

The Peril of Deterrence

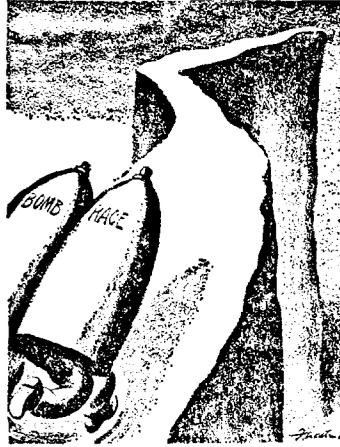
Arms Race Held to Be Forcing Both Sides Toward First-Strike Strategy

A Letter to the Editor
of the *Post-Dispatch*

The threat of first strike nuclear action has nearly become acceptable in crisis confrontations between East and West, and each of the almost annual shows of "power" becomes more appalling. The success of the venture rests on each government's counting on its opponent to act rationally, and both sides hope that no accident will occur in time of crisis. As with a game of "chicken," this game of nuclear power may, by the laws of statistics of deadly quarrels, come to the atrocious end for which we now prepare in cold blood.

New counterforce deterrent systems are presently advocated and developed. Counterforce policy has been spoken of as relatively humane because it relies on weapons systems that are essentially directed against an enemy's military and missile bases. Our counterforce systems are ineffective, however, once the adversary has fired his missiles and taken his aircraft off the ground. Therefore, if war seemed imminent, military leaders would be sorely tempted to fire them before the expected enemy attack would occur; that is, to follow a first strike policy. By the same reasoning in reverse, most of our own overseas SAC bases, being vulnerable, are only operative as a first strike system, and they may tempt the U.S.S.R. to strike preemptively. In both instances, preemptive war plans, based on paranoid thinking, are brought back onto the military planning boards.

SOME MILITARY leaders claim that counterforce policy, backed by an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, permits a "controlled response" in time of war, sparing cities on both sides of the conflict. Even a controlled nuclear war would kill millions and blight future generations over large areas. If national leaders can plan such destruction in times of peace, they will not restrain themselves from attacking the more vulnerable centers of



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Any Stopping Place Along the Way?

the enemy when in the throes of a nuclear war. Having attacked military installations, the next line of attack is almost certain to be open cities. Military conflicts can be prevented from escalation into the holocaust by turning away from nuclear defense policies.

In this connection we also question the feasibility, the wisdom and morality of second strike nuclear retaliation against population centers.

How many more international crises will test the deterrence by threats of "massive nuclear retaliation" before the final accident occurs? May not the loss of control of command in a crisis situation unleash total nuclear war? Where does a reliance on a policy of deterrence leave us when there will be several nations capable of launching a nuclear attack? Apart from political miscalculations, there is the chance of accidental outbreak of nuclear war—through technological failures or acts of fanatics, insane men or desperadoes. Obviously, every type of nuclear defense system places us in this jeopardy which increases as nuclear weapons fall into more and more hands.

In all armed forces for which statistics are available, the annual hospitalization rate for insanity is about three per thousand. Periodic examinations

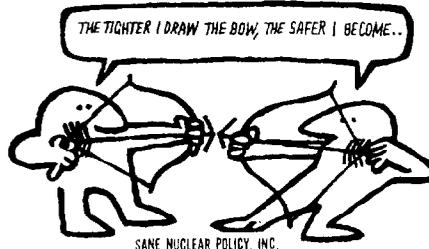
by the American armed forces screen out most of these risks before they can do damage, but the Air Force publicly admits that "it is impossible to prevent all unauthorized destructive acts." These, of course, include detonation of a nuclear weapon by an unbalanced person in the ranks of repair crews or on isolated submarine, surface or air outposts. An unauthorized nuclear explosion would not necessarily start a nuclear war, but the likelihood that it would trigger the command decision to launch a nuclear attack is greatest under a counterforce policy which puts a premium on striking first.

WHAT DID OUR superior nuclear position in the whole range of deterrent systems do to keep the arms race from escalating? Achievement of international peace requires acceptance of the fact that modern weapons of mass destruction have made unlimited national sovereignty obsolete. The basic hope of the world for lasting security is the development of a workable system of world order under the United Nations.

As a first step in a change of nuclear policy, we should leave behind the wild and provocative first strike strategy. "Nuclear deterrence" is a sacred cow of the push-button age while humane responsibility hides behind remote control. The policies of nuclear deterrence imply our preparedness and willingness to plunge over the brink of war, taking millions of innocent human beings to a fate of suffering savagery and death. Do we still have the moral vigor and courage to turn from this path?

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SANE NUCLEAR POLICY, INC.