

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1971

Letters to the Editor

'New Look' in Nuclear Solutions

To the Editor:

C. L. Sulzberger in recent Op-Ed columns (Nov. 15, Jan. 8 and Jan. 10), has pressed for "The New Nuclear Look" which would revise our NATO military strategies with a view to reliance on a new class of very low yield nuclear weapons in place of graduated response with conventional ones.

On Feb. 3 he pointed out the increasing world nervousness over the possibility that the U.S. might use tactical nuclear weapons in Indochina.

This "new look" is really not new but a resurgence of ideas of the late fifties when nuclear solutions were sought to avoid the expense of building and maintaining conventional forces. They went so far as to deploy the Davy Crockett, a jeep-mounted projectile with a nuclear warhead having a yield in the range of tens of tons of TNT, not kilotons.

As time passed and the risks of initiation and escalation of nuclear warfare became better understood, the Davy Crockett was withdrawn and reliance again placed on deterrence. Now once more one sees in many situations an attempt by military planners to find ways to make nuclear weapons useful in warfare and to avoid the tremendous manpower commitments and economic costs of conventional warfare which Vietnam has taught us are too high to bear.

Unfortunately, Mr. Sulzberger and those who are seeking to sell the idea

of "radiation-effects" weapons seem to fail to understand the true facts involved in their use. The unclassified official book, "The Effects of Atomic Weapons," makes it clear that even for fission weapons the predominant effect at yields of the order of tens of tons would be neutron radiation and that if the explosions occur some distance above the ground, blast, heat, and fallout damage will be negligible.

With fusion weapons, this effect will be even more pronounced because of the greater penetrability of the fast neutrons produced in the thermonuclear reaction. Such devices can probably be classified as "super-capitalist weapons" for they preserve property while killing people.

As Mr. Sulzberger perhaps does not know and others seem to forget, deaths caused by radiation are of questionable tactical military value. Unless subjected to extraordinarily high superlethal exposures, which would occur rarely if at all in such an airburst situation, radiation will produce casualties only after a protracted delay. A median lethal dose may not produce death for as long as a month, and clearly, troops so exposed could continue to fight for long periods of time after they had been attacked.

It is not clear, therefore, how this type of weapon can be very useful on the tactical battlefield. Furthermore, these weapons will of necessity be very expensive and not provide major economic savings.

Finally, it is hardly likely that the people of Europe are going to consider this type of warfare particularly attractive when they view all exposed people within almost a quarter of a mile of an explosion dying a lingering, miserable death.

Most critically, none of the enthusiasts for the use of tactical nuclear weapons have produced any guarantee that this employment will not escalate into all-out nuclear warfare. There is no easy firebreak once one has taken the step from conventional to nuclear explosives, and the sharp distinction between them should be retained since war gaming exercises involving the use of nuclear weapons rarely end short of the complete destruction of our current civilization.

Far better to strengthen further the present firm Presidential hand on the nuclear trigger than to loosen the prevailing custodial procedures as advocated by Mr. Sulzberger. The risks of nuclear conflagration are far too great to be trusted to every threatened officer on the battlefield.

Let us maintain the necessary conventional forces to contain small conflicts and rely on our nuclear weapons for deterrence rather than fighting wars.

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McLean, Va., Feb. 8, 1971

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