To the Editors (Rajesh M. Basrur writes):

Ward Wilson’s article “The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima” provides a startling explanation for the end of World War II in East Asia.1 Wilson argues that, contrary to established wisdom, Japan’s decision to surrender stemmed not from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but from the Soviet Union’s declaration of war against Japan on August 8, 1945. He bases his argument on the following propositions: (1) in the context of the massive destruction caused by the conventional bombing of Japanese cities at the time, the atomic bomb was not qualitatively different; (2) the havoc caused by these attacks did not undermine Japan’s determination to press on with the war in hopes of obtaining favorable terms of surrender; (3) the Japanese leadership’s reaction to the devastation of Hiroshima does not reflect a perception that the atomic bomb was decisive in its effects; and (4) in contrast, the entry of the Soviet Union into the war, by eliminating available options for a favorable end, compelled Japan to surrender quickly. Wilson’s analysis concludes that small nuclear arsenals may not deter aggressors. Whereas large nuclear forces may have such a capability (200 weapons is where the author draws the line), “the logic of deterrence may be different where small arsenals are concerned. If destroying one or two cities does not coerce an opponent, then perhaps the threat of limited nuclear retaliation does not deter when the stakes are high enough” (p. 179). In short, small nuclear powers are inherently unstable and, logically (though the author does not state this explicitly), such states can achieve deterrence stability only if they expand their armories.

Wilson’s basic argument about the Japanese decision is a plausible one, drawing considerable evidence from archival sources, though it is thin with respect to the Soviet factor, as only a single source is cited (pp. 174–175). I question, however, his inference regarding the requirements of deterrence today. Contrary to Wilson’s claim, the size of a nuclear arsenal does not matter, and more specifically, small arsenals are adequate for obtaining deterrence. A review of how nuclear powers behave when war is nigh demonstrates that the concept of “assured second-strike capability” based on the capacity to inflict casualties into the millions is a mythical notion that does not accord with histori-
Correspondence: Do Small Arsenals Deter? 203

cal fact. Wilson claims that the “field of nuclear weapons scholarship is like a large structure standing precariously on only a handful of support posts” (p. 177). On the contrary, there is a well-developed literature on how states with nuclear weapons actually behave when the probability of war is significant. In practice, states approaching nuclear conflict invariably retreat from confrontation regardless of the precise equation they face. In the case I recount below—the crisis-prone relationship between India and Pakistan—it is clear that minimal arsenals are sufficient to deter.

Wilson’s extrapolation from the Hiroshima case ignores a crucial element: timing. The author correctly notes that the difference between the effects of massive Allied conventional bombing of Japanese cities and those of the Hiroshima bombing was not more than a factor of three to four (p. 168). What he does not appreciate—and I stress this particularly in the context of small nuclear arsenals—is that the Hiroshima bomb was dropped at the end of several years of an extraordinarily costly conventional war that took tens of millions of lives. Any decisionmaker contemplating a nuclear conflict today must begin with an estimate of millions of potential losses within hours or days of the commencement of war. It takes a lot to believe that—barring deterrence for survival—a decisionmaker would conceive of political advantage accruing from the first use of nuclear weapons. But let me not rely on inference alone. What is the evidence with regard to the deterrent effectiveness of small nuclear arsenals?

As a rule, one cannot entirely rely on participants’ accounts of a historical event because they have a stake in the historian’s product. There is only one case in which unexceptional evidence of decisionmakers’ thinking during a crisis is available: President John F. Kennedy’s secret tapes of his administration’s internal deliberations during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Other forms of evidence from participants, such as reflections on a crisis after it has passed, are subject to deliberate or inadvertent distortions or errors of judgment. In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, the participants seem to lean toward the view that, in a military confrontation between nuclear-armed adversaries, nuclear superiority is irrelevant. In another instance—the Sino-Soviet border skirmishes of 1969—there is no direct evidence, and estimates of whether China’s small arsenal deterred the Soviet Union’s much larger one are based on interpretations made


3. This point, however, is also misleading. The closeness in scale between the Hiroshima bombing and typical conventional raids applies only to the quantum of damage. The fact remains that the difference was qualitatively enormous if one atomic bomb carried by one aircraft could inflict three to four times as much damage in a single attack than some 500 B-29s could over a much longer period.


by individuals outside the immediate decisionmaking circle. Information on the India-
Pakistan crises of 1999 and 2001–02 is likewise indirect.

More reliable, if more limited in scope than most forms of “inside” information, is
evidence that shows how nuclear-armed states actually behave when war hovers on
the horizon. The reality is that in trying to avoid the risk of nuclear war, they invariably
take great care to avoid conventional war. In all of the cases referred to above, partici-
pants on both sides displayed a marked preference for stopping two thresholds short of
nuclear conflict (i.e., short of regular conventional war). In the Cuban missile crisis,
President Kennedy chose not to attack, but instead to impose a blockade, which in ef-
fect transferred the decision to initiate armed conflict to the Soviet leader, Nikita
Khrushchev, who backed down. In the Sino-Soviet crisis, China did initiate the first use
of force, but on a small and local scale. Subsequently, both sides, despite mobilizing
nuclear and conventional forces, were careful not to launch a conventional military at-
tack. The Soviet leadership debated whether to go for a massive or a limited nuclear
strike, but opted not only against both but against conventional war as well. In yet an-
other instance, U.S. and Chinese forces came close to war in Vietnam during the mid-to-
late 1960s, when Chinese antiaircraft batteries shot down several U.S. aircraft and the
two sides engaged in aerial combat. But both countries exercised restraint. The United
States avoided transgressing the Chinese border, while China broke a promise to the
Vietnamese to supply them with pilots. These examples demonstrate that even
though deterrence theory “was developed in a world in which massive retaliation was
the overriding conception of nuclear war” (p. 179), political leaders faced with the pros-
npect of nuclear use at the outset of war have not relied on the tenets of their strategists.
In every case, one side had a much larger arsenal than the other, but the bigger side was
still deterred.

I now turn to the India-Pakistan relationship. Both countries possess small arsenals,
with a rough equilibrium between them. Actual capability estimates are indicative
rather than definitive, but one widely accepted assessment is that in 2002, India had
some sixty warheads and Pakistan between twenty-four and forty-eight. Note that

---

University Press, 2007).
Later,” in Mark A. Ryan, David Michael Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, eds., Chinese
Arsenals Deter?”
10. Chen Jian, Mao’s China and the Cold War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
2001), pp. 225–227; and John Stoessinger, Nations at Dawn: China, Russia, and America (New York:
11. Qiang Zhai, “Reassessing China’s Role in the Vietnam War: Some Mysteries Explored,” in
Xiaobing Li and Hongsuan Li, eds., China and the United States: A New Cold War History (Lanham,
ber 13, 2002), http://www.cdi.org/issues/nukef/ database/nukearnsals.cfm (last updated Feb-
ruary 4, 2003).
these estimates are dated around the time when the second of the two India-Pakistan crises of 1999 and 2001–02 was under way. Neither country has to this day deployed its weapons. What can one conclude from observing the conduct of both countries during confrontations that could conceivably have led to the use of nuclear weapons?

The 1999 Kargil conflict occurred when Pakistani troops in civilian garb occupied a number of posts vacated by the Indian Army on India’s side of the mutually agreed Line of Control (LoC). Once the intrusion had been detected, Indian forces attacked and drove the Pakistani troops out in a series of skirmishes between May and July. The fighting came to an end after Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif flew to Washington and agreed to President Bill Clinton’s call for a cease-fire on July 4. The conduct of the conflict shows nuclear deterrence at work. First, Pakistan sent in troops dressed as civilians so that it could retain deniability (it was claimed that the intruders were actually Kashmiri mujahideen). This was clearly aimed at minimizing the risk of crossing a red line: the LoC. Second, once its troops had begun to suffer reverses under the onslaught of Indian 155-millimeter howitzers, Pakistan made no attempt to back them up with reinforcements, as that would have effectively blown the army’s cover. On the Indian side, despite pressure from the army for a full-scale riposte, decisionmakers displayed similar caution. In 1965 India had responded to a localized Pakistani attack by broadening the war along the entire border. In 1999, however, it refrained from doing so. The Indian Air Force was given strict instructions not to cross the LoC, though this made the task of dislodging the intruders difficult. Both sides accepted considerable losses in their concern to limit the scale of the conflict, and neither resorted to the adoption of an offensive posture along the length of their long border. Indeed, the LoC and the border were observed as red lines that neither country wanted to cross (in Pakistan’s case, officially) for fear of escalation. Throughout, there was no significant threat of nuclear use. Pakistani leaders on more than one occasion did warn that they had the right of nuclear reprisal if the need arose. But there is no evidence that either side deployed its nuclear weapons. According to Bruce Riedel, a Clinton administration official who was present during the July 1999 meeting between President Clinton and Prime Minister Sharif, U.S. intelligence had obtained evidence of Pakistani preparations for nuclear deployment, but this has not been backed up by sources in any of the three countries concerned. This brief review shows not only that deterrence was in place with few weapons, but that it was effective without the weapons being deployed.

The 2001–02 crisis broke out when terrorists attacked the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001. India, angered by the Kargil conflict as well as by Pakistan’s back-

ing of terrorist groups, had already aired the possibility of military action through hot pursuit, limited strikes against terrorist camps in Pakistan, and some unspecified form of “limited war.” Viewing the attack as the last straw, India quickly embarked on a massive military mobilization and threatened war. With Pakistan also mobilizing rapidly, the crisis raised the specter of imminent war, especially during its two peaks in January and May 2002. This time, the nuclear element was in the forefront. Defense Minister George Fernandes warned, “Pakistan can’t think of using nuclear weapons. . . . We could take a strike, survive, and then hit back. Pakistan would be finished. I do not really fear that the nuclear issue would figure in a conflict.” Yet Fernandes’s statement is revealing. The threat to use nuclear weapons was posed only as a response to the threat of a Pakistani first strike, and the warning was designed to underscore mutual nuclear deterrence. The implication was clear: because the two nuclear forces deterred each other, India had the strategic space for limited conventional war. This was in line with Fernandes’s earlier assertion that nuclear weapons “can deter only the use of nuclear weapons, but not all and any war,” and that conventional war “has not been made obsolete by nuclear weapons.”

The confidence displayed in Fernandes’s words, however, was not reflected in action. When Pakistan responded to India’s mobilization with a matching buildup, and to the signals sent by Indian missile tests with tests of its own, Indian leaders had to back up their threats with action or stand down. They chose the latter course. The degree of care they took to avoid actual combat is reflected in two incidents involving senior military officers. In the first, Lt. Gen. Kapil Vij, commander of India’s II Corps, a strike force stationed in the conflict theater, was abruptly removed from his post for positioning his forces too close to the border. In the second, Air Marshal V.K. Bhatia was transferred from the front after his aircraft strayed into Pakistani airspace, was hit by enemy fire, and returned to make a distress landing at Leh. Clearly, the Indian leadership was taking no chances on escalation arising from loss of control. Taken together, the two crises vividly illustrate the effectiveness of deterrence with small forces on either side.

22. This conclusion has important implications for the debate between proliferation optimists such as Kenneth N. Waltz, who do not worry about proliferation on the grounds that deterrence always works, and nuclear pessimists such as Scott D. Sagan, who fear that strategic rationality
Finally, a word about damage. Studies have shown that even small arsenals have the capacity to cause immense destruction. One study replicating the Hiroshima bombing with respect to Mumbai (earlier known as Bombay) shows that a single 15-kiloton fission bomb would cause anywhere between 160,000 and 866,000 fatalities, depending on the precise location of ground zero. Another simulation calculates that a 50-kiloton bomb dropped over Mumbai would take 994,626 lives, and one dropped over Lahore would kill 723,970. Note that these estimates are for a single bomb and that the level of damage could conceivably occur at the outset of nuclear war. As the evidence above demonstrates, it seems extremely doubtful that any Indian or Pakistani leader would not be deterred by the risk of such levels of potential damage. Most striking is that, notwithstanding the volatile mix of a history of war, conflicts of identity centered on disputed territory, and mutual distrust, India and Pakistan have refrained from deploying their nuclear weapons even at the peak of crisis. Consider too that the level of damage required to deter may be related to a nation's experience. In the case of India and Pakistan, all of their wars (in 1947-48, 1965, and 1971) involved limited destruction and deliberate eschewal of city targeting. In contrast, Hiroshima may not have seemed revolutionary in the closing years of World War II. But again, that is no reason to expect that the prospect of one Hiroshima-type bomb dropped on one city has been an acceptable risk for any decisionmaker in the postwar era. From the evidence available, it has not.

—Rajesh M. Basrur
Singapore

does not prevent the risk of war arising from organizational and other factors. See Sagan and Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003). The wider literature on this issue is reviewed in Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Recasting the Proliferation Optimism-Pessimism Debate,” Security Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Autumn 2002), pp. 41–96. In the South Asian context, see Devin T. Hagerty, The Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: Lessons from South Asia (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). The reality is that nuclear weapons do deter and they simultaneously do carry risk, and there is no escaping this dilemma. This applies not only to new arsenals but to old ones as well. Unless one makes the abolitionist argument that nuclear weapons are entirely dispensable, the key question then is how to minimize the dilemma they pose. Thus, because deterrence has worked regardless of arsenal size, nuclear powers should limit themselves to small arsenals. This would allow them to obtain deterrence while minimizing, though not eliminating, the risk and therefore the dilemma. This evidence of caution corrects the argument of some critics that both sides were reckless. See, for example, Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian, “The India-Pakistan Conflict: Towards the Failure of Nuclear Deterrence,” Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online, Special Forum, No. 48, November 2002, http://www.nautilus.org/archives/fora/Special-Policy-Forum/48_Pervez_Zia.html; Achin Vanaik, “A Degenerating Logic,” Hindu, January 21, 2003; and Praful Bidwai, “World Views: India, Pakistan Closer to Nuclear MADness,” Daily Times, January 23, 2003. For a more balanced critique of the risks involved, see S. Paul Kapur, Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

To the Editors (Michael D. Cohen writes):

In a recent article, Ward Wilson makes two claims. First, he provides impressive evidence to argue that the Soviet Union's entry into the war in the Pacific, rather than the U.S. threat and use of an atomic bomb, caused Japan to surrender. Second, he concludes that "if nuclear weapons played no role in the surrender of Japan, perhaps it is time to conduct a serious, far-reaching review of the general usefulness of nuclear weapons" (p. 179). Although Wilson's first claim may be correct, there are few if any lessons from the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima that apply to the usefulness of nuclear weapons in the nuclear age. Wilson's fundamental error is to conflate Japan before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima with the beginning of the nuclear age. The nuclear age began after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, not before. The reason why Wilson may be correct that the threat of the use of an atomic bomb did not significantly affect Japanese strategic thinking is that Japanese leaders were unaware of the changes in the speed and scale of destruction that such weapons could produce. Thus Wilson notes that "[Chief of the Army General Staff Yoshijiro] Umezu seems to be equating nuclear attacks with conventional air attacks . . . he seems to be asserting that air attacks cannot be militarily decisive" (p. 170). Umezu would have been unaware of the increases in the scale and rate of destruction unleashed by nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons would have been inadequate to deter or compel.

Compellence is harder to achieve than deterrence, but even deterrence will not work when the nature of the punishment from noncompliance is misunderstood. An individual who knows neither what a gun is nor how it has revolutionized warfare will not be compelled or deterred by a gun. But this means neither that guns are not useful nor that they have not revolutionized warfare. That during the summer of 1945 Japanese leaders were unaware of the details of "the result of an unexpected advance in science by Japan's enemy" (p. 175) says nothing about the revolutionary effects of nuclear weapons in a world where everyone knows how destructive they are. Wilson claims that "the field of nuclear weapons scholarship is like a large structure standing precariously on only a handful of support posts" (p. 177). There is another support post, however: knowledge of the significant scale and speed of destruction that nuclear weapons can produce and the concomitant sensitivity to avoid such costs.

Strictly speaking, Wilson is correct that "calculations that similarly rely on the outcome of Hiroshima will also have to be rethought" (p. 178). But sound calculations regarding impacts of collateral damage on deterrence and coercion efforts should not be

---

2. See Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 69–91. Although compellence is usually regarded as harder to achieve than deterrence because it involves forcing an adversary to disengage from some action rather than not engage in something that she may not have wanted to do, there may be more to the matter. If deterrence involves some action on my part to contain an adversary's engagement while compellence to generate adversary disengagement does not, deterrence may be harder to achieve.
based on Hiroshima, a case in which neither deterrence nor compellence stood a chance. While President Harry Truman’s “rain of ruin from the air” threat failed to compel Japan to surrender, there is no reason to expect it to have worked. The Japanese ruling cabinet did not know about the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons. In fact, Umezu and his colleagues would probably have interpreted this to mean more conventional bombing, the likes of which they had already sustained for some time.

Evidence that the beliefs of the Japanese ruling elite regarding the grounds for their surrender changed in the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, or both, might warrant a reappraisal of the thesis that the failure of nuclear weapons to deter or compel a Japanese surrender in 1945 matters for high-casualty conflicts in the nuclear age. As Wilson documents so well, however, this does not seem to have occurred. The reporting of the Nagasaki bomb to the Japanese elite shattered any doubts concerning the U.S. capability to use more than one weapon. It did not alter their firmly held beliefs. Wilson claims that “although the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is generally presented as a horrifying event, whether Japanese leaders would have considered it appreciably different from other (conventional) attacks carried out that summer is unclear” (p. 167).

The details that Wilson provides regarding the destruction of Hiroshima—of which most if not all of the relevant decisionmakers after Hiroshima and Nagasaki would have been aware—suggest how much more destructive nuclear weapons were than conventional bombing in 1945. Five hundred bombers could deliver 4 to 5 kilotons of bombs to their targets, and the attack on Hiroshima was (only) three to four times as powerful as a typical conventional raid that summer (p. 168). But if some of the ten nuclear bombs that were set to be ready by the end of November 1945 had been used to compel the Japanese to surrender, and if Umezu and his cabinet colleagues had been aware of the destructive capacity that such an onslaught could generate—in a period much quicker than what it would take 500 bombers to drop their payloads—perhaps the atom bomb would have been the winning weapon in Japan.

Because the Japanese did not know—in fact, hardly anybody knew—about the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons, it is not surprising that they did not bring about a Japanese surrender. On the other hand, since the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, no nuclear weapon has ever been used in combat. Thus, while Wilson claims that “perspective makes it easier, for us, to imagine that nuclear weapons do not loom behind every important event” (p. 177), they surely loom behind the absence of their use in a conflict where at least one state possessed them and both states knew of their destructive capabilities. This points to the counterfactual of whether the Cold War would have been any different had the atom bomb been developed and tested but not used against Japan.

Finally, Wilson claims that in the sort of war involving nations with small arsenals, the relevance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would increase. This is incorrect. The relevance of Hiroshima here would decrease. Only if the loss of life in such conflicts comes to resemble the extremely high level that occurred in Japan before August 1945 would the Hiroshima case have relevance for such conventional conflicts. Japan was subject to

such extreme destruction that the qualitative increase to nuclear destruction was much less, and thus perhaps more tolerable, at least until Japan would have been completely destroyed. The assertion that deterrence may be different when small arsenals are involved rests on the claim that opponents are not fazed by the threat of the destruction of one or two cities. If they are not, then "perhaps the threat of limited nuclear retaliation does not deter when the stakes are high enough" (p. 179). Compellence did not work in the Pacific in 1945, but surely the threat of the nuclear destruction of New Delhi or Islamabad would deter Indian or Pakistani aggression. Moreover, that limited nuclear retaliation could escalate to full-scale war is always a possibility. More than six decades after Hiroshima, the relevant decisionmakers are well aware of these dynamics.

I have argued neither that the spread of nuclear weapons is to be welcomed or feared nor that nuclear deterrence and compellence are easy to achieve. Wilson is correct that it is time to conduct a serious, far-reaching review of the general usefulness of nuclear weapons. The case of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, however, possesses little relevance for such a study.

—Michael D. Cohen
Vancouver, British Columbia

Ward Wilson Replies:

Both Rajesh Basrur and Michael Cohen make interesting and well-reasoned points in connection with my article "The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima." Their objections, however, highlight the problems that come from thinking about nuclear weapons solely in terms of deterrence.

ABSOLUTE AREA VERSUS PERCENTAGE DESTROYED

Before turning to Basrur and Cohen, I would like to address a criticism from Barton Bernstein that he made in personal correspondence. Bernstein pointed out that the text and figure in the article comparing damage done to Hiroshima with damage done to other cities in Japan were somewhat misleading. The text and figure should have more strongly emphasized that this comparison was based on the percentage of each city destroyed rather than absolute area destroyed. For example, Toyama (99.5 percent of which was destroyed) was not as large a city as Hiroshima (68.5 percent of which was destroyed). The total area of the damage at Toyama (and most of the other cities cited in the figure) was less, in actual square miles, than the damage at Hiroshima. (The damage done at Hiroshima, however, is still eclipsed by the damage created with the conventional bombing of Tokyo.) Bernstein’s criticism is fair, and if I were to make the argument again, I would try to make this point more carefully.

It is not clear that Bernstein’s criticism has a major impact on the argument of the ar-

5. Although I leave aside command and control issues here, a trigger-happy general could be just as responsible for deterring nuclear war through instilling caution in his adversary than for starting one.
Correspondence: Do Small Arsenals Deter? 211
ticle, however. The psychological impact of destroying cities has only a loose connection to their size. For instance, if Boston, Massachusetts (90 square miles), and Hartford, Connecticut (18 square miles) were bombed and destroyed, people would probably say, "They destroyed both cities!" They probably would not say, "Boston and Hartford were bombed. Thank goodness Hartford is 72 square miles smaller!" There is a tendency to think of cities as roughly equal units, even if they are quite different in size. It seems reasonable to assume that Japan's leaders probably thought about city destruction in these sorts of rough terms, which reduces the importance of the actual square miles destroyed.

MEANS AND ENDS
Cohen states that "the Japanese ruling cabinet did not know about the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons," and therefore, "there are few if any lessons from the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima that apply to the usefulness of nuclear weapons." Deterrence works, in other words, only when your opponent knows something about the weapons with which you are threatening him.

There is evidence that suggests that some of Japan's top leaders knew a fair amount about the capability of nuclear weapons. On the evening of August 6, 1945, the day that Hiroshima was bombed, Gen. Korechika Anami, the Japanese minister of war (and arguably the most important and influential man in the government), met with the scientist in charge of Japan's nuclear weapons research project. There is no direct evidence (that I know of) that Anami shared what he learned with his government colleagues, but it would be reasonable to assume that he might share what he knew with the other members of the hard-line faction, and possibly others. So at least one and possibly more highly placed officials in the Japanese government were informed about the capabilities of nuclear weapons.

In a larger sense, however, the Japanese leadership knew exactly what it was dealing with: it was dealing with bombing attacks that could destroy most of a good-sized city. It was facing the prospect of more cities being destroyed. The leadership already knew what its response to this sort of coercion was, however, because Japan had been attacked in this way all summer. It is difficult to imagine that, in the minds of the leadership, the strategic importance of cities would have changed because the means being used to destroy them was different.

Cohen argues, in essence, that it is the reputation of the weapon that coerces. The Japanese could not be coerced with nuclear weapons because the reputation of those weapons was not yet established. Opponents are rarely coerced with weapons, however. They are usually coerced with outcomes. Someone making a threat does not say, "Unless you do what I want, I'm going to get my 7-millimeter magnum Winchester model 70." He says, "Unless you do what I want, I'm going to kill you." It is one of the characteristic mistakes of the nuclear debate—and one that people who think about this debate in terms of deterrence are particularly prone to make—to talk about means (i.e., nuclear weapons) rather than ends (e.g., destroyed cities, blown-up silos, and radiation trails). Means are hardly ever as important as ends. (If you do not believe it, imagine trying to persuade a jury to find you not guilty of murder because of the means you used in killing your victim.)
Basrur argues that small nuclear arsenals deter as effectively as large ones. He writes, “In practice, states approaching nuclear conflict invariably retreat from confrontation regardless of the precise equation they face.” He provides a useful account of two crises involving India and Pakistan with which observers in North America and Europe may not be fully familiar, and notes other cases that lend solid support to his view. He concludes that deterrence is relatively robust.

Basrur’s conclusion about the size of nuclear arsenals makes some sense. It seems likely that in certain circumstances, rough equivalence—even very rough equivalence—is sufficient for deterrence. His confidence in the overall effectiveness of deterrence seems less warranted, for two reasons.

First, Basrur’s sample is limited: he discusses only situations in which (1) war has not yet broken out, and (2) both sides have nuclear weapons. The effectiveness of deterrence is impressive when the discussion is limited in this way. Expand the sample set, however, and the scorecard becomes much more mixed. For example, neither the Vietnamese nor the Afghans were deterred from fighting civil wars against opponents with nuclear-armed allies—wars that both Vietnam and Afghanistan eventually won. In addition, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the 1979 Chinese-Vietnamese border war, and the 1982 Falkland Islands War all involved states that were not deterred by the nuclear weapons their opponents possessed. (The 1973 Arab-Israeli War is particularly striking. Given the deep animosity between Israel and its Arab neighbors, one might expect Egypt and Syria to conclude that the Israelis would be more likely to use their nuclear weapons in any conflict. Israel’s presumed willingness to use nuclear weapons should therefore have increased the effectiveness of the Israeli deterrent. But neither Egypt nor Syria was deterred from launching what would likely have been seen as a war of extermination by the Israelis.) One could even include the 1991 Persian Gulf War as one in which a nation faced the prospect of opposing a nuclear-armed opponent and yet did not feel compelled to yield. The sample set might be expanded further. With a wider set of cases included, the reliability of deterrence seems more doubtful.

Second, there is a more general problem with all of the cases Basrur uses to draw conclusions about nuclear deterrence. Proponents of the efficacy of deterrence often point to the nonuse of nuclear weapons during the Cold War—despite many confrontations. Deterrence, they say, clearly works. To be fair, nuclear weapons do seem to have inhibited the behavior of some nations at various times. But even if the record of deterrence had been perfect over the last sixty-plus years, there is still little comfort to be drawn from this history of averting nuclear war. This is because no nuclear nation has yet faced a war in which its vital interests were at stake. Despite the “domino theory,” Korea and Vietnam were, at best, peripheral to U.S. interests. Rebellion in Afghanistan did not put the vital interests of the Soviet Union at stake. The Falklands are tiny islands halfway around the globe from England. The event that comes closest to a true test of nuclear restraint is the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Although the Israelis did suffer initial reverses in that war, the tide of battle turned before the “do or die” moment arrived.

Nuclear weapons are often referred to as “weapons of last resort.” A theory that purports to explain why these weapons have not been used, but which is based on evidence that does not include any episodes of war in which the last resort is reached, is hardly persuasive.
SAVAGE WAR

Cohen seems to believe that mere knowledge of a new weapon with extraordinarily destructive capabilities makes that weapon an effective deterrent. To understand why this is not so, imagine for a moment a new defoliant that represents a quantum leap forward in effectiveness. Call it “Agent Blue.” A single shell of Agent Blue can kill all vegetation within a circle up to 10 miles in diameter in a single forty-eight-hour period. (Recall that defoliants were an important part of the U.S. military strategy for fighting in the jungles of Vietnam.) I say, “This new defoliant revolutionizes warfare. It will certainly be decisive in any future war. In fact, we may radically reduce our forces because we’ll be able to rely on Agent Blue.” You say, “Well, no doubt it is impressive and terrifying to watch all the plant life within 10 miles of the aim point die off, but killing trees doesn’t win wars.” I have focused on the quantum leap and the startling capabilities of the new weapon. You have focused on the end result. Who has looked more profoundly into the strategic impact of Agent Blue?

Cohen seems to share the widespread belief that once one is aware of the destruction that nuclear weapons might cause, the decisiveness of the weapons in war is proved. But the important point is the ends, here, not the means. Does destroying cities win wars?

Many people seem to believe that the truly appalling thought of killing hundreds of thousands or even millions of innocent civilians would necessarily deter leaders. But this assumption has not been closely examined. At a relatively low level of strategic importance, when relatively unimportant interests are at stake, horror and morality surely do influence decisionmakers. All other things being equal, most leaders would like to avoid unnecessary civilian deaths. But as the stakes rise, the importance of horror and morality decreases; the emphasis on necessity rises; and decisionmakers become more willing to allow innocents to suffer.

It is hard to make a case for the importance of civilian deaths in war based on historical examples. There is a strong emotional desire (particularly among civilians) for civilian deaths to matter in war, but attempts to bolster this emotional desire with evidence prove remarkably frustrating. A review of 3,000 years of history turns up no war that was won by killing civilians or destroying cities. (In the American Civil War, for example, the South did not surrender when Atlanta was burned or Richmond captured. It surrendered when Lee’s and Johnston’s armies were beaten.) There are no well-known examples of leaders who have been praised for surrendering so as to bring the suffering of their people to an end. No members of Parliament rose to urge that the British Empire surrender in World War II after the bombing of Coventry. In war, it seems, civilians are expected to suffer.

Indeed, there are examples of the ability of leaders to accept extraordinary levels of civilian deaths. During the Paraguayan war of 1865–70, an estimated 60 percent of Paraguay’s civilians were killed. The Thirty Years’ War provides an even more horrifying example: approximately 75 percent of Germany’s civilian population was killed. So consider: at some point during the war, half of Germany’s citizens had been killed. Half. And yet the leaders of the day chose to forge on, believing the stakes were so important that even this appalling level of destruction was justified in the pursuit of their aims.

History demonstrates that some leaders, at least, will countenance civilian deaths of
up to 75 percent. What grounds do we have for confidence that today’s leaders are incapable of this kind of bloodthirsty determination when the stakes are high enough? Lest we be tempted to take comfort in the notion that the savagery of the Thirty Years’ War is from a long-ago, far-away time, keep in mind that our parents and grandparents—during World War II—participated in a war that claimed the lives of some 30 million people, most of whom were civilians.

It may be that in a future crisis or war, the threat of the sudden and horrific destruction of cities with nuclear weapons will deter leaders. It is, however, far from a certainty.

—Ward Wilson
Trenton, New Jersey