

On Defense, Nuclear Options Are Sought

By WILLIAM BEECHER

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President Nixon declared today that the United States must develop the ability to respond in a limited way to certain kinds of nuclear attack in an effort to avoid a nuclear exchange that would slaughter millions of civilians on both sides.

A year ago, in his first State of the World Message, Mr. Nixon raised the question whether the President should have choices other than surrender or all-out war in the case of nuclear attack on the United States.

He put it this way:

"Should a President, in the event of nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of the certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans?"

Today, deep inside his 180-page message, Mr. Nixon answered his question of last year:

"We must insure that we have the forces and procedures

that provide us with alternatives appropriate to the nature and level of the provocation," he said. "This means having the plans and command-and-control capabilities necessary to enable us to select and carry out the appropriate response without necessarily having to resort to mass destruction."

Deterrence Strategy Unchanged

Informed State Department and Pentagon officials said this shift in strategic doctrine did not signal any intent to abandon the deterrence strategy that has been the foundation of American nuclear policy for the last decade.

Rather, they said, it reflects the President's determination to increase his choices in nuclear war should deterrence fail.

The doctrine of deterrence is based on the premise that the best way to deter any Soviet nuclear attack is to retain the ability to retaliate overwhelmingly against Soviet cities.

Officials said that intensive studies were under way, particularly in the Air Force and Navy, to re-examine nuclear doctrine to find specific plans

and weapons improvements for less than all-out nuclear exchanges.

If, for instance, in a crisis, the Russians destroyed most of America's land-based missiles and bombers in a surprise attack — withholding additional missiles with which they could attack American cities — the President might not want to destroy Soviet population centers. Instead, he might strike a number of Soviet bomber bases, nuclear-weapons depots and hydroelectric plants. He might then attempt to negotiate a cease-fire.

However, current submarine-based Polaris and Poseidon missiles are not considered accurate enough to hit pinpoint targets; they are designed to strike area targets, such as cities. Thus they might be made more accurate for these other alternatives.

Better spy satellites might also be needed to report immediately to the President on what his counterstrikes actually hit, and what military responses the Russians were preparing.