THE H-BOMB

MASSIVE RETALIATION OR GRADUATED DETERRENCE? 1

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REAR ADMIRAL SIR ANTHONY BUZZARD:

One of the ugly facts of life which we now have to face fairly and squarely since the failure of the high-level discussions at Geneva in July and October 1955 is that nuclear disarmament is still a long way off, though a measure of conventional disarmament may be nearer.

Specifically, our defence policy must, I suggest, aim at three main objectives: to prevent all wars, small, medium, and large, and above all to ensure that the H-bomb is never used; to strengthen our hand in negotiations and in blocking Communist power politics, particularly in Germany but also all round the Communist perimeter; to pave the way for nuclear disarmament, and meanwhile to bring about and exploit any conventional disarmament that is practicable.

Our present defence policy, which Mr Dulles has labelled ‘massive retaliation’, seems to be becoming much too drastic and inflexible for these objectives. Increasingly we are getting into a position where, in effect, we shall be forced to threaten, and if necessary initiate, the destruction of civilization in the event of any measure of aggression too powerful for our small conventional forces to combat. For, except in the most restricted areas, our conventional forces are unable to withstand the vast Communist conventional forces without the tactical use of atomic weapons, and there seems at present to be no distinction between the tactical use of atomic weapons and the unlimited strategic use of the H-bomb.

The proposition which I want to put forward is, that we should, in fact, establish a clear distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons, so that we can use our atomic weapons tactically without provoking the strategic use of hydrogen weapons.2

I suggest that we work out and declare in peace, without waiting for Communist agreement, some such distinctions as these: we regard the tactical use of nuclear weapons as confined to atomic weapons only, and we exclude the use of even these against towns and cities; strategic use of nuclear weapons would refer to the use of hydrogen weapons and to the mass destruction of towns and cities, even by atomic weapons. We might also add that, to conform to the moral principle of limiting the use of force

1 Discussion at Chatham House, 9 November 1955.
2 In this paper the word ‘tactical’ refers to the use of weapons against armed forces and ‘strategical’ to use against centres of population.
as much as possible, we would never resort to the strategic use of nuclear
weapons unless absolutely essential.

Thus, without committing ourselves in advance or showing our hand
too clearly, if we were ever threatened with aggression which, though
limited, was too powerful for our conventional forces to combat, we should
have the option of saying to the aggressor:

If you use aggression, we will, if necessary, use atomic and chemical weapons
against your armed forces. But we will not, on this particular issue, use hydrogen
or bacteriological weapons at all, unless you do, and we will not use mass
destruction weapons against centres of population—regardless of the targets
they contain—unless you do so deliberately.

To this we might specify certain exceptions to the definition of centres of
population, such as cities in the front line of the land fighting and those
with airfields adjoining them. Thus, with three graduated courses of action
from which to choose we should be modifying our present inflexible policy
of massive retaliation to one aptly named ‘graduated deterrence’.

Clearly there would be difficulties and disadvantages in such a policy,
but when scrutinized in the light of the real menaces to peace, and the
real needs of our defence policy, are they any worse than the many
dangers and shortcomings of massive retaliation? Let us compare the
alternative policies in the light of our three main objectives.

**To Prevent War.** In the first objective of preventing war, the real
menace to peace (and this is often misunderstood) is not deliberate major
aggression, which can be virtually ruled out, but local aggression on a
minor or medium scale which, if not nipped in the bud, might well lead
unintentionally to major war. Thus we require a policy which, while
continuing to maintain the present deterrent against deliberate major
aggression, would enable us to deter and, if necessary, to repel any medium
or minor aggression by the Communists, to make unintentional war as
unlikely as possible, and to deal firmly with any aggressive action by third
parties.

In the unlikely event of intentional major aggression, our deterrent,
and the results if it failed, would be the same with either policy—total
war. But the crux of the problem lies in the much more likely event of
medium aggression, i.e. any aggression too powerful for our small con-
ventional forces but not so vital as to warrant the strategic use of nuclear
weapons. With our present policy, we have only two extreme courses of
action open to us—our small conventional forces at one end of the scale,
and all our nuclear weapons, however used, at the other.

But since the Russians are now developing the power to strike back
massively at America, massive retaliation is in danger of being interpreted
as bluff in the case of medium aggression, for the Communists might well
expect the United States to shrink from action which is becoming in-
creasingly akin to suicide—and indeed, on the limited issues likely to be
at stake in medium aggression, they might well be right. Thus massive retaliation leaves much room for Communist exploitation and misunderstanding in the event of any form of aggression between a major and a very minor one.

Graduated deterrence seeks to fill this gap by enabling us to take, if desired, limited tactical action with atomic and chemical weapons, and to exploit three great assets which we possess; our superiority in atomic weapons suitable for tactical use on land, sea, and in the air; the potentials of atomic and chemical weapons used in defence, as opposed to offence, which favours us in our task of repelling Communist invasion; our technical superiority in making precision attacks with high explosive weapons, which could still be used against key pin-point targets (such as bridges) within centres of population. Graduated deterrence seeks also to make use of our fourth great asset, namely, strategic hydrogen air power, as a means of compelling an aggressor to accept our distinctions in the use of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, we should be obviating, or at least mitigating, the effects of our two great weaknesses; Communist numerical superiority in men and conventional weapons, which are highly vulnerable to atomic and chemical weapons, particularly when open to mass attack; our relatively much greater dependence than the Communists upon ports to reinforce the threatened area—ports being the communication bottlenecks most vulnerable to attack by mass destruction weapons, which would be barred from such attacks by the distinctions I propose.

Before we feel confident to choose the intermediate course of action to counter medium aggression in all areas, some increase in our tactical strength may be necessary. But such tactical strength as we possess would at once be immeasurably enhanced by the establishment of our distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons; and this would greatly help to redress the tactical balance of power.

In the case of the most likely menace of all—minor aggression—whether by the Communists or other parties, our ability to use conventional forces would be the same under both policies. But with graduated deterrence we would have (and the Communists would know that we had) our intermediate limited course of action to fall back on, instead of the unlimited and much too drastic action of massive retaliation. We would therefore be less likely to shrink from the prompt and firm action required to prevent small wars spreading, and so be less likely to get into a position in which a series of Communist nibbles ultimately forced us to take drastic action leading to major war.

In the very real danger of war developing or spreading unintentionally, a policy of massive retaliation leaves much scope for misunderstanding, such as an intended minor aggression being mistaken for and treated as a major aggression. But with graduated deterrence our intermediate action would be clearly available, so that misunderstandings would be much
less likely, and if they did occur we should be able to deal with the situation with far less risk of precipitating total war.

Finally, let us consider the distinct possibility of arriving at a complete impasse or deadlock with the Communists on some crucial, but limited, issue. With a policy of massive retaliation the stakes would be so high that it is doubtful whether the morale and unity of the friendly Powers concerned would stand the strain, for Communist propaganda would be emphasizing the effect of a hydrogen war on the cities of our Allies in the area, few of which are likely to have any appreciable air or civil defences. Under a policy of graduated deterrence our Allies would be far more likely to stand firm.

Moreover, since neither city destruction nor the use of H-weapons would seem inevitable to the Communists, they would be less tempted to forestall us with a surprise hydrogen attack on our ports and cities in the Pearl Harbour style. Indeed, on both sides the urgency of getting in the first blow would be reduced, and thus more time would be given for good sense and diplomacy to prevail.

The conclusion must surely be that a policy of graduated deterrence must, particularly in the light of the real menaces of minor aggression, medium aggression, and miscalculation, increasingly improve our chances of preventing war and of ensuring that the H-bomb is never used. The only proviso is that we should not disclose in advance—before an actual threat arises—the circumstances in which we would use our conventional, our intermediate, or our strategic course of action.

Strength In Negotiations. In the second main objective of strengthening our hand in negotiations and in blocking Communist power politics, a policy of massive retaliation becomes bluff and unreal as, with growing Russian strategic air power, strategic stalemate approaches. Our outstanding requirement for negotiations is, therefore, becoming increasingly that of redressing our present tactical inferiority in conventional forces by greater local tactical strength. Graduated deterrence would greatly enhance our tactical and local strength by making possible the tactical use of atomic and chemical weapons.

But apart from this direct and immediate strengthening of the West’s hand in the conduct of its foreign policy, graduated deterrence, by demonstrating our determination and ability to redress the tactical balance of power, would assist our cause indirectly in two other ways: it would show the uncommitted countries of Asia and Africa (where Communist propaganda is so actively exploiting our massive retaliation policy) that we are doing all we can to limit the use of nuclear weapons, pending disarmament; it would show the Allied public, many of whom have mistaken the strategic stalemate for a general military stalemate, that we still have to continue building our tactical strength. And it would disillusion them of the growing feeling that it is pointless to continue supplying
NATO and other forces with costly tactical atomic weapons when our policy is to blow the world to pieces in the event of any substantial aggression. In particular, it would convince the Germans, who are becoming increasingly impatient for reunification (and liable to compromise with the Russians), of the need to press on with their twelve divisions, wherein lies the best hope of the Russians agreeing to withdraw from East Germany on just terms. And it would convince the United States, who alone can still afford substantially increased defence expenditure, of the need to continue building tactical strength in the exposed areas around the Communist perimeter.

Thus, the establishment of our distinctions in the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons, while itself not necessarily requiring agreement with the Communists, might do much to pave the way for negotiating agreements with them. But if this proved optimistic, at least we would be better placed to block any expansionist designs they may have.

Disarmament. The factors concerning negotiation generally apply equally to disarmament negotiations, but disarmament requires special treatment in addition.

Our present policy of massive retaliation almost certainly engenders in Communist hearts a genuine fear of the vast United States strategic air potential, poised on advance bases (on land and at sea) so much closer to Russia and China than Communist bases are to America; and they may genuinely fear what might happen if the more antagonistic American personalities should gain a real following in the United States. Graduated deterrence might reduce this tension and gradually nourish the mutual trust necessary for disarmament.

At least it would afford some assurance to the Communists, and to the uncommitted countries, of our sincerity, showing that we genuinely wish to limit all possible use of nuclear weapons until their disarmament can be agreed. Conversely, it would be a test—for all to see—of Communist sincerity in the disarmament negotiations, for their denouncement of it would demonstrate their intention to continue exploiting our present tactical weakness in conventional forces, and their own vast superiority in manpower.

Graduated deterrence might also help to bring about disarmament in the following ways which, though individually far from decisive, might be a useful contribution collectively:

1. The Communists are unlikely to give up force as an instrument of policy until we provide deterrents which will effectively block each and every form of aggression. Only graduated deterrence will do this.
2. We are unlikely to get fully controlled disarmament until an effective collective force (perhaps under world government) is available to enforce it. Massive retaliation is too drastic for this, but the strong tactical forces envisaged under graduated deterrence might possibly form the nucleus of such a police force.
3. We are unlikely to get the trust and confidence essential for agreements in
the limited possession of nuclear armaments without a period of experience in which their use is limited by tacit understanding—if not by actual agreement. Only graduated deterrence can provide this.

(4) With the Communists’ fundamental dependence on tactical rather than strategic strength for their security, the continued reliance by us on our strategic strength of massive retaliation is likely to make fair and balanced reduction in armaments difficult. Graduated deterrence, on the other hand, by converting our requirements for security into terms more tactical and therefore comparable with those of the Communists, would facilitate fair and balanced reduction, stage by stage.

(5) Finally, the establishment of our distinctions in the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons would provide a natural corollary to our recent proposals for ground and air inspection, which in themselves are, of course, also measures designed to limit the use of armaments (i.e. the use of surprise) as well as pilot schemes for disarmament inspection. Now that the Communists have for the moment refused these proposals, the announcement of our distinction would enable us to retain the initiative by further positive action in our continuing efforts to face the Communists with arguments for making virtue of necessity.

The surest path to disarmament, therefore, probably leads through graduated deterrence. Certainly the responsibility for making the first move in reducing the threat of nuclear weapons rests upon our shoulders, just as that of making the first move in reducing conventional forces rests upon the Communists’ shoulders.

Two other important considerations need to be examined—the Economic and the Moral Aspects.

**Economic Aspect.** At first sight massive retaliation might seem to be the cheapest way of keeping the peace. But if the Communists are to be convinced that we will retaliate massively, even for medium aggression, and that we are not bluffing, clearly a full scale of air and civil defence for the ports and cities of the Allies (and of friendly Powers liable to be threatened with aggression) is essential against every form of mass destruction. And for our deterrent to be effective the Communists must be fully aware that such defences have been provided. They are also essential if the morale of the Allied public in a crisis is to stand firm in support of a policy of massive retaliation. But air and civil defences on this scale are becoming increasingly impracticable economically (except perhaps for the United States), and they are certainly quite beyond the means of the more exposed and less prosperous friendly Powers. With graduated deterrence, on the other hand, the meagre scales of air and civil defences, which are all that we and most of our Allies can afford, would be more justifiable, on the grounds that this policy makes the destruction of cities a far more remote possibility.

Furthermore, with massive retaliation the fullest provision of offensive strategic weapons and means of their delivery is essential to deal not only with all the enemy’s airfields and armed forces, but also with many of his important cities and ports, always in the strongest competition with the Communist offensive strategic potential. With graduated deterrence, on the other hand, we might gradually afford to take some risks and effect
some economies in this matter, on the grounds that saturation point, and therefore a stalemate, will soon be reached in our ability to destroy each other's cities, and that such destruction therefore becomes an increasingly remote possibility.

The only other alternative under our present policy of massive retaliation is to go to the other extreme and rely more on conventional (and perhaps chemical) tactical strength to deal with the various scales of medium aggression, in which case we should have to face the heavy cost, in manpower as well as material, of large conventional forces. That, too, would compare unfavourably with graduated deterrence, in which the tactical strength to deal with the medium scales of aggression is much more economically provided by being able to exploit the use of tactical atomic and chemical weapons.

In fact, rather illogically, the West seems to be expending considerable sums on tactical atomic weapons under our present policy of massive retaliation. Surely, under this policy, the money would have been better spent on more conventional forces or on improved civil and air defence measures. From whatever angle this problem is approached one concludes that, although graduated deterrence would not for some time provide any financial savings, it would certainly give us better security for our money. Moreover, some of the vast sums being spent by the United States on civil and air defence of their cities might become available for increasing the tactical strength so urgently required in Europe and other exposed areas.

Moral Aspect. Morally, we should not cause or threaten to cause more destruction than is necessary. All our fighting should therefore be limited (in weapons, targets, area, and time) to the minimum force necessary to deter and repel aggression, prevent its unnecessary extension, and return to negotiation at the earliest opportunity—without seeking total victory or unconditional surrender.

The moral standards which we profess to defend demand not only this action in the event of aggression, but the pursuance of long-term policies which will enable us to conform to these standards to the best of our ability in the future. Massive retaliation hardly passes this test, nor indeed does it square with the moral standards we professed to uphold at the Nuremberg trials. Graduated deterrence, on the other hand, at least aspires to pursue these principles so far as is possible, and it seeks to restore moderation and the rule of law in the future conduct of war, without which we will surely never succeed in abolishing it.

Would the Communists Conform? An obvious question which arises is: would the Communists conform to our limitation in the use of nuclear weapons if we chose to impose them on the threat of medium aggression or unintentional local war?
In peace the Communists would probably refuse at first to agree to our distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons, arguing, as they do now, that nuclear weapons must be abolished altogether, and knowing that this would leave the Red armies supreme. But if a war of limited aims should come and we elected to impose our limitations, it seems almost certain that the Communists would do their utmost to conform to them. They must appreciate the vast American superiority in nuclear weapons, American skill in delivering them strategically, and the extremely advantageous geographical location of American advanced air bases. In weighing the relative advantages, the Communists might well conclude, as we have, that our proposed limitations in the use of nuclear weapons would often favour us in the problem of holding territory, but the absolute disadvantage of having their cities pounded by hydrogen bombs would far outweigh such considerations from their point of view in a war of limited aims. As hydrogen weapons increase in power and numbers, this absolute consideration would weigh more and more heavily with the Communists. But, even if this estimate should prove wrong in war, we would have gained immeasurably in the unity and morale of the Allied people concerned by having placed the onus for initiating the mass slaughter of civilians on the enemy. Moreover, we would risk little since if the Communists did not conform, to be a few hours after them in city destruction would make no difference.

It is true that the Communists could, if they dared to disregard our limitations, forestall us by a few hours with hydrogen weapons against, say, our airfields while we were still attacking theirs with atomic weapons. But they would be unlikely to accept the consequences of this. If they did, we would probably be no worse off than with a policy of massive retaliation, in which the Communists would have every incentive, and probably the opportunity, to forestall us with hydrogen weapons.

The Only Real Difficulty. The only real difficulty in graduated deterrence is that of establishing a distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons which would have a reasonable chance of holding in a limited and local war. The problems of distinguishing hydrogen from atomic weapons, and of defining centres of population and their geographical limits, are certainly difficult, but provided they are thoroughly studied beforehand, there seems no reason to suppose they are insuperable. The weapons to be classed as strategic, instead of being defined as hydrogen, might be more appropriately defined as those with major fall-out effects, or those exceeding in power a certain number of kilotons. Similarly, centres of population could be defined in a number of ways. But there seems much to be said for excluding for tactical use the mass destruction of all towns and cities over a certain size, regardless of the targets they contain, excepting only those actually in the front line of the land fighting; those from which offensive missiles are launched; and those
which, having adjoining airfields, launch offensive aircraft from them, when the airfields would become liable to atomic attack.

The front line of the land fighting might be defined as extending so many miles beyond the most advanced land units of each side. And any towns or cities in the front line could be declared 'open' if desired—provided they were proved to be so.

With some such distinction established well in advance the problem seems far from hopeless. For the difference between a bombing policy intentionally designed to knock out cities with hydrogen bombs, and one designed to strike other targets with atomic bombs which may occasionally hit a city by mistake, would be obvious. Moreover, the Communists would, like us, be desperately anxious that cities should be spared and that the war should not spread, so that both sides would be anxious—not reluctant—to overlook the occasional accidental breach of the rule, and to avoid giving the other any opportunity of putting the worst interpretation on its actions.

Thus, we should probably succeed in maintaining our limitations for at least a few weeks, which is what really matters; for, by that time, even a limited atomic war would probably have convinced one side or the other—if not both—of the need to return to negotiations.

But if, despite all this, our proposed limitations should break down, would anything have been lost by making the attempt? Little or nothing, I suggest, when compared with the alternative of massive retaliation, provided that we never lose sight of the risk of breakdown occurring, and become 'trigger happy' with our tactical atomic weapons.

The conclusion is, surely, that we probably can devise distinctions which are likely to hold in wars of limited aims. These are the only types we are considering for our intermediate grade of action, and if they are dealt with faithfully, all possibility of major war would be virtually ruled out.

The overall conclusion is, I suggest, this. By adopting a policy of graduated deterrence, and implementing our intermediate course of action if the occasion arose for it, we should risk only two things: that the enemy might ignore our proposed limitations in the use of nuclear weapons and forestall us by a few hours in the use of hydrogen weapons against airfields, etc., a risk which is probably at least as great in our present policy; and that either side might become 'trigger happy' with their tactical atomic weapons, a risk which could be mitigated by advertising the danger of their tactical use spreading. These risks might never materialize, and the first could not do so unless war actually breaks out.

On the other hand, many of the formidable advantages in favour of adopting graduated deterrence are positive ones which would materialize now, whether or not war breaks out, and which would help to make war itself less likely, particularly the most likely types of wars. Indeed, graduated deterrence would arrest the present dangerous policy of drift
and constitute a definite step towards our objectives of preventing war, strengthening our hand in negotiations, and paving the way for nuclear disarmament.

**Time Factor.** One might ask whether it is not better to delay introducing distinctions between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons until the eleventh hour before the outbreak of local war. Such a delay would surely be a great mistake, for the following reasons:

1. In the cold war, unless the Western public are convinced that reasonable distinctions can be drawn, they will be unlikely to make the necessary economic sacrifices to go on providing tactical atomic weapons, since they will feel that any use of such weapons would lead to total hydrogen war and therefore be of little value.

2. In the event of a Communist threat arising, unless the country threatened is convinced that our distinctions are reasonably clear, it may well shrink from accepting any reinforcement in the form of tactical atomic weapons for fear that such use might lead to H-bombing of its cities. Similarly, the public of the Western Powers wishing to reinforce the threatened country may shrink from doing so on such terms. The Communists would not be slow to exploit such doubts and hesitations.

3. In the event of local war breaking out, unless distinctions have been thoroughly engrained in the minds and plans of both sides for a considerable period beforehand, the prospects of their holding—a difficult matter in any case—would be greatly reduced.

4. Only by announcing our distinctions at least sufficiently clearly for the world to believe that they are real and sincere, would we be able to reap the many benefits which graduated deterrence could contribute towards our second and third objectives of achieving successful negotiations with the Communists and of paving the way for disarmament and the abolition of war.

If not at the eleventh hour, when, then, should our distinction between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons be established? There seems every reason for establishing it as soon as it can be worked out and agreed with the United States and NATO. Thereafter it would still take time for both sides to adjust themselves to the possibility of limited atomic war. Indeed, the longer the delay, the more difficult will such adjustments become. Moreover, since the Geneva deadlock, we are now in dire need of some positive action with which to retain the initiative with the Communists, to discourage any relaxation by the Allied public, and to spur on the tactical rearmament of the disappointed Western Germans.

Here is a step—perhaps the only one open to us—which can do this, without having to obtain agreement from the Communists.

Let us therefore assemble the strongest team of Service representatives and international jurists to work out the best possible distinctions between the tactical and strategic use of nuclear weapons, and let them be supervised by two or three determined politicians, imbued with the urgent political need of these distinctions. If, as I feel confident, reasonably clear distinctions emerge, let us then announce them to the Communists on a take it or leave it basis. We should thus have taken a sizeable step towards our objectives, and towards sanity, moderation, and morality.
In due course this vital first step might lead to improved relations with the Communists, and perhaps a measure of conventional disarmament by which the disproportionate Communist conventional strength may be reduced. We might then conceivably feel that, with the help of German divisions and further improved tactical atomic weapons, we could keep the peace in all circumstances and areas without ever having to be the first to use the H-bomb. We might thus be able to take a second important step by renouncing in advance all use of this terrible menace to civilization, unless the aggressor uses it. And if this in turn should lead to further improvements of the same nature, we might then be able to renounce in advance all intention of being the first to use atomic and chemical weapons against centres of population, and so finally ban all strategic use of mass destruction weapons.

In this way we may learn to live a little more happily with the H-bomb. And together with the present pilot schemes for inspection and control, we might gradually move step by step towards our ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament.

Sir John Slessor:

The real object in my view is to abolish war. I do not believe that we do much good by trying to abolish or limit the use of any particular weapon of war, anyway in the context of world war between two great Powers. I feel that, in fact, total war has already been abolished by the fact of the existence of the hydrogen bomb in the armouries of the world. And so, very briefly, my view is first that, in a world war when the existence of great nations is at stake—and still more in the interest of preventing such a war, which is the real point—it is very doubtful whether graduated deterrence is either desirable or practicable; secondly that in periphery wars, the Koreas of the future which we may still see, adventures by the Red army or by the Chinese Communists, limitation in the use of nuclear weapons is worth very careful examination, because it might be possible. In other words we should differentiate between total war and minor war or police action; just as the heavy bomber of yesterday becomes the light bomber of today, so a quite serious war of fifty years ago would now be a relatively minor incident, while the real war of today was undreamt of when we were children.

Some general propositions are I think relevant to this subject. What has been described as the 'classic theory', i.e. that the object in war is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces, was finally disposed of with the advent of the atomic and the hydrogen bombs. The advocates of the classic theory always seem to me to confuse the means with the end, or the method with the object in war. The object in war has always been to impose your will on the enemy and, in the old days, in order to impose your will on the enemy you had to start off by destroying his armed forces. Today, perhaps unfortunately, that can be done without destroying his
armed forces. I do not say that there will not be a measure of attack on the enemy's armed forces in order to achieve that end, but it is not the object. We must be very clear about what this great deterrent is designed to deter. Advocates of the deterrent policy have never claimed more for it than the prevention of a potential aggressor from undertaking total war as an instrument of policy, as Hitler did in 1939, or from embarking on or developing a course of international action which involves a serious chance of total war. It is not claimed that it will prevent minor aggressions, such as the North Koreans walking across the 38th parallel in 1950.

An important weakness of Admiral Buzzard's case is his belief in our ability to provide with atomic weapons the tactical strength with which to match Communist tactical strength—the 'tactical balance of power'. I agree that modern weapons, not only the atomic and the hydrogen weapons but other modern weapons such as the proximity fuse and the recoilless anti-tank gun, have lent more strength to the defence in land-air warfare than they have to the offence. But that is not so at sea. Modern developments at sea have unfortunately given much more power to offence, especially by the U-boat, and we must remember that before we throw away our right to deal with U-boat bases with the atomic weapon. Although it has given added strength to defence on land, I still do not think it has tipped the scales to the extent that NATO, even with the addition of twelve German divisions, would be able to hold up 175 or so Soviet divisions (who will also have tactical and atomic weapons) and prevent them reaching the Channel coast before very long.

Bertrand Russell, for whom I have a great admiration and respect, makes a substantial point in a contribution to The Bomb (1955) in which he visualizes the rulers of the world saying: 'We . . . only value the bomb because it prevents war, but there is a much cheaper way of preventing war, and that is mutual admission that war can no longer further the policy of either party . . .' (p. 51). That is perfectly true. But surely he overlooks the fact that that is only true because of the existence of the H-bomb. If, as Admiral Buzzard suggests, we now say that Russian U-boat bases and centres of communication leading to the Red Armies would be immune, and all towns and cities over a certain size, regardless of the targets they contain (except those actually in the front line of the land fighting, which would be defined by so many miles each side of the forward troops) then surely the effect would be that Russia herself would be virtually immune from nuclear attack, which would suit the Kremlin very well. Destruction would be confined to NATO soil, particularly to Germany, and possibly also to satellites like Poland and Czechoslovakia. That is a dangerous policy to advocate, especially in relation to the Germans. Those present at the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft's Conference at Königswinter in the spring of 1955 will remember that that was just what many Germans were saying: 'If there is another war the only people who are going to get it in the neck with
atomic weapons are the Germans'. Incidentally, that is one of the great safeguards against Germany ever being a menace to her neighbours again, because I believe thinking Germans realize that whatever the issue of any war and whoever ultimately won it (if anybody wins modern wars) Germany would finish up as a radio-active desert. If we say that atomic weapons may be used only in the area of the front line, or the towns in the battle zone, it will not ring a very cordial bell with our new NATO allies, and Russia herself would be immune except possibly for towns in the immediate neighbourhood of airfields. That seems to be a good bargain for the Russians who would surely rather capture places like Paris and the Channel ports intact than as masses of radio-active rubble. M. Paul-Henri Spaak said in an excellent article 'The Atom Bomb and NATO' in the American Foreign Affairs of April 1955 (p. 353), 'the plain fact is that war no longer pays', and for that reason he favours the policy of nuclear deterrence. So let us be very careful before we restore war as a paying proposition. An article 'Graduated Deterrence' in The Economist of 5 November 1955 (p. 458) says: 'Would a graduation of deterrence lead a would-be aggressor to believe that the game might conceivably be worth the candle? To be quite specific, would it diminish the Western Powers' ability to deter a Russian aggression, the only likely cause of major war in the near future? If the answer to either question is in the affirmative then it is a very dangerous proposal', and it goes on to say, 'To give the Russians the power to decide whether or not hydrogen bombs would be used would surely be, as things stand now, to restore to them the power to overrun Western Europe while keeping their bomb base intact'. That is my view also. Admiral Buzzard has rightly said: 'The absolute disadvantage of having their cities pounded by H-bombs would far outweigh such considerations' as whether graduated deterrence would pay them or pay us best. I think they would be prepared to take a chance on that, and the absolute disadvantage of having their cities pounded would outweigh all considerations.

This is not all simple and straightforward. It would present the most frightful dilemma that any statesman has ever had to face. Anybody who, like myself, was on the Air Staff in 1939-40 when we were worrying about the few hundred tons of high explosives of those days, knows that it would face us with an appallingly difficult decision. But Lord Attlee put the point well when he said in a broadcast on the European Service (10 June 1954) that in a real war when the existence of nations is at stake '... any weapon will be used in the last resort'. The point which immediately arises is—what is the last resort? No one suggests that we should immediately drop a hydrogen bomb on Moscow the moment there is a frontier incident, for instance, on the border of the Soviet zone. That is one of the reasons why we must have conventional forces in Germany—the primary case in my opinion for a German army. We must have something between the hydrogen bomb and the frontier policeman in order to reduce the chances
of having to use the bomb. We must have some force to deal with the
tactics of infiltration without calling in the ultimate sanction. We cannot
afford suddenly to wake up one fine morning to find that a lot of ‘peace-
loving democratic partisans’ have ‘liberated’ Hamburg with the support of
patriots of the so-called ‘People’s Police’ or Eastern German army on the
other side of the frontier. We must be able to deal with the tactics of the
fait accompli, like Hitler’s reoccupation of the Rhineland, which was
effected with approximately one division. And I think the answer to the
question ‘When is the last resort?’ is when it becomes absolutely clear that
the Kremlin has decided on the gamble of total war.

Would this graduated deterrence policy be practicable in a major war?
It might last for more than the few hours which have been suggested—it
might last long enough to give the Red army a fatally good start into
Europe. But I cannot visualize it lasting for any length of time. Can we
really suppose that, if the Russians thought that the Allied armies were
any serious obstacle to them, they would really refrain from bombing the
ports and main rail centres through which we would be bringing our rein-
fforcements and supplies? Would they—or for that matter would we—
really be able to refrain from bombing towns? I cannot help remembering
the example of Florence in 1944. Early that year, we in the Air Force
were subjected to heavy pressure, I think perfectly justifiable pressure,
from the army to bomb Florence, which was a crucially important centre
in the German line of communication. We tried very hard to avoid having
to do so, and tried all sorts of other ways of achieving the same effect.
In that we were unsuccessful owing to bad weather and one thing and
another, and the time came when we were hard pressed in the Anzio beach-
head and the photographic aircraft brought back photographs showing the
marshalling yards in Florence full of flat cars loaded with tanks and guns
and so on, and eventually we had to give way and bomb—fortunately
without doing any substantial damage to anything except the marshalling
yards. That is the sort of thing that makes me feel that in practice in a
great war when our very survival would be at stake, this graduated policy
is not really practicable, and would soon break down. Moreover, surely in
the last resort no nation is going to accept defeat with the hydrogen
weapon still in its armoury unused? I cannot convince myself that, if it
comes to major war—to a third world war—the hydrogen weapon will not
inevitably be used sooner or later; and my own feeling is that, ghastly
though it would be, it would be less awful for us in the long run if it were
used sooner than if it were used later.

I think that in minor wars, such as Korea, where the very existence of
great nations is not at stake, the conditions may be different, and that it
may be possible to apply this idea in some form. That may sound selfish,
because after all the existence of some small Allied nation may be at stake.
But surely we must be realistic about this and accept the fact that in
practice we will not, as the Americans would say, trade New York or
London for some small town in a remote country. Nor will the Russians. Do not imagine that in a war of this sort Moscow or Peking would be just waiting for a pretext to blow it up into global thermo-nuclear war—they would be just as anxious to avoid that as we should.

But that means we must be able and willing in these circumstances to deal with limited aggression by limited means—in other words by land forces with air cover and support. That is an unwelcome idea, particularly in the United States, but it is one we must face if we are to meet our obligations to our smaller and more remote Allies. Unwillingness to do that would result in what Vice-President Nixon has called being ‘nibbled to death’.

If we had to fight in, say, Asian conditions, however, we should have to use atomic weapons to help offset the inevitable numerical superiority of the enemy—the tactical atomic weapon, not the fission–fusion–fission bomb. And it is in these conditions that we might apply some form of graduated or limited use of weapons. Korea proved that in this sort of war it is possible to arrive at a curious sort of unwritten agreement between belligerents to limit the use of military force, if it suits both sides to do so. The reason why we did not bomb across the Yalu River—which of course suited the Chinese—was that on balance we thought that it also suited us best, in spite of its obvious disadvantages.

I do not pretend to have thought the subject out in detail, but it seems to me it should be very carefully examined, the object being, of course, to spare innocent civilians and centres of population the worst horrors of modern war. We might take a tip from the RAF method known as ‘Air Control’ which we used with effect against tribal enemies between the wars. Two features of that system which might be applicable were, first, ample warnings before any bombs were dropped on villages so as to enable non-combatants to get away to a place of safety; and, secondly, ‘prescribed areas’, notified in advance to the enemy, in which any movement was liable to attack without further warning but outside which people were safe. Something on those lines might be found to suit both sides in a minor war, where it is much more likely to be practicable than in a great war in Europe.

Richard Lowenthal:

Having followed the discussion as a civilian without any technical knowledge of defence problems, I shall confine this attempt at a summing-up, in which I will incorporate points raised by my fellow members, to some political aspects.

It seems to me that we have been trying to make up our minds on two main questions which were not always kept clearly apart. The first question is whether the Western Powers can and should establish, as a matter of public policy, a clear distinction between the tactical use of atomic weapons in a limited war, and the strategic use of all weapons of
mass destruction, including the H-bomb, in total war. The second question is whether, assuming such a distinction were to be established, the Western Powers should take the further step of unilaterally announcing that they will in no circumstances be the first to initiate the strategic use of weapons of mass destruction (i.e. the dropping of H-bombs on cities), whatever the area or stake of the conflict—or whether they should reserve the freedom to take or withhold such action, according to the scope of the aggression they are dealing with.

To my mind, the outstanding result of the discussion has been to bring out the fact that the two main speakers, despite their marked difference of approach, are really agreed on the practical answers to these two main questions, once they are clearly formulated. Both answer the first question in the affirmative; both, that is, regard it as necessary and indeed vital that the Western Powers should establish a clear distinction between the tactical use of atomic weapons in a local or limited war and the strategic use of hydrogen weapons in a total war, because only such graduated deterrence will enable them successfully to resist local aggression which is beyond the scale of a police action without at once turning it into catastrophic world war by massive retaliation. But both answer the second question in the negative, at least for the time being; for both believe that the Western Powers cannot now afford to undertake that they will in no circumstances be the first to use the H-bomb, because they must retain the freedom to adjust the deterrent to the scale of the aggression.

In this gradation of deterrents then, the decisive factor is not the weapon used by the aggressor, but his objective which determines the character of the war as a local war or world war. In a local war, when the balance of world power is not at stake, the West would use tactical atomic weapons while avoiding the deliberate destruction of the centres of the enemy’s civil population by H-bombs; but it must reserve their use as the ultimate deterrent against an all-out aggression aiming at world power. Graduated deterrence implies that freedom of decision no less than the distinction between the two uses of deterrents. Without that distinction, every local aggression would leave the West only with the choice between appeasement and massive retaliation, i.e. world war; without the freedom of decision, the aggressor would run no greater risk in starting an all-out war for world power than in local war.

The difference of approach between the two main speakers showed itself chiefly in Sir Anthony Buzzard’s emphasis on the moral aspect, in the greater hope expressed by him for eventual agreement between the West and the Communist Powers on a limitation of armaments—first in the conventional and finally also in the nuclear field—and in his argument that a policy of graduated deterrence would both contribute to such agreement and could ultimately culminate in a changed international situation, in the unilateral renunciation of the initiative in the
strategic use of weapons of mass destruction which he admitted to be impossible now. While these hopes were contradicted by Sir John Slessor, the discussion clearly showed that the basic argument for graduated deterrence does not depend on them.

Doubts about this basic argument were, however, expressed from several directions. One member suggested that the distinction between the tactical and the strategic use of nuclear weapons would not be accepted by the Communist Powers, so that every use of tactical atomic weapons in a local war by the West would imply the risk of strategic counter-retaliation by the Soviet bloc; that risk, it was suggested, was the reason why no atomic weapons had been used in Korea. A stalemate was thus in existence not only with regard to total hydrogen war, but also to limited war. In reply, it was pointed out that such a 'stalemate' would be very one-sided in view of the Soviet bloc's superiority in manpower and its techniques of indirect aggression and subversion; but also that experience showed that the Communist Powers had a perfect understanding of the uses of limited war, which they had been the first to revive in modern times ever since the Soviet-Japanese 'frontier incidents' of 1932. If in a particular case a Communist aggressor should find it impossible to accept defeat in a limited war and should 'break the rules', he would start the all-out war from a much worse position than if he had done so from the beginning; the attempt at limitation would thus still have been worth while.

From an opposite point of view, a critic suggested that a 'limited war' might be lost by the West, leaving the Western Powers with the choice between accepting defeat or launching all-out war from an unfavourable position; the only true security lay in rejecting all distinctions and threatening total war in retaliation for any serious aggression. Instead of accepting the risk of limited wars, we ought to pin our hopes to peace by the H-bomb threat as the only alternative to appeasement and defeat by piecemeal 'nibbling'. To that, the reply was made that one of the main purposes of a policy of graduated deterrence was to ensure an allocation of resources which would if necessary enable the West to fight and win limited wars; and that a threat to use massive retaliation against any type of aggression would not be effective if it appeared—as it was likely to appear—to be based on bluff.

That argument raises a third question which had been running right through the discussion as a kind of undercurrent: which areas are in fact vital enough for the West to justify the use of the 'ultimate weapon' in their defence—and can we expect democratic Powers like the United States and Britain ever to sanction their actual use, knowing that Communist counteraction is likely to hit their own cities?

Discussion of that question evidently has to be more tentative than in the case of the other two. Nobody would suggest that the Western Powers should publicly commit themselves in advance to a precise list
of the areas which they considered vital for their world position, and for whose protection they would therefore be prepared to use the ultimate deterrent. But there seemed to be general agreement that, apart from a direct 'Pearl Harbour' against the territory and forces of the principal Western Powers, a full-scale attack on continental Western Europe with its concentrated industrial resources would by its nature be more than a local war. So, presumably, would a full-scale attack on the oil-bearing areas of the Middle East; while with regard to other threatened areas of Asia, ideas are still rather vague, and a practical decision might be expected to depend both on the scale of the aggression and on the capacity of local forces to resist, and in particular to handle tactical atomic weapons.

But the real difficulty was raised by one speaker who suggested that American willingness to use H-bombs in retaliation for attacks on distant allies, however vital, might greatly diminish once Russia had definitely established her capacity to retaliate against population centres on the American continent. In view of the progress of the Soviet air force and of the Soviet experiments with guided missiles, it was suggested that this stage would be definitely reached by 1960, and that the American superiority in stocks of bombs and geographical distribution of bases would then be at best of purely quantitative importance: the United States might inflict more decisive damage on Russia more quickly, but they could no longer prevent really crippling damage from also being inflicted on the United States in an all-out war. The speaker argued that it would be unwise to expect the United States, and a fortiori Britain, to start the strategic use of weapons of mass destruction in defence of continental European or any other foreign territories after that date, and he concluded that the Western defence effort should aim at using the intervening years to strengthen the European forces and their tactical atomic armaments to such a point that they could resist aggression by the numerically far superior Soviet forces without massive retaliation.

Though the view that the eventual reaching of nuclear parity by Russia would make a decisive difference to the defence of Europe was countered by another speaker, the argument was not met in detail. It may, however, be doubted whether compensation of the Russian numerical superiority by tactical atomic arms will ever be possible in a Europe divided along the present frontiers; while on the other hand the presence of American and British garrisons on the European continent, indispensable while these frontiers exist, tend to make every full-scale attack on continental Western Europe a direct attack on the two Western nuclear Powers not only in strategic fact, but also in the consciousness of the British and American peoples. Finally, this consideration may well have been one of the principal reasons for the British Government's decision to develop its 'own' H-bomb, independent of the United States.