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Nixon's Nuclear Doctrine

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For some two decades, since the advent of the Soviet H-bomb, the dominant concept in American military planning has been that there could be no winners, only losers, in a strategic nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The central aim of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson was "deterrence."

To deter Soviet use of nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies, a "second strike" strategic offensive force was built, capable of absorbing a Soviet surprise "first strike" and retaliating to inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor's industry, population and urban centers.

A fundamental change in this strategy has now been set in motion by President Nixon. Since last summer, as Defense Secretary Schlesinger has now disclosed, the Pentagon has been re-targeting strategic missiles to give Mr. Nixon, at his request, the option of fighting a nuclear war, rather than simply deterring one. The development of this so-called "nuclear war-fighting capability" has begun with the re-targeting of some Minuteman ICBMs, previously pointed at Soviet cities, for the "counterforce" mission of striking at Soviet missile silos—before they have launched their ICBMs—and at other military objectives.

A change of this kind—which affects momentous issues of national strategy, arms control and the future security, not only of Americans, but of the whole civilized world—warrant a great national debate, especially since Congressional opposition to this course has long been expressed.

Such a debate is vital because of the immediate impact of the new strategy on Soviet military planning, on the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT II) and on the opportunity that still exists to halt a new arms race in MIRV multiple warhead missiles. Mr. Nixon's decision could become irreversible once both sides test and deploy new counterforce warheads of greater yield and accuracy. The Soviet reaction, moreover, might be based

on the assumption that the American capability is designed for a massive, surprise, pre-emptive attack.

Mr. Schlesinger insists that the re-targeting of Minuteman and projected deployment later of more accurate missiles would not constitute a true "first strike" capability, since the United States would only be able to destroy some, not all, of Russia's ICBMs. But Soviet analysts, using traditional military "worst-possible-case" estimates, may see the American capability differently and press for a matching Soviet "first strike" force. The advantages of shooting first in a crisis would be so great that both sides might become trigger happy.

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Superficially, the new Nixon strategy sounds attractive. Instead of hitting cities and killing millions of civilians, the enemy's military forces would be attacked, as in old-fashioned wars. Military men, trained for war fighting, find this approach particularly attractive. Instead of responding to a Soviet nuclear attack against American missiles with a blow against Soviet cities, which would bring down Russia's remaining nuclear warheads on American cities, President Nixon has asked for the option of making a limited counterforce response against the remaining Soviet missiles first.

The trouble with this approach is not only that it requires enormous numbers of new, highly accurate warheads, making a new round in the strategic arms race probable and dooming SALT II, but it could increase rather than decrease the likelihood of strategic nuclear war. If the consequence of using nuclear weapons is a limited enemy counterattack against military installations—on the dubious assumption on both sides that rapid escalation into an all-out nuclear exchange could be avoided—the inhibition against use of nuclear weapons would be much reduced.

The strategy of deterrence has preserved the world from nuclear holocaust for two decades. Unpleasant as it is to live under the nuclear Sword of Damocles, the wisdom of trading it in for this dangerous new doctrine is highly doubtful—and surely deserves more national debate than it has yet received.