



# The Ups and Dow



*Strategic Air Command B-52s launch seconds apart, demonstrating the MITO—minimum interval takeoff—formation capability needed to respond to a combat alert.*

DOD photo by SSgt. Phil Schmitter

**A big issue in the Cold War was whether nuclear weapons should be targeted mainly on the enemy force or on the enemy's cities.**

# ns of Counterforce

By John T. Correll

**T**he early atomic bombs were crude city-busters. They weighed more than 5,000 pounds each, and, in the years immediately following World War II, the United States had only a few of them. At that point, not much deep thinking had gone into the development of a nuclear strategy.

In the 1950s, the United States adopted a policy of "Massive Retaliation," relying on airpower and the threat of a full nuclear counterattack to deter nuclear aggression by the Soviet Union.

Real options on how to employ nuclear weapons did not emerge until the middle 1950s, when the bombs became smaller and more powerful. By the end of the decade, nuclear warheads were compact enough for delivery not only by bombers but also by fighter aircraft and long-range ballistic missiles.

There were two basic targeting concepts: counterforce and countervalue. Counterforce emphasized strikes on the enemy's military forces, installations, and assets. Countervalue, also called countercity early on, centered on the enemy's economy and population.

Countervalue was easier, cheaper, and

could be done with simpler capabilities. It was the forerunner of "Assured Destruction," the balance-of-terror doctrine which held that each side should have just enough nuclear force to destroy the other as a viable society.

The Air Force advocated counterforce. "It makes a great difference whether victory is sought by the depopulation of a nation or by the disarming of a nation," said Gen. Nathan F. Twining, Air Force Chief of Staff, in a February 1954 speech. "We can now aim directly to disarm an enemy rather than to destroy him as was so often necessary in wars of the past."

Nuclear targeting had moved well beyond city-busting. Strategic Air Command's first priority was the enemy's atomic capability. Second priority was counterair strikes to retard the advance of Soviet ground forces. Third priority was destruction of the enemy's "war sustaining resources."

## **Minimum Deterrence**

The Army and the Navy were more inclined toward countercity targeting. When Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor became

Army Chief of Staff in 1955, he called for "flexible response," with less emphasis on strategic airpower and more emphasis on conventional ground forces.

Taylor was unable to sell his program. Disgruntled, he retired and wrote a book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*. It was laden with complaints about the Air Force and about the Army's reduced share of the defense budget.

In one astounding passage, Taylor said with disdain, "The Air Force sees our principal danger in the growing strategic air and missile forces of the Soviet Union."

Taylor said the requirement for strategic retaliatory force could be met by "a few hundred reliable and accurate missiles, supplemented by a decreasing number of bombers."

The Navy, whose strategic role and budget share had been diminished by the rise of the Air Force, also advocated a strategy of a minimum force for deterrence. In 1959, the Navy tried to seize the strategic nuclear mission, arguing that the retaliatory power to destroy 100 to 200 Soviet population centers was enough and that 45 Polaris



*These photos show the city of Nagasaki, Japan, before (top) and after (bottom) the atomic bomb attack that helped end World War II. This bomb and the few developed immediately after the war were crude city-busters.*

submarines would “come close” to the total deterrent force required.

The Navy proposal appealed to the economizers, but was judged too risky. In 1960, the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff was created to control the targeting of both Air Force and Navy strategic weapons. The JSTPS director was the commander in chief of Strategic Air Command.

### “Counterforce/No Cities”

President Kennedy rejected the Single Integrated Operational Plan—the nuclear war plan for strategic forces—in effect when he took office. It called for firing nuclear weapons in a single flush in the event of a Soviet attack.

“Our strength may be tested at many levels,” Kennedy said in his 1962 State of the Union address. “We intend to have at all times the capacity to resist non-nuclear or limited attacks—as a complement to our nuclear capacity, not as a substitute. We have rejected any all-or-nothing posture which would leave no choice but inglorious retreat or unlimited retaliation.”

Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, was likewise repelled by the SIOP, which he regarded as “spasm war.” He had recently gotten a detailed presentation on “Counterforce/No Cities,” and he made that the official targeting doctrine

in February 1961. (McNamara did not like the term “counterforce,” and he eventually banned it from use in the Pentagon.)

He did not say much in public about Counterforce/No Cities but a revision

*Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (left) meets with President John Kennedy and Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who had been recalled by Kennedy to active duty as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. McNamara shifted strategy toward “counterforce,” wanting more options short of “spasm war.” European allies were not happy with the departure from massive retaliation. McNamara himself soon repented and switched his support back to city busting.*



to the SIOP in April 1962 allowed for more flexibility and emphasized counterforce targets.

McNamara announced the change to NATO leaders in May 1962. The Europeans, especially the French, did not like the departure from Massive Retaliation. They wanted a full response by the US nuclear deterrent linked automatically to an attack on Europe.

A month later, McNamara was the commencement speaker at the University of Michigan. He gave the same speech he had given to the NATO ministers, minus the classified targeting data.

“The US has come to the conclusion that to the extent feasible, basic military strategy in a general nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past,” McNamara said. “That is to say, principal military objectives, in the event of a nuclear war stemming from a major attack on the alliance, should be the destruction of the enemy’s forces, not of his civilian population.”

SIOP-63, adopted in the fall of 1962, incorporated that view. Most of the US nuclear weapons were targeted on Soviet forces. Only 18 percent were targeted on cities and industry.

### McNamara’s Switch

For reasons that are not altogether

clear, McNamara began to repent of his conversion to counterforce. For one thing, the services—especially the Air Force—could use it to justify budget increases. He was also persuaded by the argument that nuclear war was best prevented by the sheer horror of an all-out exchange.

In December 1963, McNamara switched his support to Assured Destruction, although the change was not announced until February 1965.

Assured Destruction was a reflexive revenge doctrine. After absorbing a nuclear strike, the United States would retain enough retaliatory power to destroy the aggressor. The target was the enemy population. The logic of Assured Destruction was that it must be suicidal for both sides, leaving no motive for the aggressor to attack in the first place.

It would have been a return to “spasm war” except for one thing: McNamara neglected to change SIOF-63. Assured Destruction never went into actual effect. Nevertheless, McNamara’s espousal of Assured Destruction established a rallying point for those who wanted to limit US strategic forces.

McNamara and his aides set about the grisly task of setting a standard for Assured Destruction. How much devastation would a US counterattack have to inflict in order to deter the initial Russian attack?

“After careful study and debate,” said McNamara aides Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, “it was McNamara’s judgment, accepted by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and not disputed by the Congress, that the ability to destroy in retaliation 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of its industrial capacity was sufficient.”

With the passage of time, McNamara’s commitment to Assured Destruction intensified. “It is important to understand that Assured Destruction is the very essence of the whole deterrence concept,” he said in a speech in September 1967. “Our alert forces alone carry more than 2,200 weapons, each averaging more than the explosive equivalent of one megaton of TNT. Four hundred of these delivered on the Soviet Union would be sufficient to destroy over one-third of her population and one-half of her industry.”

McNamara critic Donald G. Brennan of the Hudson Institute stuck the prefix “Mutual” onto Assured Destruction, making it Mutual Assured Destruction and creating the famous acronym, MAD.



AP photo

*The 1965 Moscow parade commemorating the 20th anniversary of VE Day featured this display of a Soviet ICBM. While America debated counterforce, the Soviets pressed their efforts to achieve strategic superiority.*

MAD was supposed to be a pejorative term, but McNamara came to accept it and sometimes used it himself. “It’s not mad!” he said in an interview with CNN in 1997. “Mutual Assured Destruction is the foundation of deterrence.”

### Retreat From Superiority

The United States prevailed in the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 because it had clear-cut strategic nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union. The two nations learned different lessons from the experience and moved in opposite directions.

The Soviet Union worked to close the strategic nuclear gap, gain superiority, and never again be caught behind.

The United States turned its back on strategic superiority. It canceled weapons programs, imposed a ceiling on its missile and bomber forces, and aimed for strategic parity with the Soviet Union.

Minuteman ICBM production was cut from 2,000 missiles to 1,600, then to 1,000. The United States capped its ICBM force at 1,054. The B-70 bomber was downgraded to R&D status, then killed. The Skybolt missile for the B-52 was canceled. The Advanced Manned Strategic Aircraft (later revived as the B-1 bomber) was sidelined.

In Moscow, the outlook was different. The Soviets achieved parity in strategic

missiles in 1969, but their objective was not parity. When they pulled even in ICBMs, they kept on building, both in numbers and quality.

The huge SS-9 ICBM showed up in a parade in Moscow in 1964. It was subsequently flown with three multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). While politicians in the United States argued in the 1970s about whether to make Minuteman more accurate, the Soviets introduced four new ICBMs.

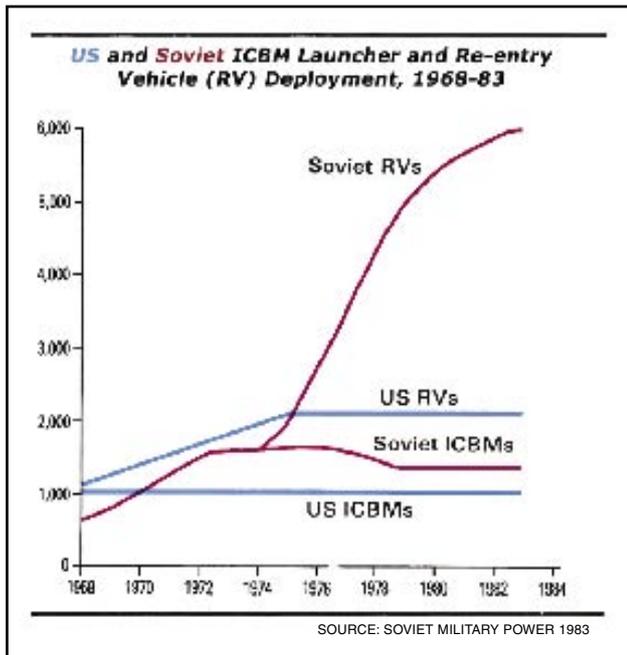
There was strong opposition to improving the US strategic force. A sense of Congress resolution, sponsored by Sen. Edward W. Brooke III (R-Mass.), said that “neither the Soviet Union or the United States should seek unilateral advantage by developing counterforce weapons which might be construed as having a first strike potential.”

The Soviet Union, which was the only side then building a counterforce capability, paid no attention to Brooke’s resolution.

Paul C. Warnke, a longtime Washington liberal, said, “The fine tuning of our nuclear weapons and delivery systems could create fears of counterforce attack on the other side and hence be destabilizing.”

### Assessing Soviet Intentions

McNamara had opined in 1965 that



*By 1970, the USSR caught up with and passed the US in number of ICBMs. After launcher totals were capped by SALT I, the Soviets turned to increasing the number of re-entry vehicles to expand their advantage.*

“there is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a nuclear force as large as ours.” The Central Intelligence Agency said, “We do not believe that the USSR aims at matching the US in numbers of intercontinental delivery vehicles. Recognition that the US would detect and match or overmatch such an effort, together with economic constraints, appears to have ruled out this option.”

The CIA forecast that the Soviet Union would have no more than 400 to 700 operational ICBMs by 1970. (In fact, the Soviets had 1,440 ICBMs by 1970.) The CIA noted that Air Force Intelligence disagreed with both the evaluation of Soviet objectives and the projected number of Soviet ICBMs.

The Air Force’s belief that the CIA understated the Soviet threat was a sticky point. In 1964, CIA Director John A. McCone sent McNamara a classified CIA report on Air Force dissent.

“The Air Force has consistently taken the position of crediting the Soviets with a greater current and prospective capability than the other members of the Intelligence Community,” McCone said, asking McNamara “to handle this communication on a very personal basis.”

Disagreement between the Air Force and the CIA persisted.

By the early 1970s, the Russian ICBMs were of growing concern to the United States. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger said in 1974 that the combination of increased throw weight, increased accuracy, and MIRVs on the new Soviet missiles was leading

to “a major one-sided counterforce capability against the United States ICBM force.”

The Air Force was not alone in distrusting the CIA estimates. Both Schlesinger and President Richard Nixon “felt that the CIA’s analysts reflected the bias of the liberal intellectual and academic communities at large,” Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas Powers said in his biography of CIA Director Richard Helms.

The issue flared up again in 1975, when the National Intelligence Estimate said SS-18s and SS-19s, the most accurate of the Soviet ICBMs, were not accurate enough to threaten the US Minuteman.

### Team B

In 1976, CIA Director George H.W. Bush appointed “Team B,” a panel of outsiders, to give an independent assessment on whether Soviet strategic objectives were more ambitious and more threatening than depicted in the National Intelligence Estimate.

Team B reported that the CIA estimates tended “to play down the Soviet commitment to a war-winning capability” and “minimize the Soviet strategic buildup because of its implications for detente, SALT negotiations, and Congressional sentiments as well as for certain US forces.” Especially noteworthy, Team B said, was “the continued absence of recognition of Soviet strategic counterforce emphasis and aspirations” in the National Intelligence Estimates.

The Team B report set off a great uproar from liberal commentators, who said that Team B was wrong and that it was all a right-wing trick to undercut detente.

The minimizers hoped that their views about Soviet military power would pre-



*Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and President Richard Nixon share a light moment during the detente years. The Soviets had surpassed the American nuclear arsenal. Nixon’s response was “strategic sufficiency.”*

AP photo by Jim Palmer

vail after the election of Jimmy Carter, but that did not happen. An article in *The New York Review of Books* bemoaned “the Carter Administration’s surrender to the notion of the vulnerability of its land-based missiles.”

Indeed. The best defense thinker the Democrats had was Carter’s Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, and some of his positions sounded a lot like Team B.

“The Soviet Union’s approach to war is different from that of the US,” Brown said in 1979. “They desire and are seeking capabilities which would enable them to fight, win, and survive a nuclear exchange.”

## Detente

Ironically, it was Nixon, the arch foe of communism, who established detente—the relaxation of tension—with the Soviet Union.

When Nixon began his term in 1969, US strategic superiority was already gone. Always a realist, Nixon tailored his foreign and defense policies to the situation. During his first months in office, he adopted the planning principle of “Strategic Sufficiency” instead of trying to restore strategic superiority.

In 1974, Strategic Sufficiency was refined by Schlesinger into a more precise concept called “Essential Equivalence.” Schlesinger said, “There must be essential equivalence between the strategic forces of the United States and the USSR—an equivalence perceived not only by ourselves, but by the Soviet Union and Third World audiences as well.”

Schlesinger’s successors, Donald H. Rumsfeld and Harold Brown, followed the same basic approach.

In the Ford Administration, Rumsfeld—in his first tour as Secretary of Defense—recast the concept slightly, calling it “Rough Equivalence.”

Brown returned to the formulation of Essential Equivalence. It required, Brown said, that “our overall forces be at least on a par with those of the Soviet Union and also that they be recognized to be essentially equivalent.”

The biggest innovation affecting the strategic balance came from a new direction: arms control. In 1972, Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed two agreements. The SALT I treaty froze the number of strategic nuclear missiles at existing levels for five years, and the ABM treaty limited each side to two antiballistic missile sites.



AP photo by Dennis Cook

**President Reagan discarded detente and launched an aggressive program to match Soviet strength. Coupled with his Strategic Defense Initiative, the program convinced Moscow that the US was moving toward a first-strike capability.**

The ABM Treaty was a big trophy for the factions in Congress and the news media that opposed counterforce. They had waged an intensive campaign on behalf of the treaty. Ballistic missile defense went against the precepts of Mutual Assured Destruction. The devastation had to be mutual and assured. Anything else was destabilizing and stimulated the arms race.

## Nuclear Options and Strategies

In 1970, Nixon described the inflexibility of options for response to a nuclear attack. He sounded much like Kennedy had in 1962.

“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?” Nixon asked. “Should the concept of assured destruction be narrowly defined and should it be the only measure of the variety of threats we may face?”

Assured Destruction had taken its toll on the planning process. Failure to improve the accuracy of US missiles had reduced their effectiveness against Soviet military targets, which were now hardened and more numerous.

The “Limited Nuclear Options” strategy adopted in 1974 included an explicit return to counterforce. It provided for “selected nuclear operations to seek early war termination ... at the lowest level of conflict possible” if deterrence failed.

“We face a wide range of possible actions involving nuclear weapons, and no single response is appropriate to them all,” Schlesinger said. “To threaten to blow up all of an opponent’s cities, short of an attack on our cities, is hardly an acceptable strategy, and in most circumstances the credibility of the threat would be close to zero, especially against a nation which could retaliate against our cities in kind.”

The Carter Administration established the “Countervailing Strategy” in July 1980. Brown chose his words carefully, acknowledging Assured Destruction without being hemmed in by it.

“What has come to be known as Assured Destruction is the bedrock of nuclear deterrence, and we will retain such a capacity in the future,” Brown said. However, it was also necessary to “have plans for attacks which pose a more credible threat than an all-out attack on Soviet industry and cities. These plans should include options to attack the targets that comprise the Soviet military force structure and political power structure and to hold back a significant reserve.”

Brown later said, “The countervailing strategy is less of a departure from previous doctrine than is often claimed.”

## The Strategic Triad

President Ronald Reagan appointed a bipartisan commission, headed by Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor in the Ford Administration,

to examine strategic force requirements.

The Soviets “probably possess the necessary combination of ICBM numbers, reliability, accuracy, and warhead yield to destroy almost all of the 1,047 US ICBM silos, using only a portion of their own ICBM force,” the Scowcroft Commission reported in 1983.

“The US ICBM force now deployed cannot inflict similar damage, even using the entire force. Only the 550 MIRVed Minuteman III missiles in the US ICBM force have relatively good accuracy, but the combination of accuracy and yield of their three warheads is inadequate to put at serious risk more than a small share of the many hardened targets in the Soviet Union. Most Soviet hardened targets—of which ICBM silos are only a portion—could withstand attacks by our other strategic missiles.”

The Soviets did not have a clear shot at the US strategic force. Each leg of the strategic triad—bombers, ICBMs, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles—had particular strengths and weaknesses. This diversity made it difficult for an enemy to simultaneously attack or defend against all three legs.

Still, land-based missiles were vulnerable. To strengthen its ICBM force, the United States planned to deploy the MX missile—subsequently called Peacekeeper—supplemented by a small, road-mobile missile dubbed “Midgetman.”

Plans for the MX basing mode moved from Multiple Protective Shelters (“the shell game”) to Closely Spaced Basing (“dense pack”), to deployment in existing Minuteman silos—as an interim step on the way toward Rail Garrison basing (on warning, the missiles would move out of their garrisons onto the railroads).

The Cold War ended before Rail Garrison was established. The end of the Cold War also overtook Midgetman, the small road-mobile ICBM with a single warhead.

The counterforce features of the MX Peacekeeper drew fierce attacks from the strategic minimizers.

“President Reagan’s decision on the MX missile signals that the United States is now firmly and publicly embarked on a first-strike nuclear policy,” complained Herbert Scoville Jr., president of the Arms Control Association and formerly assistant director of the Arms Control and Dis-

armament Agency and deputy director at the CIA.

The counterforce capability for MX was supposedly dangerous and objectionable, whereas the Russian missile counterforce was nothing to get excited about.

### Ash Heap of History

Reagan revoked the policy of detente and threw out strategic parity as an objective. He did not believe the Cold War should be—or had to be—strung out in a permanent balance of terror.

Reagan requested and got a large increase to the defense budget. He described the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and said that Marxism-Leninism was headed for the “ash heap of history.”

Reagan also launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, an R&D program for defense against ballistic missile attack. There was widespread doubt, in the defense community and elsewhere, that SDI would work.

The Soviets took SDI seriously. Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, former chief of the General Staff, said in 1990 the Russians did not expect SDI to create a perfect shield against ICBM attack, but they did believe it was a broad technology offensive meant to overcome the Soviet Union militarily and ruin it financially.

The Soviet Union was tottering in the 1980s, but the Soviet strategic buildup continued. The heavy SS-18 was the key weapon in the fleet, but in 1985, the Russians introduced two mobile missiles, the SS-24 and the SS-25. The expectation was that within a few years, half the Soviet ICBM force would consist of mobile missiles.

For the United States, Peacekeeper achieved initial operational capability in 1986, and the effectiveness of Minuteman and the bomber force against hardened military targets was increased.

Neither side completed its strategic modernization program. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the Cold War was over.

### After the Cold War

Arms control negotiations continued. The START II treaty in 1993 directed the phased elimination of

the US Peacekeeper and the Russian SS-18 and SS-24, though the treaty never entered into force.

At a summit meeting in 2002, the United States and Russia agreed that each side would cut its nuclear stockpile to 2,200 or fewer deployed warheads by 2012.

So far, the Russians have eliminated more than half of the ICBMs they inherited from the Soviet Union. Their long-range plan is to field an ICBM force consisting completely of SS-27 Topol Ms. The last of the Peacekeepers was withdrawn last month and the US ICBM fleet now consists of 500 Minuteman IIIs.

The United States has been careful to preserve a capability to attack and destroy hardened military targets. Writing for the Arms Control Association, Janne Nolan said that “prompt counterforce remains the sacrosanct principle of American nuclear strategy.”

In *Foreign Policy* earlier this year, McNamara denounced US nuclear weapons policy as “immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous.”

“For decades, US nuclear forces have been sufficiently strong to absorb a first strike and then inflict ‘unacceptable’ damage on an opponent,” McNamara said. “This has been and (so long as we face a nuclear-armed, potential adversary) must continue to be the foundation of our nuclear deterrent.”

McNamara’s recollections and opinions aside, the US has not depended on that kind of strategy for a long time.

No one knows where or when the next strategic nuclear challenge might arise, but the current nuclear triad of bombers (including stealthy B-2s), improved Minuteman IIIs, and modern SLBMs is an effective deterrent against nuclear threats—and it offers flexibility and options in time of crisis.

That, not assured destruction of the enemy’s cities, has been and still is the objective of US nuclear strategy. ■

*See the Air Force Association study “The Air Force and the Cold War,” from which this article is adapted, at [www.afa.org](http://www.afa.org).*

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