OPPOSITION TO NUKES RATHER THAN DESIRE TO PROTECT INNOCENT

The antinuclear agenda is based on the premise that nuclear weapons are inherently evil, that their use is never ethically justified, and that their very existence is dangerous; therefore, antinuclear

idealists argue that lowering the number of nuclear weapons worldwide, regardless of where they are located, is a noble objective and increases the prospects for peace.

But nuclear weapons possess no moral agency. The regime leaders in possession or in pursuit of them do. The purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is, and ought to remain, to deter catastrophic war and preserve relative peace and stability. Ultimately, they are to protect innocents. Nuclear weapons have served as the bedrock of U.S. deterrence since the nuclear attacks that brought

the Second World War to a close. There are now nine countries in possession of nuclear weapons;⁴ and missiles, the delivery systems for mass casualty warheads, continue to rapidly increase in quantity and sophistication. In contemplating the best policy for U.S. nuclear deterrence and the appropriate force structure, the stakes have never been higher. Rather than beginning with the assumption that nuclear weapons are evil—regardless of the kind or consideration of the nature of the regime that possess them—one should begin with asking the question: how can the United States government, in fulfilling its

highest responsibility as instituted by God, most effectively protect innocents from the threat of the most catastrophic kinds of war?

Instead of asking this most basic question, antinuclear idealists jump right to denuclearization, and therefore advocate for what is called a Minimum Deterrence policy. This policy is based on the belief that the U.S. ought to move towards zero nuclear weapons and can immediately safely cut current deterrent capabilities to significantly lower numbers, perhaps even as low as 100 nuclear warheads. In 2009 President Barack Obama, while admitting that a world without nuclear weapons would not happen in his lifetime, stated his intention to nevertheless lead the initiative



toward such a world. Part of his agenda would entail cutting the U.S. force, which he successfully did when he secured the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation. According to the Obama Administration,⁵ the treaty stipulates that the United States and Russia will cap their accountable deployed strategic nuclear warheads at 1,550 and deployed delivery vehicles at 700, a 74% reduction in the allowed limits of the 1991 START Treaty and a 30% reduction in the allowed number of real deployed strategic warheads under the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (the Moscow Treaty).⁶ Only months after the treaty went into effect, and without so much as offering up a single study that might support the assumptions, the President flippantly remarked that the U.S. has “more nuclear weapons than we need,”⁷ signaling that he intended another round of cuts in the near future.

But, with the resurgence of an expansionist Russia, the President’s diplomatic team, however sympathetic to the antinuclear idealists, concluded it could not continue cutting U.S. deterrent capabilities without taking on unacceptable levels of risk. To put a finer point on this, the reality of the threat and the behavior of other regime leaders forced the Obama Administration to halt its efforts to further implement a Minimum Deterrence policy. This abrupt change in policy lays bare one of the fundamental flaws of the Minimum Deterrence policy they advocate.

Antinuclear idealists claim that simply lowering the number of nuclear weapons increases security and, critically, that other countries will be persuaded to devalue nuclear weapons if the United States does. In fact, as the United States has gone to lower numbers of nuclear weapons, has self-imposed testing limitations, and has placed a unilateral prohibition on developing new nuclear capabilities, nuclear proliferation has exploded across the globe. More countries have determined that possessing nuclear weapons serves their own national security needs. One has only to look to North Korea, China, and Iran for evidence. But since many proponents of Minimum Deterrence dismiss the possibility of a nuclear war with Russia,⁸ it is particularly useful to look more closely at Russia’s recent nuclear-related activities.

Russia has moved nuclear weapons to the center of its military strategy. While the United States continues to punt on overdue nuclear

modernization efforts, the Russians are in the middle of an ongoing and massive modernization campaign. Moreover, the Russians do not place limits on their own capabilities. For example, while the United States does not place multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) on its Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) because they fear they would be provocative, Russia aggressively utilizes them.

What is perhaps most concerning is that the Russians have actually changed their nuclear doctrine in recent years. In Congressional testimony, while serving as the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Winnefeld, explained that Russian military doctrine supports the employment of nuclear weapons in order to *de-escalate* a non-nuclear conflict. As the admiral explained, NATO can overwhelm Russia in conventional weaponry, but nuclear weapons have a psychological effect in addition to a technical one, and this can change calculations. NATO’s understandably strong aversion to even threaten the employment of nuclear weapons gives Russia leverage. Russia has no qualms about exploiting the especially acute fear of nuclear conflict held by Western countries to further its national objectives. Should Russia employ a nuclear weapon, most likely a low-yield battlefield nuclear weapon,⁹ against a NATO country with the intent to de-escalate what Russia claims is aggression, that NATO country would no doubt invoke Article V of the NATO Treaty, and the United States with its allies would be required to respond. It doesn’t take much of an imagination to see how Russia’s miscalculation could lead to a preliminary nuclear exchange that may, horrifically, escalate from there.

It is clear that nuclear weapons will continue to influence global affairs as long as national leaders desire to shape events to meet their own perceived interests. Thus, the United States must continuously invest the intellectual capital to determine how best to deter and defend against nuclear conflict.

The great paradox of deterring mass casualty warfare—including nuclear conflict—is that it requires the United States to make unmistakably clear that it is willing to employ nuclear weapons to preserve the lives of its citizens and those of its allies. As such, it makes no sense for a state to possess nuclear weapons that it claims it will never employ. Conversely, it makes no sense for the United States to threaten retaliation with

nuclear weapons when the kind of force it possesses is such that in reality it would never employ it. Enemies of the United States should be made to conclude that aggressing on the United States or its primary interests *could* actually invite a U.S. nuclear response, and therefore that any perceived gains are not worth the cost. But, in order for an enemy to make this calculation, the U.S. nuclear threat must be credible.

MIMIMUM DETERRENCE AND MAD AT THE HEART OF ANTINUCLEAR AGENDA

The case for a credible and therefore effective U.S. nuclear deterrent is where we find the strong moral case for building and maintaining a robust, flexible, and resilient nuclear force. As previously stated, Christian antinuclear idealists, adopting the arguments of the secular pacifists, wrongly assume that nuclear war necessarily means the indiscriminate targeting of thousands of civilians. This is simply false.

One of the reasons many Christian antinuclear idealists continue to wrongly believe that the existence of nuclear weapons necessarily means the nuclear targeting of civilians is because this was once a common way secular strategists discussed deterrence. For example, during the early 1960s, Jerome Wiesner, science adviser to President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson, testified before Congress that the U.S. could establish deterrence based on a threat to destroy six of the ten largest Soviet cities. This kind of deterrence policy, relying on what is called in nuclear parlance “countervalue targeting,” only requires a small arsenal of nuclear weapons because cities are large targets and easy to hit with only a few warheads and delivery systems. It is the only deterrence policy that requires a small number of nuclear weapons.

But, under no circumstances should the United States target civilian populations. Targeting civilians violates the fundamental principles that define the character of the United States of America and fails to meet the just war criteria *jus in bello*. Moreover, even from the perspective of cold realism, claiming to target civilian populations and maintaining a force structure designed to do this would likely not serve American interests, for some enemy leaders do not value the lives of their civilian populations the way that the United

States does. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that American policymakers value the lives of enemy countries’ civilians more than their dictators do.

But antinuclear idealists, in seeking a Minimum Deterrence policy, advocate moving towards a small force, for placing restrictions on the kinds of nuclear weapons the United States can build and deploy, prohibit testing, and oppose nuclear modernization. This inflexible, and less accurate, limited force cannot optimally hold the spectrum of enemy military and regime facilities at risk, nor can it guarantee minimal collateral damage. Indeed, according Dr. Keith Payne, “Strategic systems of the 1960s and 1970s tended to combine relatively high yields and low accuracy that reduced the prospects for discriminate nuclear employment.”¹⁰ Continued improvement since the 70s has increased the accuracy of the delivery systems and decreased the yield of the warhead, allowing far more discriminate targeting. Continued modernization with the freedom to test and develop new capabilities will only improve the ability of the United States to make them more controllable, more accurate, and able to minimize collateral damage. Against this, a Minimum Deterrence policy *cannot* minimize collateral damage, and is best suited for a countervalue targeting strategy.

Minimum Deterrence fails to meet the criteria for just war theory on another front. It requires the U.S. government to leave American cities vulnerable to nuclear attack. During the Cold War, this doctrine, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), held that the Soviet Union and the United States would be deterred from launching a nuclear weapon out of fear of retaliation. If either country built defenses to protect their population, those antinuclear idealists argued that the other country would be provoked to build up its own offensive arsenal, thereby precipitating an unstable environment and arms race.

By the 1980s, the United States had shifted to a counterforce targeting policy, meaning it would no longer target civilian populations and would instead target military assets, including nuclear forces. This could only remain true as long as the U.S. nuclear force remained large enough and diverse enough to hold the enemies’ military assets at risk. But even after this shift to a counterforce targeting policy, nuclear deterrence policy had not

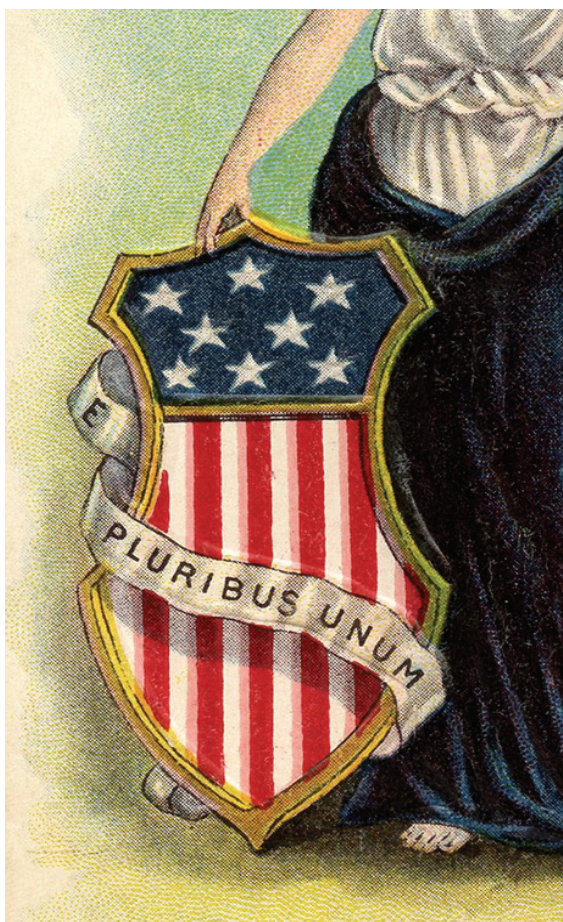


Seal of the United States Senate. An olive branch, symbolizing peace, graces the left side of the shield while an oak branch, symbolizing strength, adorns the right. Beneath are a pair of crossed fasces, the symbol of the Roman Senate, representing the magisterial power of such a collective body. Atop the shield hovers a Phrygian cap. Elsewhere the cap is found on the emblem of the Department of the Army, the Seal of the State of Iowa, and on the Coats of Arms of countries such as Argentina, Cuba, El Salvador, Haiti, and Nicaragua.

yet totally moved away from the doctrine of MAD. U.S. officials made clear in public statements that American cities would intentionally remain undefended from missile attack. This kept in place the imaginary, mechanistic “strategic balance” or “balance of terror.” Illustrating this principle, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, arguing in favor of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which codified that neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union would build effective missile defenses, noted that it gives missiles “a free ride” to their intended targets.¹¹

A NUCLEAR POSTURE CONSISTENT WITH AND REQUIRED BY JUST WAR DOCTRINE

The United States should finally and fully adopt a strategic posture that provides optimal protection of the American people, beginning with the goal of deterring war and maintaining peace. It should reject the immoral balance of terror policies proffered by the secular antinuclear idealists and adopted by many Christian churches. The George W. Bush Administration rightly moved further



away from this anti-just war, balance-of-terror formulation when he withdrew the United States from the ABM Treaty in 2002 in the wake the September 11th attacks. President Bush then set out to adapt the U.S. strategic posture to take advantage of the full spectrum of available weapons, including non-nuclear offensive weapons, nuclear weapons with a variety of delivery systems and a spectrum of nuclear yields, and purely defensive weapons with the ability to intercept missiles of all ranges in all phases of flight to provide the strongest possible defense of the American people should deterrence fail.

Since then, the United States has developed and deployed a layered ballistic missile defense system comprised of sensors and missile interceptor systems based on land and at sea. Still, U.S. policy unofficially endorses a missile defense policy that seeks to only defend against the “limited” threats posed by rogue states like North Korea and Iran, and intentionally leaves U.S. cities and bases vulnerable to Russian and Chinese missile attack, out of a misguided belief that to fully defend against Russian and Chinese attack

might provoke those countries to build up their offensive systems. First, this is still the immoral policy of MAD. Moreover, as discussed, Russia is moving forward with a massive nuclear modernization effort, regardless of U.S. missile defense systems, and as almost daily press reports show, Russia continues threatening the U.S. and our allies without provocation.

And, while the United States takes great care in not defending against Russian missiles, Russia has been modernizing its missile defense system to defend against a potential attack from the United States. In a January 15, 2014 letter to then Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Howard “Buck” McKeon, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, said that “Russia’s objective with its ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities is to ensure defense of critical political and military targets in the Moscow area from a ballistic missile attack, either by the United States or any other nation with nuclear or conventional ballistic or cruise missile capabilities.”

Moreover, in a document provided to Congress, Under Secretary Frank Kendall III warned that China is “developing and testing several new classes and variants of offensive missiles, forming additional missile units, upgrading older missile systems, and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses.” Mr. Kendall also described China’s development and successful testing of anti-satellite capabilities and said “PLA [People’s Liberation Army] writings emphasize the necessity of ‘destroying, damaging, and interfering with the enemy’s reconnaissance and communications satellites,’ suggesting that such systems, as well as navigation and early warning satellites, could be among the targets of attacks designed to ‘blind and deafen the enemy.’”

A moral and truly effective strategic posture must include a robust missile defense system that provides the best defense of innocent Americans as technically possible. Such a missile defense system would complement U.S. offensive weapons.

The U.S. strategic posture must also include a nuclear policy that is in keeping with the character of the United States, which must, itself, remain consistent with just war theory. Therefore, there should be a counterforce targeting strategy, intentionally seeking to minimize collateral damage. As

previously discussed, counterforce requires that the United States have the ability to hold at risk what the enemy values. These specific targets will vary with each enemy state, but in general, they are the facilities and objects that maintain the regimes and their means of holding power and oppression. They will certainly include the deeply buried and hardened military facilities in Russia, North Korea, Iran, and China, for example.

The U.S. nuclear deterrent force must have the ability to hold at risk all of current enemies and potential enemies' crucial facilities and arsenals central to their regimes and military, taking into account the possibility of enemy alliances as well. It must also have the ability to adapt to the changing global landscape. It should never constrain future American Presidents' options by limiting the system based on today's global threat environment or the hopes of a less complex and more peaceful future global environment. History and human nature instruct us that we should, in fact, expect and prepare for the opposite. Therefore, the United States should not move to levels below the limits codified in the New START Treaty. Moreover, the United States should fully modernize the aging nuclear force, including all three legs of the nuclear triad (bombers, ICBMs, and submarines), and reserve the right to develop new nuclear weapons if the threats require it. It should also refuse to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty, which would preclude the United States from resuming explosive nuclear testing. In order to maintain a credible and reliable force, leaders at the U.S. national labs may one day advise testing once again.

In closing, nuclear weapons are the backbone of the U.S. strategic posture, even if they are only one component. As instructed by the latest Nuclear Posture Review Report, nuclear weapons should be complemented by a mix of conventional weapons¹² and missile defense systems. But the United States must first firmly reject the arguments of antinuclear idealists, including those who wrongly do so in the name of just war theory. Christian teaching requires the U.S. government to exact justice and to protect the innocent, and it can best do this with a credible nuclear posture. A credible nuclear posture requires that it is compatible with Christian ethics, and therefore cannot target an enemy state's civilians, nor can it intentionally leave American citizens exposed to

nuclear attack. Therefore, Christian churches and U.S. defense planners have no choice but to reject the policies of Mutually Assured Destruction and Minimum Deterrence, and to embrace a strategic posture that includes a robust missile defense system and an adaptable, resilient, and robust nuclear deterrent. [P](#)

Rebecca L. Heinrichs is a fellow at Hudson Institute where she provides research and commentary on a range of security issues and specializes in deterrence and counter-proliferation. She is also the vice-chairman of the John Hay Initiative's Counter-proliferation Working Group and the original manager of the House of Representatives Bi-partisan Missile Defense Caucus.

(Endnotes)

1 Elisabeth Dias, "Pope Francis's Latest Mission: Stopping Nuclear Weapons," *Time*, April 10, 2015.

2 See, for example, 1 Peter 2:14 and Romans 13:1-7

3 Keith B. Payne and Jill E. Coleman, "Christian Nuclear Pacifism and Just War Theory: Are They Compatible?" *National Institute for Public Policy*, 1988.

4 There are also at least 44 nuclear capable states, which are listed in Annex 2 of the misguided, and fully ratified, *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty*.

5 There are loopholes in the treaty, that make some of the Obama administration's assessments of the treaty's limits unrealistic. For more on this, please see Keith Payne and Tom Scheber, "The Threat of New START," *National Review Online*, November 15, 2010.

6 Baker Spring, Rebecca Heinrichs, *Deterrence and Nuclear Targeting in the 21st Century*, The Heritage Foundation, November 30, 2012.

7 Remarks by President Barrack Obama at Hankuk University, Seoul, Republic of Korea, March 26, 2012.

8 For one such example of the tendency of antinuclear idealists dismissing the plausibility of conflict with Russia, please see the Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report, "Modernizing the U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Posture, and Force Structure," May 2012.

9 For more on the plausibility of Russian employment of tactical nuclear weapons, please see Dr. Matthew Kroenig, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 25, 2015 and Rebecca L. Heinrichs, NATO's Nuclear Nightmare Over Ukraine, *Real Clear Defense*, February 27, 2015.

10 Keith B. Payne and Jill E. Coleman, "Christian Nuclear Pacifism and Just War Theory: Are They Compatible?" *National Institute for Public Policy*, 1988.

11 Please see Dr. Keith Payne, "U.S. Strategic Arms Control Objections," Testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, May 5, 1999.

12 Some antinuclear idealists argue that a conventional strike weapon can technically do what a nuclear weapon can do and, therefore, can substitute nuclear weapons. This is false for several reasons. First, nuclear weapons have a psychological component to them that gives them a different quality even apart from technical capability. Second, nuclear assurance, that is, the promise to retaliate on behalf of an ally under the nuclear umbrella, must take into consideration what is necessary to assure allies. Allies have expressed that only a nuclear response would satisfy the necessary conditions for assurance. Last, in order to penetrate the most hardened targets, nuclear weapons are still technically required. Or, as Greg Weaver, the deputy director for plans and policy for U.S. Strategic Command stated at a February symposium in 2012, "You can't replace nuclear weapons today with conventional capability... [T]hey don't have the same effects on targets, but as a result they don't have the same effects on people's decision calculus."