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Nuclear Deterrence

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As a former operator of British nuclear weapons, next year will mark a significant anniversary for me: it will be fifty years since my indoctrination into the dogma of nuclear deterrence.

In 1968 I was a 24-year-old Lieutenant bombardier-navigator in Buccaneer
strike jets deployed aboard a Royal Navy aircraft-carrier, when my pilot and I were told we had been chosen as a nuclear crew. The process of being given a top secret security clearance was followed by indoctrination regarding the huge responsibility of this honour, and details of the 10-kiloton WE177 freefall bomb we would use. We then had to plan how to attack our assigned target: a Soviet military air base on the outskirts of Leningrad.

Thirty years later, as I landed at St Petersburg airport for an anti-nuclear conference, I was shocked to realise it had been my target.

When I told our Russian hosts, they put me on local TV with an interpreter. I apologised for having obeyed orders which would have resulted in massive civilian casualties and collateral damage to their ancient capital. Then I told them I had learned that nuclear weapons would not save me, or them.

My breakout from pro-nuclear brainwashing was slow and gradual, inhibited by tribal loyalty, peer pressure, initial unquestioning trust in my leaders, and deference to their mindset linked to ambition to succeed in my chosen career. Breakout began in 1972 after I switched from navigating nuclear strike jets to anti-submarine helicopters. Because our lightweight torpedoes were too slow to catch Soviet nuclear submarines, we were given a nuclear depth-bomb. The problem was that, unlike a strike jet, our helicopter was too slow to escape the detonation; so this would be a suicide mission. When I complained, my leaders assured me we probably would never have to use it; besides, I didn't want to cut short a glittering career, did I? So I fell silent; but the first doubts set in.

In 1979, I was a newly promoted Commander in the Ministry of Defence in London, looking after an Admiral whose responsibilities included recommending how best to replace the UK Polaris nuclear-armed submarine force. Mrs Thatcher had just come to power; and she wanted Trident. I watched as the Naval Staff warned that this would exceed the Polaris system's capability, and its huge cost would mean cuts in useful warships.

Thatcher drove the Trident decision through.

Then, sure enough, in 1981 the government announced a major defence review in order to pay for Trident. With my prospects of further promotion receding, on top of concern that I couldn't justify Trident, I applied for redundancy.

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My application was approved one week into the 1982 Falklands War. I had to stay until after we won, and I had handed over my job as Staff Intelligence Officer to the Commander in Chief Fleet, who ran the war from the command bunker on the outskirts of London. I was in charge of the 40-strong team providing round the clock intelligence support to the one Polaris submarine on so-called deterrent patrol, as well as the rest of the Fleet.

The Falklands War was a close-run thing. The French had sold the Argentine Navy sea-skimming Exocet missiles, which we had no answer to for a while; several of our ships were sunk, and colleagues killed. If one of our aircraft carriers or troopships had been taken out, we could have risked defeat. What would Thatcher have done? Before the war she had been the most unpopular British Prime Minister in history; now her political career was on the line - and she had nuclear weapons.

After leaving the Navy, I heard rumours of an extremely secret contingency plan - understandably not shared with the Navy - to move the patrolling Polaris submarine south within range of Buenos Aires. It wasn't needed; however, in 2006 it was revealed that Thatcher had phoned French President Mitterrand after the first British ships were sunk, threatening to nuke Argentina if he didn't give her the secret frequency of the Exocet guidance system to jam it.

Convinced that she was serious, he did so; and soon after, we began to neutralise Exocet.

This raised for me the nightmare of a desperate British leader having the option of using nuclear weapons, and the ignominy of our submariners being ordered to commit such a war crime. British possession of nuclear weapons had not deterred Argentine President General Galtieri from invading. Had Thatcher threatened to use nuclear weapons, probably Galtieri would have called her bluff very publicly, and relished watching US President Reagan try to rein her in. If he had failed, a nuclear strike would have compounded the ignominy of defeat, the British case for retaining the Falkland Islands lost in international outrage over such a war crime.

Seven years later, my justification for supporting nuclear deterrence collapsed with the Berlin Wall, and subsequent dismantling of the Warsaw Pact. However, it took Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to make me speak out. When President Bush senior doubled the number of ground troops to evict Iraq, my intelligence training warned me that this would be a punitive expedition. If Saddam Hussein was personally threatened, he could attack Israel with Scud missiles, possibly with chemical warheads, in order to split the US-led coalition and become the Arabs' champion. If a chemical-headed Scud attack caused heavy casualties, Israel's leader Shamir would come under massive pressure to respond with a nuclear strike on Baghdad. The Arab nations would erupt in fury, Israel's security would be destroyed forever, and Russia would be sucked in.

In January 1991, I joined the growing British anti-war movement by speaking to a crowd of 20,000 in Trafalgar Square - not the best move or place for an ex-Commander. A week later, following the launch of the allied blitzkrieg, the first Iraqi Scud attack hit Tel Aviv. For the first time, the second city of a de facto nuclear weapon state had been attacked and its capital threatened. Worse still for nuclear deterrence, the attacker did not have nuclear weapons. Israelis, cowering in gas masks in basements, learned that their nuclear deterrent had failed. 38 more Scud attacks followed, fortunately with no chemical warheads and miraculously causing few casualties. Bush rushed to offer Shamir Patriot missiles and other military aid, and congratulated Israel on its restraint.

Interestingly, in both this case and the one I described in the Falklands War, nuclear weapon possession had been used to coerce a fellow nuclear-armed state.

Meanwhile, in London the Irish Republican Army just missed wiping out the entire British War Cabinet meeting in 10 Downing Street with a mortar bomb launched through the roof of a van. A more direct threat to the government could

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barely be imagined; and Polaris was exposed as an impotent irrelevance.

Belatedly forced to research the history of nuclear weapons, I learned that the UK bore considerable responsibility for initiating and spreading the nuclear arms race. Having joined in the Manhattan project, Britain became the first medium-sized power with delusions of grandeur to threaten nuclear terrorism. Here in the US, in denial over its atrocities in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the mantra of nuclear deterrence was used to play on people's fears, and justify sustaining the unaccountable, highly profitable scientific and military monster bequeathed by the Manhattan project. Successive British governments, desperate to keep their seat at the top table of world powers, seized upon this confidence trick, endlessly repeating its bogus claims - uncritically propagated by experts and mainstream media - to the point that it echoed the fable of the emperor with no clothes.

Feeling much like the child who pointed this out - as I described in my 2010 book Security Without Nuclear Deterrence - my experience taught me that nuclear deterrence, far from providing security, promotes insecurity through stimulating hostility, mistrust, nuclear arms racing and proliferation. What is more, because of these realities and its insoluble credibility problem, it is highly vulnerable to failure. As for extended nuclear deterrence, far from providing a so-called 'nuclear umbrella' to non-nuclear US allied states, it acts as a 'lightning rod' attracting insecurity to them, because any use of nuclear weapons by the US on their behalf would inevitably escalate to all-out nuclear war. The truth is that the US uses extended deterrence to control its allies for its own purposes. Prime Minister David Lange, who led New Zealand's breakout thirty years ago, correctly called it 'fool's gold'. Similarly, the US uses its nuclear sharing arrangement with certain European states to sustain subservience to NATO, and block progress to a nuclear weapon-free world.

Let me close by honouring two controversial, courageous US Generals - both called Butler. Like me, they broke free from acceptance of their government's and peer group's mindset and indoctrination. On retirement in 1935, US Marine General Smedley Butler wrote a searing critique of his military experience, entitled War is a Racket.

Seventy years later, US Air Force General Lee Butler, after running the entire US strategic nuclear war machine, came out against nuclear deterrence. A year ago, he published his memoirs entitled Uncommon Cause, in Volume II of which he recounts the powerful, poignant story of his breakout. I must speak bluntly: stripped of jargon, what he confirms in effect is that nuclear deterrence is a vast protection racket by a US-led organised crime syndicate, who use it as a counterfeit currency of power, and whose principal beneficiary is the military-industrial complex. His findings should be required reading for the syndicate members, for all those who have fallen victim to their scam, and those of us who are leading the struggle to face them down and bring them to justice.

This is why the ban treaty must prohibit threat of use, and include language explaining what that means. It is not enough to assume that use encompasses threat. The fact that the currently deployed UK Trident submarine is described as on 'deterrent patrol', despite being at days'notice to fire with no assigned target, confirms this need.

Thank you.

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