THE MORAL STATUS OF NUCLEAR DETERRENT THREATS*

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Ethical reflection on the practice of war stands in a long tradition in Western philosophy and theology, a tradition which begins with the writings of Plato and Augustine and encompasses accounts of justified warfare offered by writers from the Medieval period to the present.1 Ethical reflection on nuclear war is of necessity a more recent theme. The past few years have seen an enormous increase in popular as well as scholarly concern with nuclear issues, and philosophers have joined theologians in exploring the moral issues surrounding the harnessing of atomic forces in the service of war.

Neither philosophical nor popular discussions of the problems of the nuclear age have attended sufficiently closely, however, to a troubling paradox which lies at the very heart of the strategy of nuclear deterrence. The paradox lies in the alleged necessity, for the sake of achieving an inestimable good, of threatening incalculable harm. The contending parties in the current debate either dismiss this paradox too easily, counting it an intellectual puzzle but not a moral difficulty, or invoke it in an oversimplified form as a demonstration of the immorality of deterrence.

The purpose of the present study is to examine both the basis of this paradox and its practical import. Nuclear deterrence will be considered as an example of a policy which threatens grave harm for the sake of great good. In exploring the morality of deterrent threats, I will propose some general

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principles concerning the morality of threats. By avoiding either a too facile
dismissal of immoral threats or an overhasty condemnation of all threats of
great harm, I hope to lay an important part of the foundation for a
satisfactory account of the morality of nuclear deterrence.

It is necessary at the outset to have a clear notion of what nuclear
deterrence is. Clearly and uncontroversially, deterrence consists in influenc-
ing another’s action by means of threats; the threats we are here concerned
with are threats to use nuclear weapons against an adversary in war. But
ought we to include in the category of deterrent threats only attempts to
prevent the outbreak of nuclear war by threatening retaliation? Or can the
threat to initiate a nuclear exchange also be considered an example of
nuclear deterrence? Equally important, should the concept of deterrence be
limited to threats of massive retaliation against an adversary’s territory and
population — to threats of “countervalue,” and not “counterforce,” nuclear
attack, in strategic jargon? Or can the threat of concentrated attack upon an
adversary’s nuclear forces themselves — a threat which might be carried out
either preemptively or in retaliation — be considered a deterrent threat as
well?

These questions are of vital importance to the contemporary debate, for
practical as well as moral reasons. I will set them aside here, however, in
order to begin by examining nuclear deterrence in what is probably its
longest-established and most widely recognized form: the threat of large-
scale retaliation for any nuclear attack. Deterrence in this form has been a
central element in United States nuclear policy since the early 1950s, when
Soviet development of fusion as well as fission weapons had broken the
American nuclear monopoly and the Korean War held out the frightening
prospect of triggering a superpower war. Against this background, Secretary
of State John Foster Dulles declared in 1954 that “local defenses” against
aggression “must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory
power.”

The strategy of “massive retaliation” or “assured destruction” remains an
essential element of United States nuclear policy. Whatever may be the
currently favored competing or complementary strategic doctrines, the
continued existence of a large arsenal of strategic warheads constitutes an
unmistakable threat of massive retaliation. The role of the retaliatory
document is confirmed in official statements of United States policy. Secretary
of Defense Caspar Weinberger stated in the Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal
Year 1984, for example, that the United States must “maintain nuclear

2 John Foster Dulles, speech before the Council on Foreign Relations, Jan. 12, 1954, reprinted
forces to deter nuclear attack on itself.” In order to deter, the Secretary insisted,

We must make sure that the Soviet leadership, in calculating the risks of aggression, recognizes that because of our retaliatory capability, there can be no circumstance in which it could benefit by beginning a nuclear war at any level or of any duration. If the Soviets recognize that our forces can and will deny them their objective at whatever level of nuclear conflict they contemplate and, in addition, that such a conflict could lead to the destruction of those political, military, and economic assets that they value most highly, then deterrence is effective and the risk of war diminished.³

Weinberger's statement, though intended to support a great deal besides a force capable of massive retaliation, shows that the threat of massive retaliation remains a central and unavoidable element in United States policy, and we may presume that similar thinking guides Soviet planners as well. Moreover, such threats confront us with the paradoxical character of nuclear deterrence in its clearest form. The scale of destruction which might result if the threat were to be carried out is quite literally incalculable and nearly unimaginable – and the magnitude of the threatened harm provides all the more assurance, according to the supporters of deterrence, that it will never need to be carried out. It is appropriate, therefore, to proceed with our exploration of the morality of threats by considering, as a paradigm example of a seemingly immoral but beneficial threat, the threat of massive retaliation for a nuclear attack.

I. Kavka's Analysis of Wrongful Intentions

The morality of nuclear deterrence has been debated by ethicists as well as statesmen ever since the first atomic bomb made such a policy possible.⁴ I shall not here attempt to trace the various positions which have been

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⁴ These issues have been addressed infrequently by philosophers but more frequently by theological ethicists. For collections representing a range of ethical positions, see James Finn, ed., *Peace, the Churches, and the Bomb* (New York: The Council on Religious and International Affairs, 1965); and Walter Stein, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* (London: Merlin Press, 1961). The writings of Paul Ramsey, included in the above collections, have been perhaps the most extended and careful defenses of nuclear deterrence strategy; see also his *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1961), and the essays in his later collection, *The Just War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968). Ramsey's defense of deterrence doctrine is briefly challenged by Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). Recent discussions of the issues raised by Ramsey and others can be found in Alan Geyer, *The Idea of Disarmament!: Rethinking the*
defended in the course of that discussion, although reference will be made to a few works, particularly those of philosopher Gregory Kavka, as I proceed. In order to address the question of the moral justifiability of nuclear deterrence, we must first face a prior question: can the actual use of nuclear weapons as means of retaliation for nuclear attack ever be morally justified? In the case which I am considering, retaliation would involve the direct destruction of the attacker’s factories and cities, as well as military forces. Traditional just war teaching requires that the means of war observe the standard of proportionality to the end sought and spare the lives of noncombatants. A large-scale counterattack on an enemy nation would flagrantly violate these standards. Thus, whatever the provocation, such an attack would surely violate the requirements of justified warfare.

Therefore, I begin with the premise that whatever moral case can be made for deterrent threats of massive retaliation extends no farther than the threats themselves. Precisely here, after all, lies the paradoxical character of international relations in the nuclear world. Granted that it can never be morally right to retaliate against another nation using nuclear weapons, we must consider whether it may nevertheless be right and fitting, perhaps even our duty, to own them and to threaten their use. (Of course, implicit in my argument on the immorality of counterattacking with nuclear weapons is the assumption that it is also immoral to initiate massive use of nuclear weapons.)

This initial premise does not simplify our task so much as complicate it, for it requires us to give an account of nuclear deterrence which is divorced from any justification for using the weapons we hold. Yet to reject this premise by insisting upon something stronger — to argue not merely for the deterrent threat but for the actual use of large numbers of nuclear weapons in retaliation — would be to deny the validity of the tradition which distinguishes just from unjust wars, or at least to disregard its demands for proportionality and the immunity of noncombatants.

A second initial ethical assumption is also necessary in order to grasp the difficulty of the choices which confront us. That is the assumption that the consequences of our actions are an important determinant of their moral character. Deterrence merits consideration, from a moral point of view, only


if we are willing to give significant moral weight to the consequences of acts.\(^6\) Given the potentially disastrous results – in the most literal sense – which the failure or the abandonment of deterrent threats might cause, it seems necessary to grant this much.

Some of the most penetrating and provocative among recent philosophical discussions of the morality of nuclear deterrence have been written by Gregory Kavka.\(^7\) His analysis of the morality of deterrence will be employed here as a starting point for my own. Kavka adopts both of the assumptions just mentioned: that, whatever may be the justification for making a nuclear threat, there are “conclusive moral reasons” not to carry it out; and that, at least in cases where a great deal of suffering and serious injustice are at stake, morality turns on consequences.\(^8\)

Kavka argues that a number of troubling paradoxes arise from a class of situations which he calls Special Deterrent Situations (SDS’s), of which “the balance of nuclear terror as viewed from the perspective of one of its superpower participants” is a paradigmatic example. More generally, he offers the following definition of an SDS:

An agent is in an SDS when he reasonably and correctly believes that the following conditions hold. First, it is likely that he must intend (conditionally) to apply a harmful sanction to innocent people, if an extremely harmful and unjust offense is to be prevented. Second, such an intention would very likely deter the

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\(^6\) Deterrence may still pose a difficult moral dilemma on strictly deontological grounds: one may be torn between the duty to protect the lives of one’s countrymen and the duty to spare the lives of innocent citizens of a hostile nation. Such a dilemma is not precisely the same as the apparent paradox of threatening grave harm for the sake of good, even though consideration of conflicting duties may support the same action as does the argument from the consequences of deterrent threats.

\(^7\) Gregory Kavka, “Some Paradoxes of Deterrence,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 75 (June 1978), pp.285–302. A classic discussion of the strategic issues which provides the starting point for Kavka’s discussion is Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). Kavka has returned to the theme of this article in several other writings, though the one cited above is the most succinct and, for our purposes, the most clearly relevant. But see also the article cited in the note immediately following, and his contribution to the Sterba volume cited below “Nuclear Deterrence: Some Moral Perplexities,” pp.127–138.

\(^8\) More precisely, Kavka assumes that the act with the highest utility ought to be performed whenever a very great deal of utility is at stake, at least if what is at stake is a great deal of negative utility and the cost of failing to perform the most useful act includes serious injustice. See Kavka, (1978), p.288. Kavka evidently regards the reference to injustice as explainable in terms of utility – a controversial assumption, but not essential for the paradoxes he proposes. In a later article, Kavka has further explored the morality of nuclear deterrence from a more thoroughly utilitarian standpoint: see “Deterrence, Utility, and Rational Choice,” *Theory and Decision*, vol. 12 (Mar. 1980), pp.41–60, where he articulates a principle of rational choice which, he argues, is better able to take account of the catastrophic consequences which nuclear deterrence must weigh than are most versions of utilitarianism.
offense. Third, the amounts of harm involved in the offense and the threatened sanction are very large and of roughly similar quantity (or the latter amount is smaller than the former). Finally, he would have conclusive moral reasons not to apply the sanction if the offense were to occur.

In such situations, Kavka argues, several paradoxes arise. They result from the fact that, in SDS's, an agent can prevent grave harm only by threatening similar harm, and moral considerations seem to require making the threat at the same time that they forbid carrying it out. Kavka's first paradox states this central point succinctly:

(P1) There are cases in which, although it would be wrong for an agent to perform a certain act in a certain situation, it would nevertheless be right for him, knowing this, to form the intention to perform that act in that situation. 9

But this claim, Kavka observes, is a denial of a highly plausible principle which connects the morality of action with the morality of intention, a principle which Kavka labels the Wrongful Intentions Principle:

(WIP) It is wrong to intend what it is wrong to do.

This principle, suggests Kavka, has seldom been explicitly discussed by moral philosophers — very likely because it seems so self-evident as to need no defense. 10 The force of the paradox Kavka has formulated, therefore, is evident: there appear to be situations in which we may and indeed ought to form immoral intentions, even though we ought in general not to form immoral intentions.

Kavka resolves this paradox by denying the validity of the WIP in situations where a conditional intention is formed solely for the purpose of

10 It is worth noting that from a utilitarian standpoint the WIP is by no means obviously true — indeed, it would appear to be clearly false. If morality demands maximization of utility or of preference satisfaction, then the moral assessment of intentions, like that of actions, turns on their probable consequences. If intending harm leads on balance to good consequences, then it is right and proper to have such intentions, whatever the WIP may suggest to the contrary. For the evaluation of intentions, on a utilitarian view, is quite independent of the evaluation of actions, except insofar as intentions tend to produce actions. It would appear that a strict utilitarian ought to feel no compunctions about forming immoral intentions, if the formation of such intentions influences others' actions in desirable ways, but ought not to follow through in action if by doing so utility is sacrificed. David Gauthier has argued recently, however, that when the effect of intentions on the probabilities of alternative outcomes is properly considered, a strict utilitarian may have cogent reasons both to form and to carry out intentions such as those involved in deterrent threats. See “Deterrence, Maximization, and Rationality,” Ethics, vol. 94 (April 1984), pp.474–495.
deterring another’s action which, if actually carried out, would provide the occasion for acting on one’s intention. In doing so, however, Kavka fails to recognize that the WIP does not bear as directly as he supposes on deterrent situations. For it is not intentions that deter, as Kavka supposes, but threats. The differences between these two concepts are more important to the moral assessment of deterrence than Kavka or other writers have recognized. Kavka’s paradoxes do not refute the WIP, therefore, nor do the situations he describes require its violation.

II. The Illocutionary Force of Threats

In order to draw the distinction between intentions and threats clearly, let us return to the definition of the Special Deterrent Situation in which immoral intentions seem to be morally required. The first condition which must be satisfied, according to Kavka’s account, is that “it is likely” that the agent “must intend (conditionally) to apply a harmful sanction to innocent people, if an extremely harmful and unjust offense is to be prevented.” This description is imprecise, however, because it confuses intentions with declared intentions, such as threats. When these are clearly distinguished, it appears highly unlikely that this first condition is ever satisfied.

What is a threat? We might define the notion briefly as follows:

(D1) A person P threatens a person Q just in case P declares the intention of bringing about a consequence which Q desires to avoid.

Threats are usually conditional: P declares the intention of harming Q unless Q acts in the way that P directs. Conditional threats are means of coercion, for if the threatened consequence is severe enough to constitute intolerable harm, given the action demanded, then Q is likely to be coerced to act as P demands. A conditional demand, however, is not essential to the making of a threat. A threat is still a threat even if it is a simple declaration of intention to do harm, as in the case of assassination threats. Kavka, “Some Paradoxes of Deterrence,” section II. In the more recent article, “Nuclear Deterrence: Some Moral Perplexities,” Kavka reiterates this conclusion and supports it further on the basis of a “Threat Principle” — the principle that it is wrong to threaten the lives of large numbers of innocent people. He rejects a categorical form of this principle on essentially consequentialist grounds and substitutes a weaker form which rests on a weighing of threatened harms against expected benefits (pp.130–131). Though this line of argument leads to a conclusion which I accept — that some, but not all, threats to do the immoral are justified — it fails, like the earlier analysis, to mark out clearly the distinction urged below between threats and intentions.

Threats constitute one form of interpersonal influence. In the characteristic case of conditional threats, one person threatens another because she wants to make him act in a certain way. What has this effect, if the threat succeeds, is the threat itself — the declared intention to do harm. The intention to do harm may be declared in any of a number of ways, and explicit statement is by no means necessary; but the effectiveness of a threat does depend on its credibility. A threat is credible, we might say, if it is such that the person threatened believes that the threatener has both the intention and the means to carry it out.

An unarmed individual who confronts a battalion of soldiers pillaging his village and tells them, “Leave the village at once or I will mow you all down,” has not credibly threatened the soldiers. His threats, no matter how vehement and specific, are unlikely to have any effect. On the other hand, the soldiers can make a highly credible threat to the villager, even without an explicit statement. If they demand his watch while holding a rifle to his head, they are effectively threatening him with death if he fails to comply — even if they say only, “Would you be so kind as to lend us your watch so that we may admire its workmanship?”

Nothing has been said thus far about intention per se. A threat is the declaration of an intention to do harm, and in order to be effective the declaration must be credible. But whether the threatener actually holds such an intention is irrelevant to the effectiveness of the threat. A convincing bluff is as effective as a genuinely intended threat. If Bob tells Carol, “Give me your money or I’ll blow your head off,” while holding a loaded pistol, he has threatened Carol even if he is actually a very gentle person who has no intention of harming her but is merely curious about how she will respond. Conversely, the vilest intentions do not constitute a threat unless they are communicated, through word or action, to others. If Ted says to Alice, “Would you mind bringing me that handsaw?” but secretly intends to strangle her if she does not do so, this intention does not make Ted’s simple request a threat.

In making threats, therefore, intention functions simply as one among many means to enhance credibility. If a threat is a bluff there is always a danger, however remote, that the bluff may be found out, and the threat may for that reason fail. But if the threat is not a bluff, it cannot be found out.

Kavka acknowledges that his first condition rules out bluffing, and he comments as follows:

The first condition will be satisfied only if attempts by the defender to bluff would likely be perceived as such by the wrongdoer. This may be the case if the defender is an unconvincing liar, or is a group with a collective decision procedure, or if the wrongdoer is shrewd
THE MORAL STATUS OF NUCLEAR DETERRENT THREATS

and knows the defender quite well. Generally, however, bluffing will be a promising course of action. Hence, although it is surely logically and physically possible for an SDS to occur, there will be few actual SDS's.\textsuperscript{13}

The occurrence of an SDS, then, presupposes that intending to carry out a particularly dire threat is necessary for the credibility of the threat. But this intention, surely, is an empirical fact which we can never know with certainty. If I am an unconvincing liar, or if my attempts to deceive are likely to be unsuccessful for some other reason, then I must do whatever I can to increase the credibility of my threats. Perhaps I ought to make my decisions in greater secrecy, or carry out a few threats to show that I am capable of doing so. Perhaps I ought even to cultivate an appearance of recklessness and instability. But deliberately forming the intention to carry out the threat is only one of many ways of making my threat more credible, and a very indirect one at that. If there are moral reasons for not forming such an intention, that is all the more reason why I ought to back up my threats with more persuasive and belligerent bluffs without intending to carry them out.

Kavka's analysis, and that of many other writers on deterrence, seems to overlook the fact that threats are examples of what J.L. Austin has called the illocutionary force of language.\textsuperscript{14} Language, Austin reminds us, is not merely a way of saying something but is also a way of doing something. Threats are among the actions that we perform by saying certain sorts of words in appropriate contexts and sometimes even by saying nothing but acting in a way which communicates the threat of harm. Threats are thus acts performed in the presence of others. Intentions, by contrast, have to do with mental states or dispositions, and they do not influence others until they are expressed through overt statements or acts. An undeclared intention to harm no more constitutes a threat than an unstated intention to marry constitutes an engagement. And it is the act of threatening, not the intention behind it, that has an effect on others. An insincere threat may be no less far-reaching in its consequences than an insincere assent to marriage vows.

III. The Wrongful Threat Principle

Suppose we amend the definition of a Special Deterrent Situation to refer to threats rather than intentions. Let us say that an agent is in an SDS just in case it is likely that he must threaten to harm innocent people in order to

\textsuperscript{13} Kavka, (1978), p.287.

avoid disastrous consequences. We might similarly amend Kavka's first paradox, quoted above, to read as follows:

(P1a) There are cases in which, although it would be wrong for an agent to perform a certain act in a certain situation, it would nonetheless be right for him, knowing this, to threaten to perform that act in that situation.

Should we still count this as a "paradox of deterrence"? Certainly something troubling remains. The revised statement no longer conflicts with the Wrongful Intentions Principle mentioned above. But it does conflict with a slightly weaker principle which we might label the Wrongful Threat Principle:

(WTP) To threaten to do what one knows to be wrong is itself wrong.

Philosophical ethicists have not often systematically distinguished threats from intentions, and I know of no historical or contemporary philosophical discussions which state or defend this principle. All the same, it seems at least as plausible as the stronger principle to which Kavka appeals in motivating his paradoxes. What follows from this principle, if we take it as true?

The Wrongful Threat Principle offers a simple and appealing way of distinguishing between justified and unjustified instances of coercion. Coercion is legitimate, we might say, when the coercer threatens a penalty which it would not be immoral to carry out if the threat should fail. Illegitimate coercion threatens a consequence which it would be immoral to carry out. Thus, the police officer who threatens arrest and possible injury to deter an assailant – hoping that his threat will succeed in preventing the assault – is acting morally, because he will be justified in carrying out the threat if its deterrent effect fails. But the bandit who threatens, "Your money or your life," would be committing a grave wrong if he carried out his threat, and the coercive threat itself is therefore wrong.

On this account, the threat of massive nuclear retaliation would clearly be an example of unjustified coercion, since the threatened consequence would be immoral to carry out. The mere possession of large numbers of nuclear weapons, and of delivery vehicles capable of reaching an adversary, may constitute a clear and credible threat of such retaliation and hence an immoral act. Deterrence using the threat of conventional weapons, however, might be legitimate, since the actual use of conventional weapons to repel an invasion is, on many accounts, morally permissible.
IV. Justifying Immoral Threats: An Example

Simple and appealing as it is, however, the WTP is mistaken. Its error is evident in a situation such as the following. Imagine that a terrorist has seized a number of hostages and has threatened to kill them unless some extravagant demand is met – let us say, the immediate execution of the chief executives of all NATO nations and of the chief executive officers of the Fortune 500. Police officers are in communication with the terrorist, but several days of attempts at negotiation have been fruitless. Police conversations have revealed, however, that the terrorist is extremely fearful that some harm may come to his family as a result of his actions and seems willing to go to any length to prevent such an outcome. The police, therefore, discuss the possibility of threatening to harm the terrorist’s wife and children in order to induce him to surrender and release his hostages. In such a situation, is it not morally permissible – even obligatory – to make such threats?

This would seem to be an instance where the avoidance of disastrous consequences justifies what would otherwise be an immoral threat. It is only the threat that is permissible – certainly not the intention to harm the terrorist’s innocent wife and children. We may not actually harm the innocent in order to protect others, and therefore we may not intend to do so either. All the same, we may do many things to make the threat more credible, including practicing deception of various kinds. We may boast to

15 For this reason, I am doubtful that the novel position recently defended by James Sterba, which permits the possession of nuclear weapons while prohibiting the explicit threat to use them, can finally be sustained. Sterba argues that such a posture achieves the ends of deterrence while eliminating the need to intend or threaten the immoral. The effectiveness of such “deterrence without threats,” Sterba argues, results from other nations’ doubts about the sincerity with which one declares that one will not use the nuclear weapons which are nevertheless maintained in one’s military arsenal. I am not persuaded that the renunciation of explicit threats accomplishes anything more than the easing (on questionable grounds) of one’s own moral qualms; but Sterba’s argument deserves more extended consideration than I can offer in this discussion. See James Sterba, “How to Achieve Nuclear Deterrence Without Threatening Nuclear Destruction,” in Sterba, ed., The Ethics of War and Nuclear Deterrence (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Inc., 1985), pp.155–168.

16 Although I cannot take up this matter here, the question of the justification of the use even of conventional arms in self-defense is an important one, and the pacifist’s argument that such armed force is immoral deserves far more serious consideration than it has received from either political leaders or ethicists. See, for example, Portia Bell Hume and Joan V. Bondurant, “The Significance of Unasked Questions in the Study of Conflict,” Inquiry, vol. 7 (1964), pp.318–327, which argues for theoretical attention to techniques of active, nonviolent conflict. A thorough review of the character and techniques of nonviolence is offered by Gene Sharp in Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1971). I have briefly explored some of the common objections to pacifism in “Reformed Pacifism,” in Peace Studies Bulletin (Bulletin of the Manchester College Peace Studies Institute), vol. 14 (1984), excerpted in “In Defense of Pacifism,” The Christian Century (forthcoming).

17 This example was suggested to me, in a panel discussion at St. Olaf College, by Edmund Santurri.
the terrorist how much we will enjoy torturing his children, thus attempting to portray ourselves as monsters capable of such an act. Perhaps we may even sharpen a few knives near the telephone and make gleeful and sadistic noises. But what we may not do is intend or carry out deliberate harm to the innocent.

The example of the terrorist suggests that, plausible as the Wrongful Threat Principle may appear, it must sometimes be set aside in order to prevent grave harm. In a situation where one must choose between threatening an act which would be immoral to carry out and permitting the death of innocent persons, the presumptively immoral threat seems to be morally allowed, perhaps even required. The argument of the previous section against the threat of nuclear deterrence, which was based on the WTP, is therefore too simple. Seemingly immoral threats may sometimes be morally permitted, and we must consider the possibility that nuclear deterrence falls into this category.

Yet the threat of nuclear retaliation is different in important respects from the threat to harm the terrorist’s family. Let us take note, first, of the ways in which the two situations are similar and, then, of their differences.

First, both nuclear deterrence and the threat to harm a terrorist’s family involve the threat of grave harm to the innocent. To speak of “innocence” does not require that we absolve those threatened from all responsibility for the disaster we hope to avert. Perhaps the people of the nation against whom we threaten nuclear retaliation have assisted in some way in building the military institutions or policies which now threaten us. Similarly, it is possible that the members of the terrorist’s family have failed to do all they could to prevent the terrorist from seizing hostages. (Ought every mother to warn her children daily, “Now go outside and play, but don’t kidnap any hostages”?) Remote complicity is not a ground for the kind of punishment we threaten, however. The residents of the cities of an enemy nation, and the families of terrorists, are innocent as regards the immediate threat of death which we hope to deter, and the threat we direct against their lives is a threat against persons whom we may not deliberately harm.

Second, both situations require deception in order to ensure the credibility of the threat. The terrorist will not take our threat seriously unless we convince him that we are immoral and sadistic enough to carry it out. And the same is true, presumably, for the nations whom we intend to deter from use of nuclear weapons.

But the nature of this deception is radically different in the two cases. The police must mislead the terrorist about their intentions, but they may assure their own friends and families that they have no intention of carrying out their threat. As soon as the threat succeeds and the terrorist gives himself up, the deception dissolves: the terrorist is arrested, his family is unharmed, and
the police put away their sharpening stones and stop cackling. Even if the threat should fail, the need for deception is limited and temporary. If the terrorist defies all attempts to coerce him and begins executing his hostages anyway, the police must then turn to other tactics to stop him. Their threat against the family, which cannot morally be carried out, will have no further use.

The threat of nuclear deterrence, by contrast, is not a temporary and limited expedient but a permanent and pervasive feature of a nation’s foreign policy. When a nation’s foreign policy relies on nuclear deterrence as an essential foundation, this threat becomes the unchanging background of every other mode of international behavior. The morally troubling character of the threat to destroy entire cities and nations with a nuclear attack is not dispelled, therefore, by noting that there are situations in which a normally immoral threat can be temporarily justified. The threat depicted in our hypothetical example is strictly limited in its scope and its duration; the nuclear threat, however, respects limits of neither sort.

Although the example we have considered restrains us from condemning a priori every threat to do the immoral, it is not sufficient to allay our qualms about the morality of a threat made, not by a few policemen to an isolated terrorist, but by entire nations to the world at large. A nation which bases its position in the world on such threats is sharpening its knives for all the world to hear.

V. Justifying Immoral Threats: Necessary Conditions

The argument of the previous section has shown that threats to do the immoral may sometimes be justified. The Wrongful Threat Principle, attractive as it appears on first examination, excludes too much. Since the principle condemns all immoral threats, a single example of a threat which, though immoral to execute, is nonetheless morally justified is sufficient to refute the principle. And we have found such an example in the case of the terrorist: a hypothetical example, to be sure, but one which is all too realistic in the contemporary world. It is unlikely, but by no means impossible, that those attempting to deal with an actual terrorist would find that, having exhausted every other means of saving innocent lives but this, they must resort to threats of the sort that I have described.

To make immoral threats, therefore, though it is normally to be avoided, is not in itself categorically immoral. Is the threat of nuclear deterrence among the threats that can be justified morally? In the case of threats of massive retaliation, it has been argued above, the differences from the terrorist example outweigh the similarities, and the moral case for deterrence is overwhelmed by the scope and duration of the threat. The threat of large-scale retaliation for a nuclear attack, therefore, is not a justified threat.
But it is necessary at this point to extend our inquiry to include not only the threat of massive retaliation but other nuclear threats as well. For it has been claimed by some ethicists and strategists that, in evaluating nuclear threats from the moral standpoint, the precise nature of the threat makes a decisive difference. Might it be justified, in some situations, to threaten to use nuclear weapons in a limited attack on military installations, for example? Would such an attack be a justifiable response to a nuclear attack? Might it even be a legitimate means of countering a nonnuclear attack of certain kinds? Some writers have given affirmative answers to all of these questions. Equally important, the present military policy of the United States is unmistakably committed to development of a greater capacity to make, and to carry out, a credible threat of both retaliatory and initial use of nuclear weapons in limited attacks of this kind. 18

Whether the threat of limited nuclear attack can ever be justified is a subject of heated and extended debate, and I cannot hope to resolve the question finally in the remainder of this brief discussion. Instead, I shall suggest the way in which any answer that we may give to this question depends crucially both on the moral considerations I have already discussed and on matters of empirical fact.

The Wrongful Threat Principle, I have observed, is initially plausible: certainly we ought normally to avoid making threats which we cannot morally carry out. What is it about the terrorist example which places it in a special class and permits us to threaten the immoral? Two characteristics of the threat – its limited scope and limited duration – have already been mentioned. There are three more characteristics implicit in the case as I have described it which are also essential, I believe, to the moral justification for this particular threat:

The credibility of the threat: the threatened party believes that the threat is not a bluff but really will be carried out. The police possess the means of carrying out their threat; and their behavior, as I have described it, is calculated to make the threat seem genuine. The terrorist's fears for his family, already expressed before the threat is made, make it likely that he will take it seriously. If the threat were not credible, it would be ineffectual; and without a reasonable likelihood that the threat will avert grave wrong, we ought not to make immoral threats. The credibility of the threat in this case is enhanced, not undermined, by a second essential element:

The irrationality of the threatened party. The point is not that only irrational persons comply with threats: on the contrary, to attempt to influence by

18 See the Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 1985 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Feb. 1984), pp.29–31. “We must plan for flexibility in our forces and in our options for response,” the report states, “so that we might terminate the conflict on terms favorable to the forces of freedom.” (p.29)
mean of threats presupposes that the other is at least sufficiently rational to be moved by our threat. Yet it is highly significant that, in the case we have described, the object of the threat is a person fanatically dedicated to some cause and willing to sacrifice innocent lives in its name. It is the comparative irrationality of the terrorist (and the danger that arises from his irrationality) that permits us to threaten harms which we may never actually impose. Even so, we may cross this moral border only after satisfying a third condition:

The exhaustion of all alternative means of averting imminent catastrophe. In our example, both legitimate threats (e.g., of imprisonment) and every reasonable means of negotiation have been attempted and found fruitless. Then, and only then, may the police resort to the extreme tactics we have described.

Justified threats to do the immoral, then, are threats intended to avert a grave and imminent catastrophe. Furthermore, as the example of the terrorist suggests, such threats can be considered morally permissible only in the presence of five further conditions:

1. limited scope of the threatened harm
2. limited duration of the threat
3. credibility of the threat
4. dangerous irrationality of the party threatened
5. exhaustion of all alternative means of influence.

When all five conditions are satisfied, I contend, the Wrongful Threat Principle may be set aside in order to avert great harm. But if one or more of these conditions is not satisfied, however, it is highly doubtful that the threat of immoral harm can be justified.

VI. Nuclear Deterrence: Three Cases

Now we must return to the case of nuclear deterrence in order to consider whether the conditions just described are met. And at this point, for the sake of relevance to contemporary policy discussion, it is necessary to consider variations of the nuclear deterrent posture which I have not yet discussed. Specifically, we must consider nuclear deterrent threats of three kinds:

Case 1: The threat of massive retaliation, or, in the language of military strategy, second-strike countervalue targeting. This is the only case I have considered thus far.

Case 2: First-strike threats. My primary concern in this study is with the morality of nuclear deterrence, i.e., the use of nuclear weapons to deter nuclear attack. Threats to employ nuclear weapons in response to nonnuclear attack fall into a different category. Certainly such threats have a
potentially deterrent effect, and since this effect is achieved by means of nuclear weapons, we might perhaps label it “conventional deterrence by nuclear means.” If we take the adjective in “nuclear deterrence” to be applied not to the end but to the means of achieving deterrence, then first-strike threats are a form of nuclear deterrence, and in any case they are of vital importance to current policy and political debate.

Case 3: Threats of limited retaliation, or of “second-strike counterforce” attack. Of the three cases considered, this would appear the most plausible example of a justified threat. Furthermore, continuing progress in the development of highly accurate delivery systems makes this an option of increasing political and military importance. And we are in this case clearly back in the realm of nuclear deterrence in the strict sense, since such threats are intended to prevent nuclear attack.19

Before we consider whether any of these cases can meet the conditions for justifiable immoral threats, we must first establish that the second and third cases are in fact threats to do the immoral. Clearly, they are threats of grave harm whose aim is to avert great wrong. But is the harm which they threaten one which it would always be immoral actually to impose? Some have denied this premise of our discussion, holding that it is possible to justify not only the threat but the use of nuclear weapons in some circumstances.

Consider the first-strike threat. The immorality of initial use of nuclear weapons is admitted by most, though not all, ethicists and strategists. Some have drawn a sharp moral distinction between an initial attack using strategic nuclear weapons (“first strike”) and a nuclear attack using limited numbers of low-yield weapons (“first use”).20 The former, it is argued, can never be justified, and even to threaten such an attack is immoral; but to threaten, and even to carry out, the threat of “first use” may be an unavoidable military necessity in the face of others’ threats. The risk that any use of nuclear weapons would ignite the exchange of strategic forces, however, as well as

19 Since threats may be limited to retaliation or may encompass initial use of nuclear weapons, and since the threat in either case may include the targeting of a large number of military and civilian targets or may include only a limited number of military targets, there are in effect four distinct variations of the nuclear threat:
- First-strike with countervalue targeting
- First-strike with counterforce targeting only
- Countervalue retaliation (massive retaliation)
- Counterforce retaliation
The first of these is not seriously defended by any contemporary moralist or strategist—even though it is the only one among the four postures which has ever actually been carried through in action, in the case of the United States’ nuclear attack on Japan in 1945. In the text, I consider the first two postures as variations on a first-strike strategy.

20 See, for example, Freeman Dyson, Weapons and Hope (Cambridge, Mass.: Harper and Row, 1984), esp. ch.20. Dyson’s treatment of nuclear issues is one which I find very valuable even if finally unpersuasive on some issues; see my review in The Christian Century, vol. 101 (Nov. 28, 1984), pp.1131–32.
the frequently declared intention of Soviet military leaders to retaliate against the United States for any use of nuclear weapons in Europe, make this distinction far less important in practice than it may appear in theory.  

Let it be granted, then, for the purposes of our discussion at least, that it is immoral under any circumstances to initiate the use of nuclear weapons in warfare. Then first-strike threats are clearly threats to do the immoral. And although the harm directly threatened may be limited in scope, to initiate a nuclear attack of any kind is to risk triggering an escalation of conflict whose consequences may be indistinguishable from those of direct strategic attack.

Must a strictly limited retaliation against an attacker's military forces fall under the same condemnation? Some argue that threats of such attack do not fall into the category of immoral threats at all, since a nation subjected to nuclear attack would be committing no wrong by responding with a nuclear strike limited to military installations. Nuclear weapons of low yield and high precision, it is claimed, fall within the range of morally permissible means of war.

If we grant this claim, the status of deterrent threats of this kind would be quite different from that of other nuclear threats, since they would not constitute threats to do what is immoral. It would not follow that such threats are in all cases morally justified, of course. It is not always permissible to make a threat simply because one could morally carry it out. But the perplexities which arise from Kavka's Special Deterrent Situations, at any rate, would not arise.

If limited retaliatory nuclear warfare is morally permissible, however, it must satisfy the moral requirements of discrimination and proportionality which are at the heart of the tradition of justified warfare and which are so evidently violated by large-scale use of nuclear weapons. To make this case plausible, in other words, one would need to demonstrate the truth of the following claims:

(1) Nuclear weapons are no less discriminating in their immediate effect, and no more harmful in their long-term consequences, than conventional weapons which might be used in the same circumstances.

(2) Retaliatory use of nuclear weapons poses no significant risk of triggering a nuclear conflict larger in scale than the initial attack which prompted the retaliation.

21 The case against limited nuclear attack has been made persuasively by the authors of *The Challenge of Peace*, among many others. Their rejection of limited nuclear war extends to limited retaliatory attack as well; some possible qualifications of their firm position on this issue are expressed in the following section.

22 Wohlstetter argues for the morality of limited nuclear retaliation but also contends that future advances in precise delivery of high-yield conventional explosives can diminish and ultimately replace military dependence on the nuclear threat: see "Bishops, Statesmen, and Other Strategists on the Bombing of Innocents," *Commentary*, vol. 75 (June 1983), pp.15–35.
Nuclear weapons accomplish as effectively as any alternative the legitimate ends of justified warfare. Are these premises true? The available evidence seems to me to favor none of them. If even one of the three is false, then limited retaliatory use of nuclear weapons must fall under the same moral prohibition as massive retaliation and first use.

The first premise underlies the others, since the indiscriminate effect of nuclear weapons is the characteristic which makes them both so dangerous in use and so ill-suited to the military aims of legitimate warfare. Perhaps it can be argued that this claim may become true at some point in the future, if weapons development efforts are directed toward maximizing precision in nuclear weapons delivery and minimizing collateral damage. But the same technology which may make nuclear weapons more discriminating also holds the promise of making them unnecessary, since advances in precision may potentially make conventional explosives into counterforce weapons as effective as current nuclear weapons. In any case, neither the first premise nor the others is true in the world as it is at present, and even highly limited retaliatory use of nuclear weapons must be judged immoral. We are justified, therefore, in construing all three of the cases described as threats to do the immoral.

VII. Limitations and Credibility of the Threat

We must now consider whether the conditions which permit the making of otherwise immoral threats obtain in any of these cases. First, is the harm threatened properly limited in its scope? In the first case — the threat of massive retaliation — the destruction threatened is more devastating than anything yet experienced in human history, and the ill effects of carrying out such threats reach around the globe and across many generations. Therefore, as we have already observed, our first condition is by no means met, and such threats cannot be morally condoned.

In the second and third cases, the initial destruction caused by a nuclear counterattack may be far more limited than in the case of large-scale strategic retaliation. Yet the use of even a limited number of nuclear weapons crosses a vital boundary both of physics and of politics. The initial damage done by nuclear weapons exceeds that caused by conventional weapons both in scope and in duration, through the lingering effects of radiation. And in conditions of conflict and crisis, a nuclear attack of any kind may trigger an escalation of conflict to a level whose results will be indistinguishable from those of direct strategic attack. Even the threat of limited nuclear counterattack, therefore, poses a significant risk to the lives

On this point, see the Wohlstetter article cited above.
and well-being of soldiers and civilians alike, not only in the country attacked but in vast areas of the globe. Such threats clearly exceed the limited scope which is required to make an immoral threat permissible.

And what of the second limitation - the temporary character of the threat? Our three cases do not differ significantly in this regard. Such threats are not emergency measures desperately put forward to ride out a crisis but, rather, standing elements of a nation’s military policy. On this score, then, once again we find that none of the three nuclear threats qualifies as morally permissible.

Suppose that a nuclear power seriously committed itself to nuclear disarmament, in practice and policy alike, and yet chose to maintain a nuclear deterrent solely as a temporary measure to prevent the political instability which might result from sudden disarmament, whether unilateral or multilateral. It was with this possibility in mind that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, having condemned the use of nuclear weapons in any form, granted their provisional approval to the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent force solely as a means to orderly and complete disarmament. Clearly, the motives which maintain present nuclear arsenals are far from those recommended by the bishops. At the same time, it is not inconceivable, even if it is unlikely, that the future government of the United States or another nuclear power might follow precisely the course which the Bishops recommend. Were that to occur, we might then regard the remaining nuclear threat as an emergency measure of limited duration, and the second of the conditions set out might then be satisfied.

Third, we must consider the credibility of nuclear threats of these three kinds, for a threat which is obviously a bluff cannot benefit anyone. Credibility is an especially troublesome requirement in the case of threats of massive retaliation, for it is widely recognized that the enormity and the immorality of the consequences threatened undermine the threat’s credibility. Bernard Brodie wrote in 1959 that “one of the first things wrong with the doctrine [of massive retaliation] is that in many instances the enemy may find it hard to believe that we mean it.” For this reason Albert Wohlstetter, who helped shape the nuclear strategy of the 1960s, now urges the repudiation of threats of large-scale counterattack: “Informed realists in foreign-policy

24 “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” the Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Bishops on War and Peace, published in full in Origins, a publication of the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, (1983). The issue of the morality of threats and intentions seems to me to be one of the issues which is least satisfactorily dealt with in this insightful and provocative discussion.

25 Bernard Brodie, Strategy in the Missile Age, p.273. Compare Secretary of State Caspar Weinberger’s statement in the Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 1984, p.52: “If our threatened response is perceived as inadequate or contrary to our national interest, it will be perceived as a bluff” (italics added).
establishments as well as pacifists should oppose aiming to kill bystanders with nuclear or conventional weapons,” he writes, because “indiscriminate Western threats paralyze the West, not the East.”

The incredibility of the threat of massive nuclear counterattack not only undermines its effectiveness but constitutes a further strike against its moral standing as well. Extreme measures such as immoral threats are justified only when they promise to avert catastrophe; but when the threatened sanction would only compound the catastrophe, the threat lacks both practical effect and moral plausibility.

The threat of a limited first strike has considerably greater credibility than the threat of massive retaliation. It is for precisely this reason that such threats have come to be a central element in the military posture of the United States and its European allies. But it is noteworthy that several leading figures in the formulation of United States nuclear policy have recently argued that first-use threats in Europe, and specifically the US-NATO doctrine of “flexible response” at any nuclear or nonnuclear level, should be rejected for political and strategic as well as moral reasons.

Limited retaliatory threats, finally, appear more credible than threats of the other two types, and for this reason such threats are more likely to have a significant effect in restraining nuclear attack. At least one of the three conditions for justified immoral threats, then, seems to be met by limited nuclear threats.

But there is a further difficulty which undercuts any moral defense of counterforce nuclear threats. It is a problem which arises from the nature of the weapons themselves. Counterforce weapons, by design, provide a highly effective means of destroying an adversary’s offensive capability. Their stated purpose – in the case we are considering here – is limited to a retaliatory strike, a strike launched in response to a presumably limited first strike in order to reduce the damage that may be done by further exchanges of weapons. But declared policies do not have the power to restrain weapons themselves, and the same weapons which threaten a retaliatory counterforce attack could equally well be employed in a preemptive counterforce attack.

26 Wohlstetter, p.15. Wohlstetter argues on this basis for modernization and refinement of both nuclear and nonnuclear weapons. His article and the exchange of letters which followed it (“Letters from Readers: Morality and Deterrence,” Commentary, vol. 76 (Dec. 1983), pp.4–22), provide a clear and vigorous statement of the case for a major redirection of U.S. defense policy toward more discriminate targeting.

The difference between first-strike and second-strike doctrines, in other words, is a difference of words but not of weapons.

The weapons of massive retaliation pose no such ambiguity, since no meaningful advantage can be gained by using them first. Any temptation which might arise to launch a large-scale attack before one's own weapons are destroyed is balanced by the certainty that such an attack can only be suicidal. To use counterforce weapons first, however, might appear an irresistibly attractive way of preventing large-scale nuclear war. Thus, as soon as one nation declares an intention to retaliate using counterforce weapons and builds suitable weapons and delivery systems, its adversaries cannot dismiss the possibility that the weapons may be used for a crippling first strike.

Thus far in this discussion I have avoided consideration of particular weapons systems, but a concrete example will help to illuminate the point I am making here. The MX missile has been defended in political discussion as an effective means of limited retaliation, and hence a weapon which strengthens the credibility of the United States nuclear deterrent force. The basing mode finally approved for the MX, however, undermines deterrence and exacerbates Soviet fears because of the ambiguity just noted. The MX belongs to a new generation of high-precision warheads capable of destroying Soviet missiles in their silos, according to military authorities. But its placement in existing missile silos which are vulnerable (or so it is claimed) to Soviet attack makes it an unreliable retaliatory weapon. In Soviet eyes, therefore, this addition to the United States nuclear arsenal, introduced with the purpose of stabilizing nuclear deterrence by posing a more credible threat of limited retaliation, is both a tempting target for attack and a threat to Soviet deterrent capabilities.

Thus, even though the nuclear threat may be a credible threat, particularly if the stated intention is to launch only a limited retaliatory attack, the ambiguous nature of the weapons themselves ensures that the first two conditions for justified wrongful threats - that such threats be limited in scope and duration - are not satisfied. To be sure, it is possible that, as a result of future developments in weapons technology, nuclear weapons will no longer pose as severe a danger as they now do to the lives and well-being of civilian populations. If such development are accompanied by multilateral disarmament, including destruction of all but a limited number of low-yield nuclear weapons, then the specter of global devastation will no longer hang so heavily upon us. Perhaps, then, a generation from now, a more plausible case will present itself for condoning the threat of nuclear counterattack. But we do not live in such a world. Today, every nuclear threat is at least potentially the threat of great devastation. Even if we may hope that this will
no longer be true a generation or a century from now, we must make our moral choices in the present and not in an imagined future.\textsuperscript{28}

VIII. Further Conditions for Justified Threats

There remain two conditions, suggested by the example of the terrorist, which must also obtain if an immoral threat is to be justified, and I turn to them now. First, is the nuclear threat directed against an adversary relevantly like the terrorist of our example – a dangerously deranged fanatic who cannot be influenced except by such dire threats? This claim would not merit serious consideration in the international context, were it not regularly advanced by some commentators for whom patriotism takes precedence over sober realism. If the Soviet Union is, as some would have it, “the focus of evil in the modern world,” and if Soviet leaders will trample on the lives and welfare of the citizens of their own nation and every other nation besides in the fanatical pursuit of Marxist ideology, then perhaps we would be justified in treating them as we would treat the terrorist of our example.

In a certain sense this fanatical view of the global situation undercuts the policy it supports: for if Soviet leaders are indeed bent on ideological conquest whatever the cost, they are unlikely to be deterred by threats against their people or territory. But this picture is, of course, wildly inaccurate, and it cannot be supported from the actual behavior of Soviet leaders, who behave in foreign affairs rather like their counterparts in the West – protecting vital economic and military interests by carefully calculated, if sometimes violent, means. In this regard, the case of the terrorist is altogether different.

We must consider, finally, whether nuclear threats represent a last and desperate resort to avert catastrophe, all less immoral means having been proven ineffectual. If nuclear deterrence is morally justified, in other words, it must be shown, first, that it provides an effective means of securing its ends – national security and global peace– and, second, that no equally effective and less morally problematic means to the same ends can be found. Are these claims true? The evidence is mixed. It is likely that the existence of nuclear weapons has helped, in some situations, to deter attack and to

\textsuperscript{28} The context of discussion of nuclear deterrence has been altered significantly by President Reagan’s open endorsement of the goal of defensive measures against nuclear attack employing high technology nuclear and nonnuclear weapons. Such measures, referred to by the President as the “Strategic Defense Initiative” and by critics as “Star Wars”, pose formidable and, in the judgment of many experts, insurmountable technical difficulties; but they deserve careful consideration from a moral standpoint, since they are motivated at least in part by recognition of the immoral character of nuclear threats. The cautions voiced in the text about making moral decisions in the present need to be emphasized in this context as well: the dim possibility of future technologies which may provide an effective defense against nuclear attack has little relevance to the urgent task of orderly and effective disarmament which is our present responsibility.
prevent international rivalry and regional conflict from exploding into large-scale war. Yet the nature of nuclear weapons casts doubt on the claim that nuclear deterrence is the most effective means of preserving peace. For the very magnitude of the destruction threatened by nuclear weapons makes them remarkably poor means to the ends they purport to secure. In regional conflicts, in economic crises, in periods of heightened hostility between superpowers, the sheer scale of the destruction which would be wrought by the use of nuclear weapons makes them virtually useless as weapons. Hence, the threat of their use, though it can never be entirely disregarded, is seldom credible enough decisively to influence behavior. In George F. Kennan’s words:

I deny that the nuclear weapon is a proper weapon . . . It can serve no useful purpose. It cannot be used without bringing disaster upon everyone concerned.29

In a certain sense, there are no alternatives to nuclear threats: nothing but nuclear explosives can effectively threaten destruction and death on a scale which even approaches the probable results of a large-scale nuclear exchange. But in another sense, there are many alternatives to such threats, since their ultimate purpose is not destruction but the preservation of peace and order. The relevant alternatives to nuclear deterrence, in this broad sense, include not only conventional military means but also economic and diplomatic policies. In a still larger sense, programs of international development, which build other nations’ self-reliance while at the same time fostering cooperation, must also be counted among alternative means to national security. Many of these alternatives are less expensive and less dangerous than the maintenance of a large nuclear arsenal. Several represent steps away from international competition and toward a closer community of nations. More important still, some go beyond the mere restraint of violence to alleviate its causes.

A dissenter might grant all that has been said about the need to explore alternatives to nuclear deterrence and yet hold that, if one’s own nation is threatened by the nuclear weapons of a hostile power, one has no choice but to maintain a nuclear arsenal as a deterrent. Morality must not lead us to abandon realism and prudence, and the presence of a threat from others, it may be argued, justifies us in continuing to pose a threat which we would otherwise gladly abandon.

A moment’s consideration reveals the inadequacy of such a response. The threat posed by others is an entirely acceptable reason for countermeasures

of one's own; but there is no reason why such countermeasures need mimic an adversary's immoral means. Consider the parallel case of chemical and biological weapons. When one nation develops and uses such weapons, its adversaries have the right and the obligation to defend themselves and to dissuade the offending nation by any means which fall within the range of morality. But to develop equally immoral weapons of one's own is wrong, whatever the provocation.

Similarly, should one nation threaten nuclear attack, the nations threatened may and should combine legitimate military countermeasures with any international measures which promise to persuade the offending nation to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. But to develop – or, once having developed, to retain – one's own nuclear arsenal is neither an adequate nor a necessary response. It is not adequate, since nuclear weapons offer no means of defense against a threat but only a means of retaliation which would be immoral and ineffective if it should ever be used. Nor is the nuclear threat necessary, since other military measures may create an effective deterrent to attack.

A widely dispersed force of several thousand highly accurate conventional weapons, for example, can effectively threaten an enemy's cities and military bases. Nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter has observed that “improving accuracy by a factor of 100 improves blast effectiveness against a small, hard military target about as much as multiplying the energy released about a million times.” As long-range targeting achieves accuracies which can be measured not in miles but in yards, the deterrent effect of a conventional threat against military targets may approach that of the present threat to use nuclear weapons. Equally important, the threat of such an attack, which would be more limited and more subject to control than a nuclear attack, has far greater credibility than a nuclear threat.

An adversary's nuclear threat, therefore, does not decisively affect the moral status of deterrence. Because the nuclear threat is a threat to do the immoral, we may not make such a threat unless the conditions noted above, including the exhaustion of all other alternatives to the ends sought, are satisfied. But few, if any, of these conditions are satisfied.

IX. Conclusions

The moral case for threatening nuclear attack, I conclude – whether first-strike or second-strike, directed against cities or against military targets only – must inevitably fail. There are decisive moral objections to the employment of nuclear threats as a means of preserving peace. These objections are not quite so straightforward as they may at first appear: the immorality of

\[^{30}\text{Wohlstetter, p.22.}\]
deterrence is not entailed simply by the fact that it would be immoral to carry out a threat of nuclear retaliation, for example. The example of the terrorist offers a counterexample to the general claim that it is always wrong to threaten what it would be wrong to do. But deterrence through the threat of nuclear attack is not a temporary expedient in a single crisis; it is a permanent underpinning of a nation's foreign policy, and it is not warranted either by the supposed dangerous irrationality of the Soviets against whom it is directed or by the exhaustion of every other available means of achieving the same end.

To claim that nuclear deterrence is conceptually incoherent would be too strong a claim. Certainly the threat of force can be an effective deterrent to the use of force, and there is no reason in principle why this effect should not obtain in reference to nuclear weapons as well as other means of force. But nuclear weapons have such an awesome capacity to destroy that their actual use cannot be justified even by the principles which have been appealed to in defense of the use of conventional weapons of war.

It is possible that, if both nuclear weapons and international realities should change significantly in the future, conditions like those which obtain in the terrorist example may someday be present among nations. We cannot categorically exclude the possibility, therefore, that in some future state of the world nuclear threats might be justifiable measures to avert imminent catastrophe. In the world in which we presently live, however, such conditions do not obtain. In our world, therefore, the threat of nuclear attack or counterattack is unavoidably immoral.

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