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Mr. Richardson's Turn

By Herbert Scoville Jr.

McLEAN, Va.—Deterrence, our sole protection from a nuclear attack or blackmail, requires not only sufficient retaliatory weapons to make the initiation of war inconceivable, but also a national attitude that leaves no doubt in the minds of both our potential foes and our allies that we will not submit to intimidation.

Although no one will ever know whether or not we would actually launch a retaliatory attack in any specific situation, an aggressor would be deterred from action if he were certain that he risked the complete destruction of his society. The Moscow ABM Treaty was a public acknowledgement by President Nixon and Secretary General Brezhnev that the security of the two major nuclear powers depends for the foreseeable future on mutual vulnerability.

Secretary of Defense Laird, however, has acted to destroy the credibility of our deterrent; will his successor, Elliot Richardson, reverse this course?

The U.S. now has more than 6,000 strategic nuclear weapons in its arsenals; about 4,000 of these are in ballistic missiles aboard submarines that are invulnerable to attack for the foreseeable future. This submarine missile force is backed up by more than 1,000 landbased ICBM's and nearly 500 intercontinental bombers. As a result of the ABM Treaty virtually all the missile warheads have a free ride to targets in the Soviet Union. Can anyone question that such a force is more than enough to wreak havoc on the Soviet Union under any conceivable circumstances? Certainly this is a credible deterrent today; Soviet developments could not destroy this retaliatory capability in the next ten to twenty years even if the U.S. stood still.

But for the last four years, and even after the Moscow pact, we have been witnesses to a strange performance by our defense leaders. Instead of making clear to the world that the United States could never be vulnerable to nuclear attack, they have been belittling U.S. strengths and inflating Soviet threats.

Each year the refrain of inferiority swells in intensity as the military budget comes under review. Secretary Laird has preached a national security

strategy of "realistic" deterrence while he defended his programs before Congress on the basis of unrealistic threats. In 1969, he decried the vulnerability of our Minuteman ICBM deterrent to large Soviet SS-9 missiles with MIRV's and said that warheads with a "footprint" covering Minuteman silos had been under test for a year; but three years later he is forced to admit that the first Soviet MIRV test may still be six to eight months in the future. Now as he makes his departure from the Pentagon scene he again refers to the momentum of the Soviet weapons program. At last he can report the first un-MIRV'ed test of a new SS-9 type ICBM which may go in the very large silos he was so alarmed about two years ago. However, as a result of SALT I, the Russians are limited to less than 40 of these so regardless of the number of MIRV's they might eventually carry they pose no danger to the Minutemen force.

Misleading depreciation of U.S. strategic strength might be ignored as the distortions of an overenthusiastic advocate of military power if it was harmless. But, unfortunately, it serves to undermine the very credibility of our deterrent. Can we be sure that our allies will recognize such statements for what they are, i.e., attempts to extract more funds from the Congress, or will they perhaps take them at face value, cease to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and procure their own nuclear weapons?

Might even the Soviets believe that they had a freer hand to make political capital out of such advertised U.S. weaknesses? At the very least we are increasing the chances that we will be subjected to nuclear threats and be more pliable to pressures. If we talk often enough about the dangers of numerical inferiority, we may come to believe that numbers of weapons are a realistic measure of strength. Numerical advantage has no military significance when both countries can wipe out the other many times over; it can only have a political meaning if our leaders give it one. Expressions of alarm can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

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