

PROFILE OF A DILEMMA: LIMITED NUCLEAR WAR

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THE UNDERLYING FEAR OF LIMITED nuclear war is that it may provide the flash point for another all-out struggle. In analyzing the subtle aspects of limited war, however, the use of nuclear weapons utilizes present Marine Corps tactical and technological skills to the fullest, and is as unlikely to cause a global war as what we now term conventional weapons.

To understand the possibility that limited war need not touch off a thermonuclear holocaust, we must first consider the often misunderstood meaning of limited war. Limited war is essentially a political maneuver, and is not fought to consider unconditional surrender. This type of war has no purely military solution, consequently it must end in negotiation — at the point where our political objectives have best been reached. Perhaps the most all-inclusive definition of limited war is provided by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger in his book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*: "A limited war is fought for specific political objectives, which by their very nature

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tend to establish a relationship between the force employed and the goal to be attained. It reflects an attempt to *affect* the opponent's will, not to *crush* it. To make the conditions imposed seem more attractive than continued resistance. To strive for specific goals, not for complete annihilation."

It is generally accepted that the United States and Russia deem the unlimited use of nuclear weapons unwise — not necessarily out of humanity, but out of an urge for self-preservation. Behind this shield of mutual deterrence the Soviets give every indication of continuing their strategy of limited objectives. "Under the mutual threat of massive destruction, it is more likely than ever that another Korea will develop," asserts a Marine general officer. "We dare not leave a hiatus in our operational capabilities between pious indignation over outrageous communist behavior and the delivery of thermonuclear weapons." Far from revolutionary, this strategem has been in successful operation since Peter the Great penned his last

will and testament in early 1700. The influence of this little known document on communist thinking can hardly be overestimated. The Russian czar outlined a plan for limited aggression by "keeping Russia in a continual state for war, to hold the soldier ever ready — to choose the most favourable means for attack, to follow up peace by war, and war by peace."

While it is dangerous to rule out the possibility of general war, it is equally foolish to disregard the probability of localized conflicts. Clausewitz theorized that limited wars are likely under two conditions: where political tensions or aims are small, and where the military means are such that the overthrow of the enemy is not possible, or can be approached only indirectly. Historically speaking, limited war has been the mean — total war the extreme.

Recent experiences — such as the delayed British and French intervention in Suez — emphasize the importance of aggressiveness and mobility in curbing inflammatory situ-

ations. "The basic principle of our national strategy must be mobility," says George Fielding Eliot. "Our best chance of deterring or defeating limited aggression is similarly to be found in the creation of forces and weapons systems which will be equally well suited to exploit our geographical advantages as well as to achieve our ends."

The inherent mobility of the new Marine division — armed with at least 4 kinds of helicopter transportable missiles and backed by supersonic Marine fighter aircraft carrying other missiles — gives us a basis for analyzing the role of nuclear weapons in limited war. This analysis cannot be based on experiences of the past 12 years. Since nuclear weapons were not used in Greece, Korea, or in recent Middle Eastern disputes, our only conclusion would be that they have no place in limited war.

Opponents of limited nuclear war have posted several well-grounded objections. They point out that each side will attempt to outguess his adversary by using the largest

practicable weapon. Even if limited nuclear war is initially fought on a "low-yield" basis, will not the losing side be tempted to regain the initiative by resorting to more and larger mass destructive weapons? Further, won't the technical and destructive complications arising from their use impose a greater drain on our manpower and resources than ever before? Anyone even remotely familiar with the explosive capabilities of nuclear weapons could not fail to take note of these possibilities.

The primary problem of nuclear war—as far as the United States is concerned—arises in actions against nuclear powers, or against nations with vast resources of manpower which are difficult to overcome with conventional weapons. Certainly, the indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons against a minor power, or in a situation where we do not wish to antagonize the civilian population, may be unwise and unnecessary from both a psychological and political standpoint. Only the amount of force needed to win the objective need be applied.

Assuming that both sides wish to avoid all-out war—a requisite for any type of limited war—there exist some intricate restrictions which form the basis for keeping limited war limited. High-yield nuclear weapons cannot be detonated near friendly troops, on terrain soon to be occupied by friendly troops, or against friendly civilian bystanders. With these limitations in mind, there is little basis to assume that so-called conventional high explosives—now 10 times as powerful as in WWII—would produce any less devastation than limited nuclear war. Fortunately, in the development of nuclear weapons, we have not lost sight of this important point. Today we not only have larger strategic weapons, but smaller tactical ones—a fraction of a kiloton—as well. The immediate problem of radiation is already being solved. "It is possible for a bomb to be so clean that you can drop it and all the damage will stay within a 5-mile perimeter, and there is no fall-out whatever," states Dr. Willard F. Libby, member of the Atomic Energy Commission.

With the advent of the Marine Corps' dispersed unit concept, nu-

clear war need not be as destructive as traditional war. High casualty estimates are based on the assumption that most targets will continue to be those of past conventional wars, such as cities and populous industrial areas. Highly mobile, self-sustaining battalions remove the former significance of these targets.



In Korea, for example, certain restrictions were observed. The Americans did not bomb airfields and supply points in Manchuria, while the Chinese did not bomb similar targets in nearby Japan. An opponent who is prepared to ignite an all-out war, in preference to a limited defeat, would hardly be more restrained from using nuclear weapons in a war that began as conventional. The contention that neither side will accept defeat is a denial of the very principles of limited war. Inherent limitations in war are, for all practical purposes, independent of the type of weapons used. If they can be enforced in a limited situation such as Korea, they may apply to nuclear war as well. Such restraint in the future is not unreasonable, or without precedent. The entire history of war is one continuous precedent of restraint. Without it civilization would have been destroyed long ago.

The nucleus of Soviet tactical doctrine is massed manpower. But the

value of this manpower is limited by the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons, as well as the principles of Marxist dialectic materialism. If we utilize nuclear weapons, there is a limit to the number of troops that can be profitably employed against us.

Thus, nuclear weapons make use of the mobility and striking power of the Marine Corps as a means of combating limited aggression on our own terms—and shifting the risk of initiating all-out war to our foe. Because the psychological advantage of this type of war shifts against the winning side, the importance of diplomatic overtures which make it clear that a settlement is possible on reasonable terms, is evident. Any attempt to pulverize the enemy nation as a whole would tip the psychological balance that makes it desirable for both forces to keep the war limited.

Limited wars require units with high mobility and considerable firepower which can move to trouble spots quickly and bring their power to bear with accuracy and discrimination. These units must be capable of imposing a price for limited aggression that does not exceed the cost to us, or the force appropriate to the objective involved. Because of their greater effectiveness, nuclear weapons will eventually find a place in limited war. "If we get into a limited war, outnumbered to the extent we are in bodies, we have very little opportunity to win this kind of war unless we have one of two things: either the clear resolution to use the big stuff if need be, or have the technical weapons which neutralize the ability of the other side to put up more bodies against you." So said Defense Secretary Neil H. McElroy.

The implications are clear: If the United States is to maintain its superior stature among the world powers, it must aggressively pursue its political objectives. In a changing world, with changing military technology, our leaders are faced with the decision to risk all-out war—or consent to camouflaged aggression. This is the dilemma of the nuclear age. Upon the decision will depend—not only our future—but the atmosphere in which the free world will exist.

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