



Dr. Schlesinger or: How I Learned to Start Thinking and Accept The Bomb

By Mark Stout

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It would seem the defense community is at a point where it's generally recognized the nuclear mission is...well, really important. Recognizing and reasserting the importance of the nuclear enterprise is the essential intent of ongoing comments from the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, recent remarks from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the just-released Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management, also known as the Schlesinger Report (for its Chair, former Secretary of Defense, Dr. James Schlesinger). While the world has become more complex since the end of the Cold War and much more so since 9/11, there is still a vital role for nuclear weapons today.

Deterrence--nuclear or not--is a way to keep others from taking action. The Schlesinger Report asserts nuclear deterrence has been achieved when we can credibly threaten potential adversaries with nuclear weapons so as to prevent them from taking action against the United States, our allies, and our vital interests. Key to this is the ability to present a credible threat of retaliation to our potential adversaries. But, because not every actor will be deterred by the threat of nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence is only a piece of an overall deterrent strategy.

General Kevin Chilton is the Commander of U.S Strategic Command, and part of his job is to certify that America's nuclear deterrent remains viable. Accordingly, he (and others) have advocated for a new-design, modernized nuclear weapon. This weapon would be created through the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) program, which aims to offer reduced maintenance costs and increased nuclear safety, security, and reliability. After all, nuclear deterrence is not achieved, regardless of the viability of the delivery systems--that is, missiles and bombers--without a credible warhead. However, because Congress has refused to fund RRW--twice--he will likely have to accept a nuclear warhead life-extension programs (LEP). The LEP, according to the Global Security Newswire will infuse "another 20 to 30 years into warheads already three to four decades old."

Admiral Mike Mullen is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and is by law, the senior ranking member of the Armed Forces. Writing in the recently released Joint Force Quarterly, Admiral Mullen declares America needs a new model for deterrence

theory, which among other things “should espouse the highest standards of nuclear preparedness” and “hold ourselves accountable to unimpeachable high standards of training, leadership, and management.” Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Admiral Mullen notes the risk of state-on-state conflict has diminished, not disappeared--think North Korea and Iran, and yes, the usual suspects--and that improvements are needed in the nuclear enterprise to avoid adversary misbehavior and miscalculation.

The just-released nuclear coup de grâce however, is the Schlesinger Report. The report is an indictment of nuclear negligence coinciding with the fall of the Berlin wall. This portion of the Schlesinger Report focuses on the Air Force and it argues “there has been an unambiguous, dramatic, and unacceptable decline in the Air Force’s commitment to perform the nuclear mission and, until very recently, little had been done to reverse it.” The Schlesinger Report is the 800-pound gorilla the Air Force will not be able to ignore.

Along with specific leadership and culture, and sustainment issues, the report also calls for a significant Air Force reorganization. The reorganization would entail redesignating Air Force Space Command (AFSPC) as Air Force Strategic Command (AFSTRAT), and making the new AFSTRAT the single Air Force command responsible for representing all Air Force nuclear-capable forces to U.S. Strategic Command. Included in the reorganization is the call for all Air Force bombers to be assigned to AFSTRAT. Culturally, this proposal, when accepted, will create an interesting tension for Air Force leadership. AFSPC is currently led by a space and missile officer. Should the same lead AFSTRAT or will tradition--that is, a pilot--rule the day?

There will be some who accept Schlesinger’s thoughts on organization and people, and Mullen’s concerns about concepts and policy, while rejecting Chilton’s focus on hardware and systems. The main reason for this is a general anti-nuclear sentiment. In its most modest form, this sentiment tends towards statements like “models show the nuclear stockpile is reliable” as the reason for limiting nuclear deterrent forces to the current “Science-based Stockpile Stewardship.”

As a result of the science-based stockpile approach, the United States hasn’t designed or built a new nuclear warhead in almost 20 years, nor has it tested such a weapon in over 15 years. With existing weapons already beyond their design-life, a no-new-nuke argument creates concerns regarding the accumulation of numerous small but untested changes to the current nuclear stockpile. The concept of credible deterrence does not work without reliable and safe nuclear weapons.

Without question, the problems associated with the Air Force’s nuclear enterprise now have its leaders’ full attention. Expertise, organizations, culture, and systems have all been weakened and full recovery will be a multi-year effort requiring significant follow-through. But now, as during the Cold War, nuclear weapons continue to be critical to deterrence. As many have pointed out, there are a number of nations that will consider pursuing their own nuclear capabilities if they lose confidence in America’s nuclear deterrent. Reconciling the need for a credible deterrent and the desire to never have to

use that force is not a difficult intellectual challenge--in no way is national security enhanced by an atrophied, non-functional nuclear force.

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