

The U.S. Quest for Nuclear Primacy: The Counterforce Doctrine and the Ideology of Moral Asymmetry

When I come to study in detail some of the arguments of these new military writers about nuclear war, I will necessarily have to adopt many aspects of their own methods and terminology, that is, I will have to meet them on the methodological ground of their own choosing. I want therefore to apologise in advance for the nauseating inhumanity of much of what I have to say.

—P. M. S. Blackett¹

John Bellamy Foster

The demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 resulted in Washington declaring at that very moment that a new unipolar world order was being ushered in, with the United States now the sole superpower. The United States, supported by its NATO allies, immediately initiated a grand strategy of regime change or “naked imperialism” in the Balkans, the Middle East, northern Africa, and along the entire perimeter of the former Soviet Union. This was accompanied by the rapid expansion of NATO itself eastward into the former Warsaw Pact countries and regions previously part of the USSR.² The pivotal goal in this expansion, as explained by former U.S. National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard*, was to incorporate Ukraine into NATO, which would create the geopolitical and geostrategic conditions for the final overpowering and forced breakup of the Russian Federation.³



The “Baker” explosion, part of Operation Crossroads, a nuclear weapon test by the United States military at Bikini Atoll, Micronesia, on 25 July 1946. Source: [United States Department of Defense](#) (either the [U.S. Army](#) or the [U.S. Navy](#)), Public Domain, [Link](#).

¹ ↪ M. S. Blackett, *Studies of War: Nuclear and Conventional* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 130.

² ↪ “Excerpts from the Pentagon Plan: Preventing the Emergence of a New Rival,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992; Wesley K. Clark, *Don’t Wait for the Next War* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 37–40; John Bellamy Foster, *Naked Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006); “Notes from the Editors of *Onthly Review on Ukraine*,” – Jus Semper, 7 March 2022.

³ ↪ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 46, 92–96, 103; Grey Anderson, “Weapon of Power, Matrix of Management: NATO’s Hegemonic Formula,” *New Left Review*, 140/141 (March–June 2023): 16, 21–22.

Underlying this imperial design for the formation of a unipolar world order was Washington's effort to reestablish its absolute nuclear dominance of the early Cold War years, when it had a nuclear monopoly (1945–49), followed by a period of quantitative nuclear superiority (1949–53)—prior to the Soviet Union achieving effective nuclear parity with the United States.⁴ Attempts were made in the early 1960s during the John F. Kennedy administration to shift to counterforce (the targeting of Soviet nuclear weapons and command systems) as a means of reestablishing U.S. nuclear hegemony. This, however, was soon abandoned as impractical at the time, and the U.S. nuclear deterrence posture in the decades from the 1960s to the '80s remained one of mutual assured destruction (MAD), in which nuclear weapons were targeted primarily at enemy cities, or countervalue targets. But, with the disappearance of the USSR from the world stage in 1991, Washington abruptly abandoned MAD as its nuclear strategy, replacing it with counterforce, sometimes referred to as NUTS (after nuclear use theories or Nuclear Utilisation Target Selection).⁵ Ironically, the demise of the Soviet Union led in the United States (and NATO) to the triumph of the maximum deterrence posture, despite various strategic arms agreements, and to the seeming final defeat of those who had long argued for a minimal deterrence posture.⁶

Counterforce has as its objective nuclear primacy or first-strike capability, that is, the use of nuclear weapons for

The counterforce revolution initiated by Washington in the post-Cold War era was aimed precisely at making nuclear weapons usable.

“decapitating” the enemy's nuclear weapons before they can be launched (sometimes referred to as a “true first strike”).⁷

Moreover, counterforce also lends itself to the idea of limited nuclear war and can therefore be seen as operating within a

continuum that also includes nonstrategic or tactical nuclear weapons and conventional weapons, thus representing the full integration of nuclear weapons into military strategy at every level. Under MAD, resting on countervalue targeting, nuclear weapons were seen as unusable in promoting political and military ends (only to be employed in the case of massive retaliation), whereas the counterforce revolution initiated by Washington in the post-Cold War era was aimed precisely at making nuclear weapons usable.⁸

The long-running nuclear deterrence debate between minimalists (sometimes referred to as “nuclear revolutionaries”), such as Patrick Blackett, George Kennan, and Bernard Brodie, and maximalists such as Albert Wohlstetter, Herman Kahn, Henry Kissinger, and Thomas Schelling, in what is sometimes referred to as the “golden age” of nuclear deterrence strategy, rested primarily on the question of countervalue versus counterforce targeting.⁹ For the minimalists, MAD, based on countervalue targeting and nuclear parity, was the most stable condition of deterrence since no side could then hope to benefit from a nuclear war, creating a lasting nuclear stalemate. In contrast, maximalists argued for the development of a counterforce strategy aimed at nuclear primacy of the United States (and NATO) as the only stable solution to the problem of nuclear deterrence. The maximalist argument—as Blackett, the celebrated British socialist,

⁴ ↪ M. S. Blackett, *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 27–33; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (2006): 42–54; Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 649–63.

⁵ ↪ John T. Correll, “The Ups and Down of Counterforce,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, October 1, 2005; Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 120–23; 178–79; Spurgeon M. Keeny and Wolfgang K. H. Panofsky, “MAD vs. NUTS: Can Doctrine or Weaponry Remedy the Mutual Hostage Relationship of the Superpowers?,” *Foreign Affairs* 60, no. 2 (1981): 287–304; William D. Hartung, “Bush's Nuclear Doctrine: From MAD to NUTS?,” *Institute for Policy Studies*, December 1, 2000, ips-dc.org.

⁶ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 649.

⁷ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 668.

⁸ ↪ Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 22.

⁹ ↪ Michael Joseph Smith, “Nuclear Deterrence: Behind the Strategic and Ethical Debate,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 63, no. 1 (1987): 1–22; Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 666, 672; Michael Howard, “Brodie, Wohlstetter and American Nuclear Strategy,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 34, no. 2 (1992): 107–16.

Nobel prize-winning physicist, and founder of military operational research, demonstrated—derived its coherence from the assumption of “moral asymmetry” between East and West, a position that represented the failure of reason.¹⁰ It was Blackett’s early critique of the maximum deterrence posture that constitutes the most penetrating theoretical challenge to the counterforce doctrine up to the present day.¹¹

The coincidence of declining U.S. hegemony in the world economy with the U.S. attempt to secure unipolar dominance through military means, in line with its current policy of maximal deterrence by means of counterforce and nuclear primacy, has all come to a head in the current proxy war in Ukraine between the United States/NATO and Russia, and in the increasing tensions over Taiwan between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. The ongoing conflicts over Ukraine and Taiwan constitute the main hot spots in the New Cold War emanating from Washington, involving actual and potential proxy war on the very borders of superpowers. This has enormously increased the likelihood of global thermonuclear war. This in turn poses the threat of global annihilation with the onset of nuclear winter, as smoke and soot from all-encompassing fires in one hundred or more cities would block out solar radiation, drastically lowering global temperatures and resulting, within a couple of years, in the effective annihilation of the global population.¹²

The Critique of Maximum Deterrence

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the maximalists were able to achieve complete dominance over the minimalists within establishment circles, marked by the first U.S. “Nuclear Posture Review” in 1994.¹³ Nevertheless, the critique of maximum deterrence that arose in the preceding decades, and which has been closely tied to the world peace movements, needs to be unearthed and resurrected in the nuclear crisis of our times.

The greatest critique of the doctrine of maximum deterrence in the “golden age” of nuclear deterrence was launched by Blackett in his 1948 book, *Fear, War, and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy*, which appeared almost simultaneously with the announcement of his receiving the Nobel Prize in physics for his experimental work in nuclear physics.¹⁴ That book was followed by two others on nuclear weapons strategy: *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations* (1956) and *Studies of War: Nuclear and Conventional* (1962).

Blackett was a leading British socialist thinker, part of the social relations of science movement, associated with J. D. Bernal, and a close colleague of other British socialists, including Bernal, J. B. S. Haldane, C. H. Waddington, and Solly Zuckerman.¹⁵ Blackett was president of the left-wing Association of Scientific Workers from 1943 to 1947. He was also a close friend of the physicist Robert Oppenheimer in the United States, who headed the Manhattan Project.¹⁶ In his 1935 essay, “The Frustration of Science,” appearing in a book by the same name—a volume to which Bernal also contributed, and which had a foreword by Frederick Soddy—Blackett argued for “complete socialism” and declared that capitalism

¹⁰ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 138.

¹¹ ↪ Rajesh Basrur, “Nuclear Deterrence: The Wohlstetter-Blackett Debate Revisited,” RSIS Working Paper No. 271, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, April 15, 2014; Mary Jo Nye, *Blackett: Physics, War, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 65–99.

¹² ↪ See John Bellamy Foster, “‘Notes on Exterminism’ for the Twenty-First-Century,” – Jus Semper, June 2022.

¹³ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 649–50.

¹⁴ ↪ M. S. Blackett, *Fear, War and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1949). The subtitle of the book was the title of the 1948 British edition; the title *Fear, War and the Bomb* was added for the U.S. edition.

¹⁵ ↪ On the British Marxist scientists and the social relations of science movement, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 367–73, 457–76.

¹⁶ ↪ Blackett, *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations*, 73.

was a “retrograde movement” that shaded over into fascism. He had great admiration for the achievements of the Soviet Union in the realms of science and industry.¹⁷

Like a number of other left scientists—notably Bernal, Haldane, and Zuckerman—Blackett, who had served in the British navy, was a leading figure in the formation of British military strategy during the Second World War. He was the “father” of the field of military operational research. He played a critical role in developing the radar chain that was to prove the key weapon in the air war, known as the Battle of Britain, and in organising anti-aircraft defences. His greatest achievement in the war, however, was in “helping devise the convoy system to deal with the [German] U-boat offensive in the Atlantic.”¹⁸

In August 1945, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee appointed Blackett to the newly established Advisory Committee on Atomic Energy. He was also appointed to the Chief of Staff Committee on Future Weapons. Blackett strongly opposed British development of nuclear weapons and supported a policy of neutrality toward the Soviet Union. With the termination of the Advisory Committee in 1947, he engaged publicly in the debate over the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁹

In *Fear, War and the Bomb*, Blackett dealt with the U.S. decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“The dropping of the atomic bombs was not so much the last military act of the Second World War”... Rather than a result of the need “to save American lives,” as is commonly claimed, the haste in dropping the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and then a second bomb on Nagasaki three days later, had to do with the fact that the Soviet Union was preparing to enter the war against Japan. The U.S. objective, Blackett explained, was thus to force an unconditional Japanese surrender before the Soviets could advance very far into Manchuria, and to ensure that the Japanese surrender was to the U.S. alone.

Here it was argued for the first time that “the dropping of the atomic bombs was not so much the last military act of the Second World War, as the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia now in progress.” The Japanese had already offered to negotiate peace terms, while a U.S. invasion of Japan was still in the planning stage and was not to take place for some time. Rather than a result of the need “to save American lives,” as is commonly claimed, the haste in dropping the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and then a second bomb on Nagasaki three days later, had to do with the fact that the Soviet

Union was preparing to enter the war against Japan on August 8, commencing their offensive in Manchuria on August 9. The U.S. objective, Blackett explained, was thus to force an unconditional Japanese surrender before the Soviets could advance very far into Manchuria, and to ensure that the Japanese surrender was to the United States alone.²⁰

Blackett’s analysis was subjected to heavy criticism in a forum on his book in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, but received support from the Manhattan Project physicist Philip Morrison, who indicated that the scientists responsible for making the bomb were pushed to meet a “mysterious” deadline in which it was to be ready by “a date near August tenth.”²¹ The proposition that the dropping of the atomic bombs was not, in reality, the last act of the Second World War,

¹⁷ ↪ M. S. Blackett, “The Frustration of Science,” in *The Frustration of Science*, eds. Daniel Hall et al. (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1935), 137, 140–44.

¹⁸ ↪ Gregg Herken, Albert Wohlstetter, Thomas Powers, and response by Lord Zuckerman, “‘Counsels of War’: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, November 21, 1985; Nye, Blackett, 67–85.

¹⁹ ↪ Blackett, *Fear, War and the Bomb*, v–vi; Bernard Lovell, “Blackett in War and Peace,” *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 39, no. 3 (1988): 228.

²⁰ ↪ Blackett, *Fear, War and the Bomb*, 131–39.

²¹ ↪ Philip Morrison, “Blackett’s Analysis of the Issue,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 5, no. 2 (1949): 40; Nye, Blackett, 91. Morrison was a columnist for *Monthly Review* from 1956 to 1961.

but rather the first act in the Cold War was to be verified in later historical studies by figures such as Gar Alperovitz and Robert Jay Lifton.²²

Blackett showed in *Fear, War and the Bomb* that there was strong sentiment initially in strategic circles in the United States for using the atomic bomb on Soviet cities in a first strike, since the USSR did not at that time have the bomb and was not expected to develop it and have a stockpile until 1953. In 1948, Winston Churchill had argued for threatening the Soviet Union with a preventative nuclear war. Nevertheless, Blackett, seeking to promote sanity, argued at the time that from a military standpoint, atomic bombs, however devastating, could not defeat the Soviet Union, any more than strategic bombing had been effective against Germany. The Soviet Union had a large conventional military, and in the event of a U.S./NATO nuclear first strike, would almost certainly overrun Europe.

By the time Blackett wrote *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations*, the situation had changed entirely. The Soviet Union had its first atomic weapons test in August 1949, a mere four years after the United States atom-bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In August 1953, the USSR carried out its first hydrogen bomb test, less than a year after the United States. At that time, the Soviet Union had achieved effective nuclear parity with the United States in everything but delivery. It was at this point that the nuclear deterrence debate took off in earnest. Blackett insisted on the importance of the strategic stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union: “Today strategical atomic weapons have not only cancelled themselves out and so made all-out total war exceedingly unlikely, but have finally abolished the possibility of victory by air power alone against a great power.... I think we should act as if atomic and hydrogen bombs have abolished total war and concentrate our efforts on working out how few atomic bombs and their carriers are required to keep it abolished.”

Recognising that NATO was relying on tactical nuclear weapons as a response to the Soviet Union’s larger conventional force, together with the European disinclination to go to the expense of equaling it, Blackett saw such nonstrategic nuclear weapons as a major problem. His answer was to consider a policy of using “no atomic bombs at all—not even on the battlefield.”²³ He came out firmly against U.S. maximalist doctrine of “graduated deterrence” or the notion of the use of nuclear weapons at various levels of escalation, stretching from battlefield use all the way to a true first strike, in order to achieve political and military objectives.²⁴

Blackett was strongly supportive of Oppenheimer, who by that time had come under attack in the McCarthyite atmosphere in the United States. He explained that Oppenheimer’s initial concrete opposition to the hydrogen bomb had been based on its poor design. But Oppenheimer’s subsequent deeper opposition, and that of the Manhattan Project scientists more broadly, was a response to the way in which the atomic bomb had been used, unnecessarily, in the war. As Blackett pointed out, “There is a little-noticed passage in the Hearings. When Oppenheimer was asked when his opposition to the H-bomb started, he replied, ‘I think it was when I realised that this country would tend to use any weapon they had.’”²⁵

²² ↪ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America* (New York: Harper, 1996); Ben Norton, “Atomic Bombing of Japan Was not Necessary to End WWII: US Government Documents Admit it,” *Geopolitical Economy*, August 7, 2023.

²³ ↪ Blackett, *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations*, 99–100.

²⁴ ↪ Michael Howard, “Blackett and the Origins of Nuclear Strategy,” *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 36, no. 2 (1985): 92.

²⁵ ↪ Blackett, *Atomic Weapons and East-West Relations*, 78; In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer, April 15–May 6, 1954, Before the Personal Security Board (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), 250.

Despite his enormous prestige as a Nobel laureate in physics and as the founder of military operational research, Blackett's attempt to promote a rational, minimalist deterrence strategy downplaying or even removing nuclear weapons resulted in Cold War-style attacks on him as a Communist fellow traveler. He was "the most outspoken and the most vilified of British scientists who opposed American and British nuclear policies from the mid-1940s to around 1960."²⁶ George Orwell put Blackett on his secret blacklist of crypto communists, though he apparently did not know who Blackett was, characterising him incorrectly as a "scientific populariser." The Cold War sociologist Edward Shils wrote an article for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* entitled "Blackett's Apologia for the Soviet Position," calling Blackett's careful analysis in *Fear, War and the Bomb* "a gift to Soviet propaganda."²⁷ Both MI5 in Britain and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States had him under surveillance, with MI5 recording all of his phone calls but discovering nothing. Blackett was attacked in *Scientific American* for having a "pro-Soviet prejudice."²⁸ Nevertheless, it was impossible to ignore Blackett or set him entirely aside due to his enormous credibility both in scientific and military circles, his cogent arguments on nuclear deterrence, and his direct confrontation with nuclear maximalists such as Wohlstetter, Kahn, and Kissinger.

The first part of Blackett's *Studies of War* on nuclear deterrence consisted of essays that he had written between 1948 and 1962, the earlier ones overlapping with his first two books on the subject. However, *Studies of War* also included essays written on nuclear strategy between 1958 and 1962. During this period, between the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the nuclear debate had intensified. Especially notable was Blackett's 1961 article "Critique of Some Contemporary Defence Thinking," which constituted his most important contribution to what is known as the Blackett-Wohlstetter debate, representing the minimalist versus maximalist views on nuclear war.²⁹ Although Blackett's earlier work on nuclear deterrence had caused him to be characterised as an "atomic heretic," *Studies of War*, appearing around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, was received favourably in higher circles in the West as well as the general public and was seen as representing the nuclear consensus of the time.³⁰ Maximalists in subsequent years therefore set the overturning of Blackett's analysis as one of their principal objects in their campaign to make nuclear weapons usable.

In "Critique of Some Contemporary Defence Thinking" and in other essays in *Studies of War*, Blackett offered a classic critique in the sense of German philosophy and Marxian theory, in which the inner logic and contradictions of the maximalist position on nuclear weapons were shown to represent the irrationalist destruction of reason. He argued that Soviet nuclear parity with the United States had created a nuclear stalemate in which the use of nuclear weapons against another similarly armed nuclear nation was unthinkable "by any nation that wanted to survive."³¹ His argument was directed against three of the main maximalist thinkers: Kissinger, Kahn, and Wohlstetter. Kissinger's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957) argued against the then current policy of reliance on MAD, and instead advocated that the

²⁶ ↪ Nye, Blackett, 66.

²⁷ ↪ Nye, Blackett, 2–4, 66, 90–93; Edward Shils, "Blackett's Apologia for the Soviet Position," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 5, no. 2 (1949): 34–37.

²⁸ ↪ Camille Rebouillat-Sarti, "MI5 and Atomic Scientists (1945–1958): The Case of Patrick Blackett," September 11, 2022, byarcadia.org; Nye, Blackett, 92; Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear*

²⁹ ↪ Blackett's essay "A Critique of Defence Thinking" was first published in *Encounter* magazine in April 1961 and was reprinted, along with most of his other articles on nuclear deterrence, in his *Studies of War*. *Encounter* was a publication of the social democratic, anti-Communist left, and was one of a number of publications secretly funded by the CIA. Blackett, as a Nobel laureate, was clearly sought out for the publication. But unlike others who published in *Encounter*, he did not engage in attacks on the left but devoted his article entirely to the critique of the nuclear establishment.

³⁰ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 73–77.

³¹ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 77.

United States develop nonstrategic or tactical nuclear weapons that could be used for limited nuclear war and would be available as an extension of politics.³²

Kissinger's position was strongly rejected by Blackett and by the leading U.S. minimalist thinker, Kennan, best known as the developer of the U.S. Cold War "containment" strategy. Blackett pointed out that Kissinger's argument was predicated on the West unilaterally deploying tactical nuclear weapons that could be directed against Soviet conventional forces, with Europe, both East and West, as the battleground. According to Kissinger, NATO could use tactical nuclear weapons in a first strike with the expectation that the Soviets would not respond with massive retaliation, and thus endanger their own country. Moreover, in such a limited nuclear war, Kissinger argued, Western soldiers would be superior in their use of tactical nuclear weapons, as compared with the Soviets, even if the latter were to develop such capabilities—a view that Blackett referred to as "plain poppycock." Indeed, "the initiation by the West of tactical nuclear war might either hasten military defeat, or lead to the destruction of Europe by H-bombs—or both."³³ Blackett opposed those like Kahn, who, in works such as *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1962), argued that a nuclear war could be won and survived through such measures as civil defence. Blackett retorted that civil defence in a nuclear war was impracticable.³⁴

Kahn coined the distinction between countervalue and counterforce.³⁵ With the emergence of nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union and the dominance of MAD, which declared nuclear weapons unusable, the maximalists devoted all their efforts to arguing that any nuclear balance was unstable and that the only answer for the United States was the development of counterforce weapons aimed at a first-strike capability or nuclear primacy. The leading advocate of this position in the early 1960s was Wohlstetter, who, like Kahn, Schelling, and other maximalists, was employed by the RAND Corporation.

The key work launching the case that MAD was unstable and arguing for the United States to switch to a counterforce strategy was Wohlstetter's "The Delicate Balance of Terror," published in the Council on Foreign Relations' magazine, *Foreign Affairs*, in 1959.³⁶ Wohlstetter heavily criticised Blackett and others who argued that "mutual extinction" was "the only outcome" of a general nuclear war, thus adopting the MAD position. Instead, Wohlstetter argued that counterforce attack or first strike could theoretically eliminate the ability of the other side to carry out a second strike, thus raising the question of the "survivability" of the nuclear second-strike capability in the nation attacked. A first strike could thus be seen, in Wohlstetter's view, as a "sane" policy for an attacker. This then required the United States to pursue first-strike capability or nuclear primacy and the modernisation of nuclear weapons for greater accuracy and maximum deterrence. Subtly built into Wohlstetter's argument, but constituting the whole basis for his claim that the current nuclear parity was unstable, was the presumption the Soviets would not be deterred by ten million or even more deaths since they had suffered twenty million deaths in the Second World War. Moreover, Wohlstetter's whole case relied on the assumption that there was what Blackett labeled in his critique a "moral asymmetry" between the United States and the Soviet Union, in which U.S. nuclear primacy represented no danger to the USSR, while Russian nuclear parity represented a very real threat of a nuclear attack on the United States.³⁷

³² ↪ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper Brothers [for the Council on Foreign

³³ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 58–63.

³⁴ ↪ Nye, Blackett, 95–97, 218; Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

³⁵ ↪ See Carl Sagan and Richard Turco, *A Path Where No Man Thought: Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race* (New York: Random House, 1990), 215.

³⁶ ↪ Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 2 (1959): 211–34.

³⁷ ↪ Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," 212, 217, 222, 226; Blackett, *Studies of War*, 128–46.

Blackett's response to Wohlstetter was devastating. The noted British military historian Michael Howard called it a

True first-strike capability would require the destruction, not simply of 90 percent of the nuclear weapons on the other side, but would in fact require a 99 percent destruction of the opposing nuclear forces, and even that would not be enough if megadeaths were to be avoided on the side of the attacker as well as the attacked.

"ferocious critique."³⁸ Using arithmetical examples he pointed to the fact that true first-strike capability would require the destruction, not simply of 90 percent of the nuclear weapons on the other side—itsself an impossibility given the technical problems involved, the number of targets, the near-automatic push-button responses of the other side, and the immense intelligence difficulties—but would in fact require a 99 percent destruction of the

opposing nuclear forces, and even that would not be enough if megadeaths were to be avoided on the side of the attacker as well as the attacked. Hence, increased accuracy would not obviate "the essential insanity of a first-strike policy." Blackett pointed out that Wohlstetter believed that a U.S. first strike on the Soviet Union would have been sane at the time that the United States had a nuclear monopoly or even when it simply had nuclear superiority. For those like Wohlstetter, the goal was to reestablish the basis for such a "sane" first strike.³⁹

Most important was Blackett's criticism of Wohlstetter's notion of the "moral asymmetry" between the United States and the USSR. As Wohlstetter wrote, "they [the Soviets] make sensible strategic choices and we do not," meaning they would undoubtedly use nuclear superiority (or even nuclear parity) as a basis for a nuclear attack to achieve their ends, but the United States would not, due to its higher morality.⁴⁰

In response, Blackett stated, "Wohlstetter's doctrine seems to be that the West must plan on the enemy's capability, but the USSR should plan on the West's intentions," which are assumed to be benign. By "introducing a large and arbitrary degree of moral asymmetry between the two contestants" as a "methodological device," Wohlstetter, according to Blackett, saw "the period 1954 to 1957 [when Russia 'had no effective power of hitting America at all' with missiles]...to be a safe period because, though America had a large nuclear superiority, she was pacific, while the present time is dangerous because this superiority is less and the USSR is aggressive."⁴¹ It was this kind of dangerous logic, Blackett insisted, that was behind demands of the maximalists that the United States should attempt "to regain a first counterforce capability by improved missiles and reconnaissance satellites."⁴²

Arguing strenuously for "the policy of the minimum deterrence," Blackett insisted that "enough is enough."⁴³ However, if the maximalists were to have their way and get Washington to pursue counterforce or first-strike capability, the Soviet Union and China would have to respond at a certain point by taking actions to ensure the survivability of their deterrence as a matter of pure defence, which would then set off an endless nuclear arms race and increase the dangers of a nuclear war.⁴⁴ He was sharply critical of those at RAND, like Schelling, who used game theory as a way of creating false scenarios of limited nuclear warfare and counterforce strategies in the irrational pursuit of continuing nuclear

³⁸ ↪ Howard, "Blackett and the Origins of Nuclear Strategy," 94.

³⁹ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 131–34.

⁴⁰ ↪ Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," 222.

⁴¹ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 162.

⁴² ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 135–41.

⁴³ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 153.

⁴⁴ ↪ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 157.

modernization spending. In 1962, Blackett again raised the issue of nuclear disarmament, which, he suggested, would have to be done on an extremely large scale or it would be ineffective.⁴⁵

In the 1980s, the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations attempted to place nuclear-armed cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles in Europe, ostensibly in response to the Soviet SS-20—a more survivable intermediate-range missile that was seen as reducing NATO's first-strike capability.⁴⁶ The U.S. response was introducing new counterforce missiles with Europe as the base of operations. This was coupled with the U.S. plan to introduce the Strategic Defense Initiative, better known as Star Wars, an overall missile defense system. This too was only meaningful in terms of a first strike or counterforce attack. The result was the development of an enormous anti-nuclear movement in Europe, in which the Marxist historian E. P. Thompson played a major role as the leading spokesperson for European Nuclear Disarmament.⁴⁷ In the United States, these developments generated the nuclear freeze movement. In this context, Wohlstetter once again sought to criticise Blackett, who had died in 1974, for his criticisms of maximum deterrence and game theory. Zuckerman responded by referring back to Blackett's issue of moral asymmetry embedded in the work of Wohlstetter and all the other U.S. counterforce strategists.⁴⁸

The U.S. Pursuit of Nuclear Primacy: From 1991 to Now

It is one of the great ironies of our time that the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War led to the immediate triumph of the maximum deterrence doctrine in Washington and the pursuit of nuclear primacy through the

The way was then open to the initiation of a full counterforce strategy... "counterforce remains the sacrosanct principle of American nuclear strategy."

development of counterforce capabilities. Despite nuclear arms agreements initially put into place and reductions in nuclear warheads, the basic structure of nuclear forces was left intact, while Washington saw this as a chance to secure global nuclear primacy or true first-strike capability, and thus absolute nuclear dominance. "Minimum deterrence," according to Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels in their classic work, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, "still had its supporters but they constituted a minority," and were greatly weakened.⁴⁹ The way was then open to the initiation of a full counterforce strategy. As Janne E. Nolan of the Arms Control Association declared, "counterforce remains the sacrosanct principle of American nuclear strategy."⁵⁰

Since the U.S. nuclear strategy is based on counterforce, building the capability for a first strike arriving as a "bolt from the blue," with antimissile systems picking off the few weapons that survive, it requires the unification of "offensive" and "defensive" nuclear weapons.⁵¹ The overall goal is ensuring the non-survivability of command-and-control centers and nuclear weapons systems on the other side. Antiballistic missile systems, which are regarded as practically useless in

⁴⁵ ↩ Blackett, *Studies of War*, 144, 163–64.

⁴⁶ ↩ Freeman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 415–16.

⁴⁷ ↩ See E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds., *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981); E. P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Steve Breyman, *Why Movements Matter: The West German Peace Movement and U.S. Arms Control Policy* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 2001; Christos Efstathiou, P. Thompson: *A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (London: Merlin Press, 2015), 116–65.

⁴⁸ ↩ Wohlstetter and Zuckerman in "Counsels of War." Wohlstetter wrote a highly polemical essay attacking Blackett principally, but also Zuckerman and C. P. Snow for their criticisms of, in Wohlstetter's ironic language, "the excessively sophisticated theory of the American" game theorists in the development of nuclear deterrence strategy which had come to "corrupt" the "intuitive common sense of English thinkers," forgetting perhaps that he was criticizing, in the case of Blackett in particular, both one of the world's greatest physicists and also the founder of military operational research. Albert Wohlstetter, "Sins and Games in America," in *Game Theory and Related Approaches to Social Behavior*, ed. Martin Shubik (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), 209–25.

⁴⁹ ↩ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 649, 671.

⁵⁰ ↩ Janne Nolan quoted in Correll, "The Ups and Downs of Counterf

⁵¹ ↩ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 651.

defending against a full-scale first strike, are not mainly defensive weapons, but are meant to ensure that the few nuclear weapons in the country attacked that manage to survive in the face of a first strike are picked off before they can reach their targets. Hence, nuclear missile defence systems are chiefly intended to enhance first-strike capability.⁵²

Faced with the prospect of a first strike, there are only four ways in which a nuclear power can protect its deterrent: (1) redundancy of such weapons since the more targets there are the more difficult it is for an attacker to carry out a successful first strike; (2) hardening missile silos to protect the strategic deterrent from incoming missiles; (3) hiding the nuclear weapons, by means of submarine-based nuclear weapons and mobile ground-based missiles/missile launchers; and (4) (most questionable of all) reliance on doomsday machines, which enable a massive retaliation that can be set off at a moment's notice, almost automatically, with barely any human intervention.⁵³

With these conditions in mind, it is possible to understand the otherwise seemingly contradictory actions of Washington with respect to nuclear arms control and development since the demise of the Soviet Union. A big emphasis has been placed by all U.S. presidents, from Reagan to Joe Biden, on developing nuclear missile defence systems, seen as crucial to an effective counterforce strategy. The George H. W. Bush administration, while moving away from Reagan's Star Wars, chose to promote the "Global Protection Against Limited Strikes" program. This was pushed forward by the Bill Clinton administration, which offered a scheme for National Missile Defense. However, missile defence systems could not be put into operation while the United States remained bound to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which led to the George W. Bush administration's unilateral withdrawal from the treaty in 2002. In 2007, the Bush administration decided to expand its two missile defence sites in California and Alaska and add a "Third Site" in Europe, under the cover of protecting Europe from Iran (a non-nuclear power), but the Russians naturally understood this as directed at them. In 2008, this system was integrated with the general NATO defence missile system. The Barack Obama administration revised this plan by placing missile defence systems aimed at longer-range ballistic missiles (yet also capable of launching offensive nuclear-armed missiles) in Poland and Romania.⁵⁴

At the same time, as missile defence systems were being introduced in Europe, stockpiles of nuclear warheads held by the United States and Russia were reduced.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, in 2023 the United States still had 5,244 strategic nuclear warheads, France 290, the United Kingdom 225, and Russia (seeking to match all three NATO nuclear powers) 5,889. China, meanwhile, had 410.⁵⁶

Washington's reductions in the number of nuclear warheads, in line with parallel reductions by Moscow, appear to have been aimed at cooling nuclear tensions. However, this policy conformed to its overall counterforce strategy, as redundancy in the sheer numbers of such weapons is one of the main means of ensuring the survival of a nuclear deterrent. Coupled with the modernisation of its nuclear weapons systems for greater accuracy and enhanced means of detection of nuclear submarines and mobile ground-based missiles, the United States was able to move rapidly toward its goal of nuclear primacy. According to Cynthia Roberts of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace at Columbia

⁵² ↪ Andrey Baklitskiy, James Cameron, and Steven Pifer, "Missile Defense and the Offense-Defense Relationship," Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, October 28, 2021, fsi.stanford.edu; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017): 12, 49.

⁵³ ↪ Lieber and Press, "The New Era of Counterforce," 16–17; Lieber and Press, "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," 44–45; Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine*, 306, 323.

⁵⁴ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 657–61; Jack Detsch, "Putin's Fixation with an Old-School U.S. Missile Launcher," *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2022.

⁵⁵ ↪ Hans M. Kristensen, "How Presidents Arm and Disarm," *Federation of American Scientists*, October 12, 2014, fas.org.

⁵⁶ ↪ Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Kate Kohn, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," *Federation of American Scientists*, March 31, 2023.

University, in “Revelations About Russia’s Deterrence Policy,” “Russians perceive further U.S. improvements to strategic forces, both conventional and nuclear, as part of a continuous effort to stalk Russia’s nuclear deterrent and deny Moscow a viable second-strike option,” with the objective of effectively eliminating its nuclear deterrent through “decapitation.”⁵⁷

In 2006, nuclear analysts globally were startled by the appearance in Foreign Affairs, the flagship publication of the Council of Foreign Relations, of an article by Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press entitled “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy.”⁵⁸ Lieber and Press indicated that the United States had been in pursuit of true first-strike capability since the end of the Cold War and was now “on the verge of attaining nuclear primacy.... Unless Washington’s policies change or Moscow and Beijing take steps to increase the size and readiness of their forces, Russia and China—and the rest of the world—will live in the shadow of U.S. nuclear primacy for many years to come.” Indeed, “the weight of the evidence,” they wrote, “suggests that Washington is, in fact, deliberately seeking nuclear primacy.”⁵⁹

The United States, Lieber and Press contended, had already obtained nuclear primacy in relation to China, which could not then protect either its hardened missile silos or its nuclear submarines (due to noise level, though this was being reduced), and was near to having a credible first-strike capability in relation to Russia as well. Weapons such as nuclear-armed cruise missiles, nuclear submarines able to fire their far more accurate missiles with low-yield warheads near the shore, and low-lying B-2 stealth bombers and stealth fighters carrying cruise missiles and nuclear gravity bombs could more effectively eliminate hardened missile silos. More advanced remote sensing technology, in which the United States had the lead, had greatly enhanced its ability to detect and target mobile land-based missiles and nuclear submarines.⁶⁰ The extension east of NATO made it possible to place nuclear weapons systems (including missile defence systems) much closer to Moscow. The increased accuracy of U.S. missiles and guided gravity bombs, moreover, means that the nuclear weapons of target countries are increasingly vulnerable to conventional weapons with non-nuclear warheads.⁶¹

The announcement that the United States was, at least theoretically, on the verge of having first-strike capability set off alarms in Russia and China, leading to massive new efforts to protect the survivability of their nuclear weapons and measures to defend against a counterforce strategy through the development of new hypersonic missile technology, which could elude antiballistic missile systems. China has referred to this as an “assassin’s mace,” a weapon chiefly advantageous to those challenging a more powerful opponent.⁶² In 2007, disturbed by the U.S. attempt to obtain nuclear primacy and the related expansion of

In 2007, disturbed by the U.S. attempt to obtain nuclear primacy and the related expansion of NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin unequivocally declared that there would be no unipolar world. Nevertheless, NATO in 2008 both declared that it intended to bring Ukraine into NATO and went forward with its plans to place missile defence systems in Poland and Romania.

NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin unequivocally declared that there would be no unipolar world.⁶³ Nevertheless,

⁵⁷ ↪ Cynthia Roberts, “Revelations About Russian Nuclear Deterrence Policy,” War on the Rocks (Texas National Security Review), June 19, 2020, warontherocks.com.

⁵⁸ ↪ Lieber and Press, “The Rise of Nuclear Primacy.”

⁵⁹ ↪ Lieber and Press, “The Rise of Nuclear Primacy,” 43, 50.

⁶⁰ ↪ Lieber and Press, “The Rise of Nuclear Primacy,” 45; Lieber and Press, “The New Era of Counterforce,” 18–19; Kris Osborn, “US Air Force Stealth Bomber Missions Deploy Over Europe,” Warrior Maven, Center for Military Modernization, August

⁶¹ ↪ Ian Bowers, “Counterforce Dilemmas and the Risk of Nuclear War in East Asia,” supplement 1, Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament 5 (2022): 9, 14.

⁶² ↪ Richard Stone, “‘National Pride Is at Stake’: Russia, China, United States Rush to Build Hypersonic Weapons,” Science, January 8, 2020. As Bowers notes, Chinese submarines are also vulnerable due to the fact that China’s “access routes to the Pacific are difficult to traverse without detection, as the Chinese vessels must transit through Japanese- and U.S.-controlled choke points.... There is data that China’s emphasis on controlling the South China Sea is in part driven by the need to create a protected patrol area where its SSBN fleet could securely operate” (Bowers, “Counterforce Dilemmas and the Risk of Nuclear War in East Asia,” 12).

⁶³ ↪ Diana Johnstone, “Doomsday Postponed?” in From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning, ed. Paul Johnstone (Atlanta: Clarity, 2017), 277.

NATO in 2008 both declared that it intended to bring Ukraine into NATO and went forward with its plans to place missile defence systems in Poland and Romania. The Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense facilities that were installed in these countries are also potential offensive weapons capable of launching nuclear-armed Tomahawk cruise missiles.⁶⁴

The United States, through NATO, has always relied on a first-strike strategy based on both nonstrategic and strategic nuclear weapons, forming the core of NATO's defence, first against the Soviet Union's conventional forces, and then against those of Russia, under the umbrella of U.S. "extended deterrence."⁶⁵ Although the Soviet Union, like China today, had a no-first-strike policy—while post-Soviet Russia has declared that it will only use nuclear weapons in a first strike if the Russian state/territory is directly threatened—all U.S. presidents down to the present office-holder have reconfirmed U.S. first-strike policy.⁶⁶ For Washington, nuclear weapons (both strategic and tactical) are "on the table" all over the world, even in some cases against non-nuclear powers, a policy reinforced by the imperial outreach of the United States, which maintains at least eight hundred military bases abroad.⁶⁷ Although Obama had declared in his race to the presidency that he intended to seek "a world in which there are no nuclear weapons," he adopted a more maximalist position upon entering the White House, while rejecting a no-first-strike pledge.⁶⁸ The deputy assistant secretary for nuclear and missile defence policy in the Obama administration placed in charge of writing the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review was Brad Roberts, a nuclear hawk deeply committed to a strategy of nuclear first use. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review "reaffirmed a doctrine of counterforce and rejected changing to focus on counter-value targets." Shortly after leaving the administration, Roberts published *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century*, which argued that the United States should be ready and willing to engage in nuclear war fighting at every level. The Obama administration initiated a thirty-year, \$1 trillion upgrade in U.S. nuclear weapons in line with counterforce strategy.⁶⁹

In 2014, the United States backed the Maidan color revolution/coup in Ukraine, which removed the democratically elected president Viktor Yanukovich. This led to a civil war in Ukraine between the government in Kyiv controlled by NATO-backed Ukrainian nationalists, on the one hand, and Russian-speaking separatists in the Donbass region, supported by Russia, on the other. In 2022, Russia, after NATO continually ignored its red lines, firmly intervened on the side of the separatists. Faced with a U.S./NATO proxy war in Ukraine, Russia put its nuclear forces on alert.⁷⁰ Suddenly, a global thermonuclear exchange endangering the entire global population with annihilation (via nuclear winter) became an imminent threat.

The Donald Trump administration, meanwhile, had unilaterally withdrawn from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 and from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020. Unilateral withdrawal from these treaties was favorable to Washington

⁶⁴ ↪ NATO, Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008, nato.int; Detsch, "Putin's Fixation with an Old-School U.S. Missile Launcher."

⁶⁵ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 640–45, 678; Anderson, "Weapon of Power, Matrix of Management," 112.

⁶⁶ ↪ Octavio Bellomo, "Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons Use and Deterrence Over Ukraine," *Finabel: European Army Interoperability Centre*, January 26, 2023, finabel.org; Gregory Kulacki, "Would China Use Nuclear Weapons First in a War with the United States?," *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2020.

⁶⁷ ↪ David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 2, 279–97.

⁶⁸ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 652–54.

⁶⁹ ↪ Freedman and Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 654.

⁷⁰ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, John Ross, and Deborah Venezia, *Washington's New Cold War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 81–83; Shannon Bugos, "Putin Orders Russian Nuclear Weapons on Higher Alert," *Arms Control Association*

in allowing it to further develop its counterforce capabilities. Louisiana Tech Research Institute's Guide to Nuclear Deterrence in the Age of Great Power Competition (2020), written by nuclear arms experts for the around thirty thousand members of the U.S. Air Force Global Strike force and seven hundred thousand airmen all told, declared that "the United States has never been content with a mere second-strike capability," and was prepared for a first strike and winning a nuclear war as part of its maximum deterrence posture.⁷¹

In early January 2023, the United States cleared the C-17A Air Force transport plane for shipping B61-12 nuclear bombs to Europe in a more rapid introduction of the bombs than originally scheduled.⁷² The B61-12 nuclear bomb has been designated by National Interest as "the most dangerous nuclear weapon in America's arsenal," because it is the most usable, serving the dual purposes of a strategic nuclear weapon capable of a counterforce first strike against hardened missile silos while also doubling as a tactical nuclear battlefield weapon.⁷³

The B61-12, although part of the B61 class of nuclear bombs first introduced after the Cuban Missile Crisis, is a new weapon in that, in the words of Hans Kristensen, a nuclear weapons expert at the Federation of American Scientists, is "the first U.S. guided nuclear gravity bomb," with a guided tail kit assembly that gives it much greater accuracy (a warhead twice as accurate is eight times more lethal). Existing U.S. nuclear bombs have circular error probabilities (CEP) of between 110–170 meters, while the B61-12 has a CEP of 30 meters. It is considered a "low-yield" nuclear weapon. However, it has an upper-level yield three times that of the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima. It also has an earth-penetrating capability, meaning that it can explode underground. Launched against an underground target, its destructiveness in relation to its target, according to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, is "the equivalent of a surface-burst weapon with a yield of 1,250 kilotons—[i.e.,] the equivalent of 83 Hiroshima bombs," making it an extraordinarily powerful first-strike weapon.⁷⁴

The B61-12 is also a "dial-a-yield" weapon where the explosive yield can be dialled down to 0.3 kilotons or up as high as 50 kilotons. Hence, it is considered a "tactical" as well as "strategic" nuclear weapon. It is to be delivered to its targets by fighter jets, such as the F-35 stealth fighter, as well as by strategic bombers. The United States is using it to replace its current nuclear weapons in Europe. As a more "usable" nuclear weapon, which is also considered a battlefield weapon, the B61-12 is lowering the nuclear threshold in Europe. According to Russia, the B61-12 is particularly threatening due to proximity to Russian targets. Although Russia has two thousand tactical nuclear weapons, these are all currently in storage, while the new B61-12 bombs are to be deployed (representing the only deployed tactical nuclear weapons anywhere in the world) and located in Italy, Germany, Turkey, Belgium, and the Netherlands, "just a short flight from Russia's borders." Poland, which has just obtained the F-35 fighter, is now requesting that B61-12

⁷¹ ↪ Guide to Nuclear Deterrence in the Age of Great-Power Competition (Bossier City, Louisiana: Louisiana Tech Research Institute, 2020), 37, atloa.org; Alan Kaptanoglu and Stewart Prager, "US Defense to its Workforce: Nuclear War Can Be Won," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 2, 2022, thebulletin.org; Stewart Prager and Alan Kaptanoglu, "Rebuttal: Current Nuclear Weapons Policy Not Safe or Sane," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 24, 2022.

⁷² ↪ This paragraph and the following two paragraphs draw on "Notes from the Editors," *Monthly Review* 75, no. 1 (May 2023): c2–63, written by the author.

⁷³ ↪ Zachary Keck, "Why the B-61-12 Bomb Is the Most Dangerous Nuclear Weapon in America's Arsenal," *National Interest*, October 9, 2018.

⁷⁴ ↪ Hans Kristensen, "The C-17A Has Been Cleared to Transport B61-12 Nuclear Bomb to Europe," *Federation of American Scientists*, January 9, 2023; "B61-12: New US Nuclear Warheads Coming to Europe in December," *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)*, December 22, 2022; Hans Kristensen, "Video Shows Earth-Penetrating Capability of B61-12 Nuclear Bomb," *Federation of American Scientists*, January 14, 2016; "B61-12: New US Nuclear Warheads Coming to Europe in December," *ICAN*, December 22, 2022.

bombs also be located on its territory.⁷⁵ In the event of war, according to NATO's nuclear sharing agreement, the United States could release these nuclear weapons to the individual nations.

The Trump administration's 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy was written largely by the anti-China hawk Elbridge A.

The logic of U.S. policy with respect to Taiwan, including that of both of the dominant political parties, thus points to crossing China's red lines, again threatening the entire world.

Colby, then deputy assistant secretary of defence for strategy and force development. It focused on China as the principal strategic threat to the United States (a position later adopted by the Biden administration) and stipulated that U.S. first-strike policy would allow nuclear weapons to be used against an undetermined

cyberattack. Moreover, for the first time ever, the preparation for limited nuclear war was formally integrated into U.S. nuclear grand strategy. Colby is most famous for his ultra-aggressive "strategy of denial" toward China, promoted by his Marathon Initiative think tank. This includes scenarios for the U.S. use of counterforce nuclear weapons in a conflict over Taiwan. The logic of U.S. policy with respect to Taiwan, including that of both of the dominant political parties, thus points to crossing China's red lines, again threatening the entire world.⁷⁶

Since its first nuclear test in 1964, China has had an unambiguous position that it "will never at any time under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons."⁷⁷ Unlike the United States and Russia, China's nuclear weapons are kept on off-alert status, with the warheads not mated with the missiles, although it now has one nuclear submarine at sea at all times.⁷⁸ Its nuclear weapons are deliberately geared to MAD—without the accuracy needed for counterforce.

According to Benjamin C. Jamison, currently a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force serving in the nuclear enterprise division of the U.S. European Command, China's nuclear "arsenal exclusively includes large megaton and inaccurate

China insists that no nation should place nuclear weapons in another state.

weapons that are best suited for a countervalue targeting strategy." It has not sought nuclear parity with the United States and Russia. China's "goal remains the preservation of a survivable second-strike option.

Technologically and resource wise, there is no reason China could not build a nuclear force to rival the United States or Russia, but they just choose not to."⁷⁹ Consistent with this, China has refrained from developing an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.⁸⁰ China insists that no nation should place nuclear weapons in another state. Nevertheless, with the U.S. focused on first-strike capability, China has recently entered into modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal

⁷⁵ ↪ Hans Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "The B61 Family of Nuclear Bombs," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 70, no. 3 (2014): 82–83; Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia Says U.S. Lowering 'Nuclear Threshold' with Newer Bombs in Europe," *Reuters*, October 29, 2022; Len Ackland and Bert Hubbard, "Obama Pledged to Reduce Nuclear Arsenal, Then Came This Weapon," *Reveal*, July 14, 2015; "Poland Wants American Nuclear Warheads for its New F-35 Stealth Fighters: Will Nuclear Sharing Expand to Warsaw?," *Military Watch Magazine*, July 1, 2023.

⁷⁶ ↪ Elbridge A. Colby, "America Must Prepare for a War Over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022; Elbridge Colby, *The Strategy of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Elbridge A. Colby and Yashar Parsie, "Building a Strategy for Escalation and War Termination," *Marathon Initiative*, November 2022, 23; Manpreet Sethi, "The Idea of Limited Nuclear War," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 14, no. 3 (2019): 235–47. When applied to nuclear weapons, the term strategy of denial is a euphemism for counterforce. "A counterforce first strike is a denial strategy" (Benjamin C. Jamison, "The Counterforce Continuum and Tailored Targeting: A New Look at United States Nuclear Targeting Methods and Modern Deterrence," *Wright Flyer Papers*, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 2022, 6).

⁷⁷ ↪ David Logan, "The Dangerous Myths About China's Nuclear Weapons," *War on the Rocks* (Texas National Security Review), September 18, 2020.

⁷⁸ ↪ Luke Caggiano, "China Deploys New Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles," *Arms Control Today* 53 (May 2023).

⁷⁹ ↪ Jamison, "The Counterforce Continuum and Tailored Targeting," 6, 13; see also Benjamin C. Jamison, "Nuclear Targeting Methods and Modern Deterrence," *Æther: A Journal of Strategic Airpower and Spacepower* 1, no. 2 (2022): 43–56.

⁸⁰ ↪ Logan, "The Dangerous Myths About China's Nuclear Weapons."

aimed at the survivability of its second-strike capability. The most recent U.S. defence documents indicate that China has managed to retain a lean, survivable second-strike nuclear deterrent.⁸¹

None of this, however, has altered the West's quest for nuclear primacy. "At the nuclear level, missile defences and precision strike," Norwegian political scientist Even Hellan Larsen wrote in June 2023, "render total preemption of nuclear retaliation a realistic prospect." In other words, committing itself to a strategy of a first strike against other nuclear powers can be seen as a "rational" policy on the part of the main counterforce power, the United States/NATO.⁸²

U.S. Hegemonic Decline and the Threat of Nuclear Armageddon

U.S. nuclear strategists and military planners, nearly all of whom today are maximalists, do not, as a rule, refer in any

There is no mention of nuclear winter, which would annihilate almost the entire global human population, even though this has been affirmed over and over in scientific studies.

of their analyses to the full effects of global thermonuclear exchange, even when a full-scale nuclear war is contemplated. Thus, there is no mention of nuclear winter, which would annihilate almost the entire global human population, even though this has been affirmed over and over in scientific

studies.⁸³ More often, U.S. military planners today contend that a first-strike counterforce strategy with relatively "low-yield" strategic nuclear weapons (though generally greater in yield than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) can decapitate the second-strike capability of the other side, through a bolt from the blue, eliminating the possibility of a massive retaliation. Accompanying this are plans for limited nuclear war that presume that the country being attacked will be able to distinguish between a partial attack and a true first strike and can be counted on to respond in a similarly "limited" manner, without a threat of escalation. Again and again, however, these assumptions, though governing U.S. nuclear strategy, have been shown to be false and irrational. The dangerous reality that maximalist nuclear analyses conveniently ignore is best depicted by Daniel Ellsberg, himself once a nuclear strategist for the RAND Corporation: "The United States and Russia each have an actual Doomsday Machine. It is not the same relatively cheap system that Herman Kahn envisioned (or Stanley Kubrick portrayed).... But a counterpart nevertheless exists for each country: a very expensive system of men, machines, electronics, communications, institutions, plans, training, discipline, practices, and doctrine—which, under conditions of electronic warning, external conflict, or expectations of attack, would with unknowable but possibly high probability bring about the global destruction of civilisation and nearly all human life on earth."⁸⁴

Today, the U.S. proxy war in Ukraine on the Russian border and Washington's threatening behaviour toward Beijing over Taiwan (recognised by the entire world as part of China, but with a different government) have brought the issue of a general thermonuclear exchange to the forefront of world concern. As former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert S.

⁸¹ ↪ Kulacki, "Would China Use Nuclear Weapons in a War with the United States?"; Office of the Secretary of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), 98; Brad Marvel, "4 New Developments in China's Nuclear Deterrent," Asia Pacific Advanced Network, community.apan.org; Bowers, "Counterforce Dilemmas and the Risk of Nuclear War in East Asia," 6–23.

⁸² ↪ Even Hellan Larsen, "Deliberate Nuclear First Use in an Era of Asymmetry: A Game Theoretical Approach," Journal of Conflict Resolution 17, no. 16 (2023).

⁸³ ↪ See Steven Starr, "Turning a Blind Eye Towards Armageddon—U.S. Leaders Reject Nuclear Winter Studies," Public Interest Report (Federation of American Scientists) 69, no. 2 (2016–17): 24; Alan Robock, Luke Oman, and Georgiy L. Stenchikov, "Nuclear Winter Revisited With a Modern Climate Model and Current Nuclear Arsenal," Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres 112, no. D13 (2007): 1–14; Joshua Coupe, Charles G. Bardeen, Alan Robock, and Owen B. Toon, "Nuclear Winter Responses to Nuclear War Between the United States and Russia in the Whole Atmosphere Community Climate Model Version 4 and the Goddard Institute for Space Studies ModelE," Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres 124, no. 15 (2019): 8522–43; Alan Robock and Owen B. Toon, "Self-Assured Destruction: The Climate Impacts of Nuclear War," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 68, no. 5 (2012): 66–74; Steven Starr, "Nuclear War, Nuclear Winter, and Human Extinction," Federation of American Scientists, October 14, 2015.

⁸⁴ ↪ Ellsberg, The Doomsday Machine, 339.

McNamara wrote in 2005 in "Apocalypse Soon," "to launch weapons against a nuclear-equipped opponent would be suicidal. To do so against a nonnuclear enemy would be militarily unnecessary, morally repugnant, and politically indefensible." The idea that "nuclear weapons could be used in some limited way" is "fundamentally flawed," since the effects on civilians cannot be contained, while "there is no guarantee against unlimited escalation once the first nuclear strike occurs."⁸⁵

Blackett, however, remains the single greatest critic of the maximalist nuclear strategy. For Howard, writing in 1984,

A counterforce first-strike against other major nuclear nations is strategically, operationally, and mathematically impossible to accomplish without megadeaths on both sides.

Blackett's "views would now be labelled by [Western] strategic theorists as 'minimal deterrence' or MAD (mutually assured destruction) and considered so primitive as to be hardly worth taking into account. To my mind, however, they remain as valid today as they were 20 years ago: the only

basis on which both an acceptable defence policy and a credible arms-control policy can be based."⁸⁶

Five elements of Blackett's critique stand out: First, a counterforce first-strike against other major nuclear nations is strategically, operationally, and mathematically impossible to accomplish without megadeaths on both sides. Hence, all dreams of nuclear primacy are dangerous illusions. Second, limited nuclear war using tactical or nonstrategic nuclear

The U.S. maximalist nuclear strategy, going against all of Blackett's precepts, is justified today in nuclear deterrence circles in terms of a supposed moral asymmetry that places the United States uniquely above other nations.

weapons would soon escalate out of control. Third, all Western arguments for maximum nuclear deterrence, rejecting the idea of a nuclear stalemate, rely on the notion of moral asymmetry in order to justify the pursuit of nuclear primacy. Fourth, all nations need to adopt a no-first-strike posture. Fifth, nuclear weapons should be restricted to countervalue targets, which is also the

only basis from which nuclear disarmament can proceed.

It is significant that today the only major nuclear nation that has implemented all of Blackett's precepts is the People's Republic of China. The very fact that China, both in its nuclear doctrine and practice, has adhered strictly to a minimalist line on nuclear weapons suggests that this is also possible for other nuclear nations.

In contrast, the U.S. maximalist nuclear strategy, going against all of Blackett's precepts, is justified today in nuclear deterrence circles in terms of a supposed moral asymmetry that places the United States uniquely above other nations. It is commonly argued by U.S. nuclear strategists that the powerful "taboo" created by the U.S. dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki makes it "unlikely that the United States would employ a countervalue nuclear

The irony of moral asymmetry is that the one nation that has actually employed nuclear weapons, killing hundreds of thousands of people and some eighteen million people in wars and interventions since 1945 alone, sees itself (and NATO) as so morally above other major nuclear states.

attack even in response to an attack on mainland America. Therefore, countervalue nuclear threats are no longer credible for American deterrence." This is attributed to the presumed higher moral values of the United States relative to other states, and its greater reluctance to use nuclear weapons on cities and against civilian populations, with the result that the United States has no choice but to orient

its nuclear strategy to counterforce first-strike, or nuclear primacy. "Countervalue targeting, however, [we are told]

⁸⁵ ↪ Robert S. McNamara, "Apocalypse Soon," Asia-Pacific Journal 3, no. 5 (May 19, 2005), reprinted from Foreign Policy (May/June 2005): 29–35, apjjf.org.

⁸⁶ ↪ Howard, "Blackett and the Origins of Nuclear Strategy," 95.

remains valid for other nuclear states,” such as Russia and China, which are not so subject to the taboo on the use of nuclear weapons, since lacking the high moral values of the United States and Western countries more generally, with the result they would not balk at massive retaliation against civilian targets.⁸⁷

The irony of all such arguments based on moral asymmetry is that the one nation that has actually employed nuclear weapons, killing hundreds of thousands of people—as Blackett demonstrated, not as the last military act of the Second World War but as the first political act of the Cold War—the nation, moreover, responsible for the deaths of some eighteen million people in wars and interventions since 1945 alone, sees itself (and NATO) as so morally above other major nuclear states (such as Russia and China) that it is compelled to pursue a counterforce or first-strike capability.⁸⁸ Such a strategy is aimed at starting and winning a nuclear war, not simply relying on nuclear weapons for massive retaliation. It is supplemented by plans for limited nuclear war and domination at every step in the escalation ladder.

The U.S. maximalist nuclear strategy, rooted in the assumption that the United States can dominate at all stages of conventional and nuclear escalation and even win a nuclear war, is a major factor in inducing a false sense of power on the part of decision-makers, leading to Washington’s aggressiveness toward Beijing and Moscow in the present New Cold War. The most likely result of the current Western view that nuclear weapons can be used to achieve political and military ends is that they will indeed end up being used, with the destruction of virtually all of humanity.⁸⁹ The fact that the entire Western nuclear strategy since 1991 has been based on counterforce targeting, first-strike capability, nuclear primacy, and limited nuclear war, viewing thermonuclear weapons as useful instruments in the struggle to secure a unipolar world order, means that the United States/NATO today constitutes the single greatest existential threat to humanity via a Third World War (that is, outside of the planetary ecological crisis). Only a minimalist, as opposed to maximalist, approach to nuclear arms can put humanity on the road to nuclear disarmament. Ultimately, however, the answer lies in a worldwide shift away from a dying capitalism to what Blackett called complete socialism.

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⁸⁷ ↪ Jamison, “The Counterforce Continuum and Tailored Targeting,” 2–13; Jamison, “Nuclear Targeting Methods and Modern Deterrence,” 47; Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*, 16.

⁸⁸ ↪ David Michael Smith, *Endless Holocausts* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023), 208–9, 256–57.

⁸⁹ ↪ Jamison, “The Counterforce Continuum and Tailored Targeting,” 20.

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