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The Real Missile Gap Is In Knowledge of Psychology

THE SEASON for the missile-gap game has rolled around again. This time the Republicans promise to lambaste the Democrats for letting the Russians creep up on our "nuclear superiority."

A large backward step is the premise that nuclear supremacy is an end in itself. If this is a valid aim for the United States, it should be also for every other independent power. These familiar arguments about mutually aggravated escalation are too often attributed to a world view that is supposed to be soft-minded about communism and what the Reds would do to us if we gave them half a chance.

To the contrary, I must give great credit to the world Communist conspiracy for inciting the United States to unrealistic goals that drain our resources. With good reason, they are as afraid of American irrationality as we are of theirs. It would be a cosmic crime to tempt them by our own weakness into the ultimate gamble that might, once and for all, pacify the world. But it is so easy to exploit our adolescent temperament, our historic insistence on being the prima donna, if we accept any part at all on the world stage. So they feint in Berlin, or with ballistic-missile defenses or just by holding back in Vietnam, and we promptly overreact in push-button fashion.

THE MISSILE-GAP game should stimulate us to hard thinking about the truths of national security. The achievable purposes of strategic nuclear weapons are to forestall nuclear blackmail and to deter a mortal attack. These are essentially psychological aims, intended to influence our own behavior

and that of the adversary. If strategic nuclear weapons ever again have to be used, they will have been dismal failures—and we, as a species, along with them.

In this light, a striving for nuclear superiority may temporarily further some national psychological aims; but do we need to bolster self-confidence that can resist blackmail? Perhaps yes. The ultimate step in any scenario of nuclear deterrence is exquisitely irrational. An unsophisticated public may demand the comfort of large irrational numbers in order for nuclear stalemate to be emotionally acceptable. We might also wonder about the public on the other side: will they also understand that there is no difference between being killed or overkilled?

There is unfortunately more to deterrence than the calculated physical capacity to retaliate after a first strike. We might make that capacity more credible and thus more effective, especially if the adversary is ill-informed, by expanding our own advertised reserve force. But deterrence also demands that he feel secure enough not to have to gam-

ble on a desperate strike. Parity is the most stable equilibrium for mutual security, for each side may then feel that both will be unacceptably damaged no matter who takes the initiative. The most unstable is that disparity ~~is approached.~~ *

THE CASE for escalating nuclear armaments as a valid investment in world stability (rather than a step toward pre-emptive war) would be far more reasonable if the psychological objectives of nuclear policy were more clearly perceived and used as a basis of research and action. How our friends and adversaries perceive this country's policies and motives are at the root of our foreign and military policy. Do we spend 1 per cent of our arms outlay on social and psychological research and action? If so, Congress is not aware of it, for it would surely be squelched, by the same illogic that led to the halving of the already puny research budget of the Disarmament Agency. Perhaps the brunt of such research ought to be directed at the perplexing psychology of our own Congress.

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*that can support the perception of one side overwhelming the other. Since each side will then race to pre-empt the other's initiative, neither can gain when such a disparity is approached.