

The Wash

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A Handle for de Gaulle

Under Secretary of State Ball plunged into a swamp with his assertion that France's noncooperation with NATO might force the West to use nuclear weapons "earlier than we might otherwise do" in a major war. The statement may be true, but it is irrelevant to the main dispute with President de Gaulle. Many, perhaps most, Europeans are not afraid that nuclear weapons would be used too soon in all-out war; they worry lest the United States employ such weapons too late.

Unquestionably de Gaulle has been mischievous in spreading doubts that the United States would rush to defend Europe if the consequence were to expose its own cities to attack. But who gave him the cue for this nuclear Alphonse and Gaston act? The United States Government. In 1962 Defense Secretary McNamara unilaterally undertook to supplant the agreed NATO strategy of instant nuclear retaliation with the theory of graduated response.

As the Senate National Security Subcommittee puts it:

There was little or no consultation with our allies, and the shift was explained in terms which, to say the least, caused doubt and confusion about what kind of counterblows the United States might be planning in the event of a Soviet attack on Europe. To some in Europe it looked as though the United States would rather switch than fight. The change in American doctrine forced modifications in allied military doctrine as well, thus painfully underlining for the allies how little influence they had on American policies of life and death importance to them.

Flexible response makes sense if there is complete mutual confidence in planning. You fit the reaction to the provocation. But in nuclear strategy the United States has wanted it both ways. On the one hand our policy has been to discourage nuclear proliferation. We did not welcome the advent of the independent French nuclear force,

for example, arguing that American nuclear power afforded adequate protection for Europe. But on the other hand we have not granted the Europeans a real say in the development of guidelines that would convince them that their interests were fully protected. In this sort of climate the doubts cultivated by de Gaulle continue to grow.

The damage that de Gaulle is doing to integrated planning in NATO has been adequately expounded. His exaggerated notions of national sovereignty may make compromise impossible. But the need is not to intensify the break by more denunciation; it is to limit the damage as far as possible and to learn from the experience. We shall be missing a basic lesson if we fail to acknowledge that some of our own practices have contributed to the problem.

Reforms are overdue in NATO procedures with or without de Gaulle, and none is more urgent than more genuine allied participation in the evolution of nuclear strategy. Because of the preponderance of American power the President must retain the ultimate responsibility. But with more real consultation it would be possible to build confidence that the President is acting as the trustee of the entire alliance.