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# HIGHWAY TO ARMAGEDDON

*Bernhard G. Bechhoefer\**

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND WORLD POLITICS: ALTERNATIVES FOR THE FUTURE. By *David G. Gompert, Michael Mandelbaum, Richard L. Warwin, and John H. Burton*. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1977. Pp. xii, 370. Cloth, \$10.95; paper, \$6.95.

This book is part of a large project undertaken by the Council on Foreign Relations "to examine important political and economic problems not only individually but in relationship to one another. . . . Over the course of the next decade, substantial adaptation of institutions and behavior will be needed to respond to the changed circumstances of the 1980s and beyond" (pp. ix-x). As the authors of *Nuclear Weapons and World Politics* recognize, the "[c]oncern with nuclear weapons has, understandably, been dominated by the question of how to avoid cataclysmic war" (p. 1). In their own study, therefore, they seek to avoid two pitfalls: (1) a "preoccupation with the particulars of force posture and arms control issues at the expense of conceiving more basic alternatives to present conditions;" and (2) "bold but vague prescriptions for dramatic change that leave unattended the specific policy issues most likely, in fact, to form the next decade's nuclear agenda" (p. 5).

The difficulties inherent in forging a policy that will avoid cataclysmic war are enormous. Crafting any clear statement of foreign policy entails monumental problems of balancing a plethora of political, economic, and strategic interests. The perfectionism of many responsible foreign-affairs officers has frequently begot endless meetings, additional drafts that only gild the lily, and programmatic statements that recite, all too often without any significance to the public, merely the lowest common denominator of conflicting views. And by the late fifties, a special language—"disarmamentese"—penetrable only by State Department "disarmamenters" such as myself and the small group that followed the international conferences closely had begun to shroud the field of arms control. Today's far more complex technical problems necessitate the extensive and excellent glossary annexed to the book.

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To bring order from this chaos, the authors hypothesize four distinct "nuclear regimes" as a framework for their discussions:

1. Continuation of the present nuclear stalemate.
2. Limitations on nuclear weapons which, one might hope, would restrict their role to one of deterring the use of other nuclear weapons.
3. Progress towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.
4. Strategic deterioration leading to a nuclear imbalance between the Soviet Union and the United States.

There may be other ways to slice the cake, but I have described this methodology in detail because I find it such an excellent approach. It is difficult to imagine important arms-control issues which do not fit readily into this framework. For example, last year a popular but unscholarly writer seriously visualized a situation in which the Shah of Iran would collar the world through nuclear blackmail. In the framework of this study, it is clear that the United States-Soviet nuclear dominance will not be challenged in the 1980s, and for considerably longer, regardless of the proliferation of weapons, the possible limitations on the use of nuclear weapons, progress toward eliminating nuclear weapons, and strategic deterioration.

More important, the book's four hypothetical regimes allow the authors to demonstrate convincingly a conclusion which is, I believe, accepted almost unanimously by the knowledgeable: no simple nostrum will quickly enhance world security in the nuclear age. Proscribing the use of nuclear weapons against states without them, abolishing nuclear weapons, or taking immediate steps to strengthen the United Nations or establish a world government—all such measures are fraught with political and strategic uncertainties which might increase global instability and the danger of a nuclear holocaust. Strengthening one or more of our nuclear capabilities, such as our anti-ballistic-missile defense, similarly may increase instability.

The authors weigh with both technical astuteness and lucidity the pros and cons of these and many other suggestions, qualifiedly approving a very few. In short, they brilliantly avoid one of the two pitfalls of evaluating steps to avoid cataclysmic war: they do not issue "vague prescriptions for dramatic change that leave unattended the specific policy issues most likely, in fact, to form the next decade's nuclear agenda." I believe, however, that the authors less successfully avoid their first pitfall: the "preoccupation with the particulars of force posture and arms control issues at the expense of conceiving more basic alternatives

to present conditions." I shall try to illustrate this weakness by taking a somewhat whimsical detour—for me a sentimental journey—to contrast the apparently simplistic approach to arms control of the early 1950s with the approach of today.

In the early 1950s, no more than a half dozen of us planned, as well as conducted, the bulk of international negotiations. How we would have welcomed studies such as the present volume! We had, nonetheless, some advantages. The first was Ben Cohen. I have never found his equal in devotion to the ideal of a safe world or in breadth of vision of how to get there. Our second advantage was a much readier access to the Secretary of State or even President Truman to resolve differences of view. Third, since most planners also participated in negotiations, we fully appreciated the vast attenuation of thought necessary to convert a sound idea into a product we could sell to international forums and the American public. This last fact made our ideas appear more simplistic than they actually were. I believe that some of them remain basically important to the quest for a safer world, but they receive scant attention in this volume.

For example, before 1951, many within the United States government insisted that disarmament negotiations cease until certain international political settlements were achieved, since the Soviet Union was exploiting the negotiations solely for propaganda outbursts—"ban the bomb," "reduce conventional weapons by one third," and so forth. In 1951, President Truman announced the far-reaching decision that political settlements and disarmament negotiations should proceed concurrently, so that progress in either area could facilitate progress in the other. Ostensibly little more than a procedural decision, this announcement actually reflected the triumph of the much-debated view that more was to be gained in assuring world peace by *détente* than by an arms race and confrontation. This decision was the lineal ancestor of others; it harbingered such projects as increased cultural exchanges and attempts to promote East-West trade, as well as strides toward political settlements. More bread in the Soviet Union might mean fewer guns, which might lead to a more open society and a greater distaste for the threat of wars. This concept of concurrent political and disarmament negotiation continues to be the United States policy, I believe, toward the coincident Middle East and SALT negotiations. Yet I find virtually no analysis in this volume of the role of such political and economic initiatives in avoiding cataclysm.

The authors' failure to consider the significance of political and economic initiatives is most pronounced in their elaboration of the "Fourth Nuclear Regime," where the strategic deterioration of either the United States or the Soviet Union could induce a "nuclear asymmetry" in which the stronger super-power might more willingly chance a preemptive nuclear strike. Dr. Gompert does give lip service to the importance of politics and economics in averting destabilization:

If the politics of detente have not averted a destabilizing strategic arms trend—and it appears they have not—what sort of politics could? However, the real danger is not that politics will fail to contain technology but that politics, too, will go sour in large measure as a result of developments in technology—sour enough to exacerbate technology competition and too sour to permit adequate management through negotiation and tacit understanding. [P. 256]

He emphasizes that the crucial point in strategic deterioration would be passed when the United States loses its credibility as the protector of its allies, a point which would precede by years the Soviet Union's ability to launch a preemptive first nuclear strike without risking its own destruction. This is an excellent start toward a thorough political and economic analysis, but when Dr. Gompert discusses specific developments that might destroy the United States credibility, he ignores those which are not predominantly technological. He does not consider possible economic developments such as the dwindling dollar, nor domestic political developments such as the tax revolt, which might fetter necessary expenditures for new technology. We should not forget that just that type of frenzied domestic political reaction played a great role in deciding Vietnam.

One other example: In suggesting that the Soviet economy might not be capable of sustaining a vastly increased military program, the authors fail to consider the age-old method by which despots extend their military strength beyond their resources—plunder. The economic system of the Soviet bloc already features a subtle exploitation of satellites' resources. That could increase dramatically if Soviet military leaders felt themselves threatened. I do not, however, anticipate that Brezhnev's successor will be a Genghis Khan.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings, as I see them, are relatively minor compared to the book's brilliant analysis of the current world situation, which the scientist Dr. Robert Oppenheimer "likened to two scorpions in a bottle each capable of killing the

other but only at the risk of his own life." Notwithstanding the authors' care to hedge any approval of specific proposals, their failure to evaluate the significance of politics and economics strengthens the hawks' case and weakens the doves'. By this time, it should be obvious that I am a confirmed dove.