



Job's Tormentors, by William Blake, circa 1785 – 90. Source: Wikimedia Commons

WHEN DETERRENCE SIMPLY WILL NOT WORK: THE CASE OF JOB

JOHN MARK MATTOX*

One of the many defects with the social sciences is the increasing infatuation with everything *new*: new events, new issues, new sources, new data, new analyses, new publications—new *everything*! Indeed, the ticket to the top of the social science ladder of success is to come up with something so new that other social scientists pause and gaze in awe and wonder.

To be fair, everybody—not just social scientists—loves new stuff. Unfortunately, the social sciences' particular infatuation with new stuff results, all too often, in the woeful neglect of

old stuff and of the lessons of the past.

Social science narratives of the second half of the 20th century conditioned most national

security practitioners to think of deterrence in terms of nuclear weapons—and for good reason. When nuclear weapons appeared in the mid-20th century, they were *the* “new things”,

* Views expressed herein are those of the author and do not purport to reflect those of National Defense University or of any other U.S. Government entity.

par excellence. They could produce destruction on a previously unimaginable (i.e., “new”) scale.

Not surprisingly, the problem of how to deal with nuclear weapons was likewise treated as something new. The phrase which captured the essence of this “new” problem was, perhaps more than any other, “nuclear deterrence”. Indeed, for many national security practitioners writing at the dawn of the nuclear age, “deterrence” equaled “nuclear deterrence”, and finding literature that dealt in depth with deterrence in any other sense was hard to come by.

Nevertheless, deterrence itself is, in reality, a very old concept. In fact, deterrence has been part of the human experience ever since a human being first uttered a threat or gave an ultimatum: “Don’t do such and such—or else!” The idea was, and has always been, that one’s uttered threat would induce sufficient angst that the other would either modify behavior or not act at all.

But angst about what? Answering that question is the key problem of deterrence: If one can discover the thing that is *essentially valuable* to the “other” and then credibly threaten the “other” with the loss of that essentially valuable thing, then one can deter the “other”. If not, the “other” cannot be deterred. In that case, four alternatives present themselves (listed from nicest to nastiest):

1. Make the “other” an ally.
2. Stop trying to deter the “other” and simply accept that the “other” is doing something objectionable.
3. Attempt to restrain or contain the “other”

by some combination of diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, or law enforcement means.

4. Destroy the “other”.

To illustrate both what deterrence means at the most fundamental level and for just how long intellectually engaged people have been thinking about how deterrence functions, we turn to what many moderns might consider an unlikely source: the biblical Book of Job. Job comes to modern readers as one of the *Ketuvim* (כתובים), the so-called “Writings” or “Hagiographa”—the third and final section of the *Tanakh* (תנ"ך, what many non-Jewish readers refer to as the Old Testament). It is the account of a “perfect and upright” man from whom God allows Satan to take away everything of apparent value to him—his substantial wealth and livelihood, his health, his children, and the love and encouragement of those around him—in short, every external thing that one could possibly value. The only thing Satan is not allowed to take from Job is his life. Satan is certain that while Job’s righteousness is rare among men, even *he* can be deterred from continued faith in God. Satan is wrong.

The following excerpts from the Book of Job¹ provide thoughtful national security policy practitioners with occasion to reflect upon the question, “Just how many ‘Jobs’ are there—whether individuals or states—in the world today?” Whatever the precise answer, Satan seems to have been right about one thing: There *aren’t* very many. Almost every individual person or collectivity of persons has something the loss of which is so unacceptable that the individual

or collectivity will modify behavior rather than risk its loss. To discover that thing is to discover that upon which all meaningful deterrence efforts must focus.

The beginning of the story comes to us like this:

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil... And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD. And there was a day when... there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking,



Job Rebuked by His Friends (*from the Butts Set*), by William Blake, 1805. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's

house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and... the house...fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

Not one to give up, Satan co-opts Job's wife to alter her husband's cost-benefit analysis. She

mocks him, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die." But Job will not be moved, "What?", he asks, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" He cannot be persuaded to curse the Lord.

Next, up step three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who seek to comfort Job by trying to persuade him that his afflictions are the result of evil he has done and must acknowledge because, by their account, God would never afflict a righteous man with the terrible suffering and loss that has come to Job. He simply *must* have sinned. That is the only possible explanation for his wretched condition. (How "comforting" these friendly observations actually

are to Job is left for the reader to ponder.)

Job, however, simply will not assent to the proposition that his misery is the natural—perhaps inevitable—result of wrongdoing on his part. He knows in his heart that he has been a righteous and upright man. Indeed, Job, who has lost practically everything except his life, continues to be unwilling to surrender the one thing over which he still has control: his integrity. In this respect, there are two things Job simply will not compromise: his insistence that he has done nothing wrong and his insistence that he must not foolishly blame God for his suffering. His unfailing faith is characterized by such exclamations as,

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.”

Job “demands” (i.e., earnestly seeks) from God an explanation for why the afflictions have occurred without any wrongdoing being committed. When God responds with a challenge to Job’s prerogative to demand such a thing, Job “repents” (which implies not only sorrow or regret but also an actual turn in direction or a change of one’s mind) and acknowledges his subservience before his Creator. No matter what Satan throws at him, no matter how the enemy tries to alter his behavior, Job will not denounce God nor cease to follow him. In the end, God rewards Job for his integrity, chastises Job’s friends for their

insistence that his suffering could only have been the result of his wrongdoing, and blesses him with greater abundance than anything he had prior to Satan’s intervention.

However, it is not this happy ending that has principal claim on the attention of national security practitioners. Rather, it is Job’s response to not only the threat of loss but, indeed, to the *actual* loss of practically everything he has. This is so for several reasons.

First, it illustrates the principle that in order for deterrence to work, the one seeking to deter another must discover and put at risk the thing that the other essentially values. If one can hold at risk that thing which the other essentially values, the other can be deterred. If not, the other cannot be deterred.

It also strongly suggests that it’s the *risk* to value that deters. The fear of losing things valued is often harder to endure than actually losing them. (Moreover, deterrence presumably only works so long as one’s adversary retains hope that he can preserve what he values.)

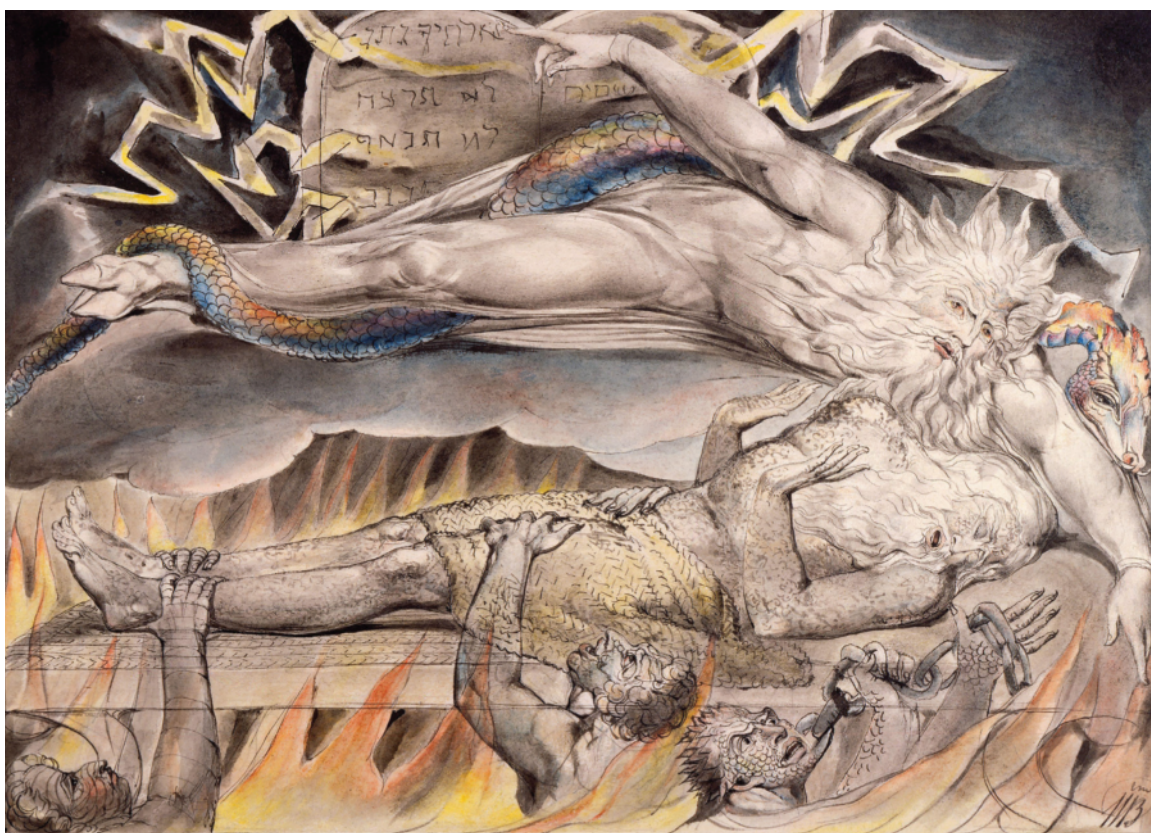
It also demonstrates that it is likely easier to deter an adversary *from* a particular action rather than to coerce an adversary *to* a particular behavior.

Second, it invites students of national security studies to ponder the following questions about Job: What is Job willing and not willing to give up? Alternatively put, what does Job truly value? What are the limits of the other to influence Job’s decisions and conduct?

Finally, it provides a *point de départ* to extrapolate from Job’s experiences and reflect



Job Confessing His Presumption to God Who Answers from the Whirlwind, by William Blake, circa 1803–05. Scottish National Gallery. Source: William Blake Archive, via Wikimedia Commons.



Job's Evil Dreams (from the Butts Set), by William Blake, 1805. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

upon contemporary problems of national security, such as the following:

- If X (i.e., state or otherwise) believes it is effectively “detering” Y but does not know what Y *essentially values*, is X actually deterring Y at all?
- If X correctly identifies that which Y *essentially values*, does the deterrence method X has chosen effectively threaten Y with the loss of that essentially valued thing?
- If X correctly identifies that which Y *essentially values* but is unable to effectively threaten Y with the loss of that thing, what other security options does X have?

As Job illustrates, there are those who simply cannot be deterred from particular behaviors

or compelled to “change one’s mind”. Even the story’s hopeful ending provides no reason whatsoever for Job to have supposed, at the relevant decision points, that anything short of death would have brought an end to his abject misery. The wise Job is unable to know the future—a trait shared with contemporary objects of deterrence. In short, the story of Job illustrates a case in which deterrence simply does not work.

The Book of Job’s salient point for national security practitioners is not that deterrence never works but rather that it does not always work. Hence, one of the security strategist’s foundational tasks is to distinguish those cases in which deterrence might work from those in which it will not. Moreover, it points to the need for resources that move beyond attempts to deter. When an adversary

cannot be persuaded to “change his mind”, one better have identified the viable alternatives to deterrence.

The Book of Job also points to an interesting but separate question of contemporary national security interest: Can persons with deep, especially religiously grounded, normative commitments be dissuaded away from that which they consider righteous? Can those motivated by extreme religious zeal—like radical suicide bombers—be deterred? Job suggests that, at least on some occasions, when ultimate things are concerned, God alone can deter those who rightly or wrongly claim to act in His name.

However, while the extremist functionary might not be open to deterrence, there’s reason to suspect their bosses can be. How do we know this? Because

their bosses do not strap on suicide vests. They hide in caves while they persuade some “other” to blow up himself or herself. A viable non-state actor deterrent strategy need not focus on the zealot wearing a suicide vest any more than a viable nuclear deterrent strategy need focus on the lieutenant sitting watch in an ICBM silo.

Indeed, deterrence strategy always must focus on where it *will* work—not on where it will not work. As the story of Job makes plain, the place to focus a deterrent strategy is always—*always*—on that thing that the key decision maker *essentially values*. Many things can be assumed to be valuable to an individual—like Job or lone, non-state actors. Likewise, many things can be assumed to be valuable to a collectivity—like Job’s friends; a non-state entity, such as Islamic State or al-Qaida; a recognized

nation-state, such as the United States or Iran; or even a multinational entity like NATO, the U.N., Microsoft, or Wal-Mart. However, not everything that an outsider may assume to be valuable is essentially valuable to the entity at issue. If one can discover what is essentially valuable to the “other” and then credibly threaten the loss of that essential value, then one can deter the “other”. Unless, this is the case, the “other” cannot be deterred.

The theory of deterrence is frequently criticized for relying upon an ultimately unprovable negative, as, indeed, it does. However, historical experience with the theory suggests that reasonable assessments as to when and under what circumstances deterrence might be expected to work are possible. And the hard, intellectual work required to distinguish between when deterrence might work

and when it positively will not work is worth the strategist’s effort. For in the absence of deterrence, the strategist is unavoidably left with four, and only four, difficult and unhappy alternatives. P

John Mark Mattox is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Defense University Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. He is a retired U.S. Army colonel, has taught at the United States Military Academy, the University of Maryland, and Missouri State University, and is the author of *Saint Augustine and the Theory of Just War*. He currently directs the Department of Defense Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Graduate Fellowship Program.

(Endnotes)

1 From the “Authorized” (King James) Version (1611), with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation preserved.



Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils, by William Blake, circa 1826. Tate Britain, London. Source: Google Art Project, via Wikimedia Commons.