

McNamara's "No Cities" Speech

In a famous address in Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1962, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara unveiled a controversial nuclear idea; he argued that, should Moscow attack NATO with nuclear weapons, the US would hew to a "no cities" retaliation plan. In such a war, he went on, the goal should be "destruction of the enemy's military forces, not of his civilian population." His remarks kicked up a furor, and he soon de-emphasized the no-cities idea. The public feared "limited war" would make nuclear usage more likely. The Pentagon chief soon embraced "assured destruction," though plans for less-than-all-out war continued.

The mere fact that no nation could rationally take steps leading to a nuclear war does not guarantee that a nuclear war cannot take place. ...

For our part, we feel—and our NATO allies must frame our strategy with this terrible contingency, however remote, in mind—simply ignoring the problem is not going to make it go away.

The US has come to the conclusion that to the extent feasible, basic military strategy in a possible general nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past. 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.

The very strength and nature of the Alliance forces make it possible for us to retain, even in the face of a massive surprise attack, sufficient reserve striking power to destroy an enemy society if driven to it. In other words, we are giving a possible opponent the strongest imaginable incentive to refrain from striking our own cities.

In particular, relatively weak [European] national nuclear forces with enemy cities as their targets are not likely to be sufficient to perform even the function of deterrence. If they are small, and perhaps vulnerable on the ground or in the air, or inaccurate, a major antagonist can take a variety of measures to counter them.

Indeed, if a major antagonist came to believe there was a substantial likelihood of it being used independently, this force would be inviting a pre-emptive first strike against it. In the event of war, the use of such a force against the cities of a major nuclear power would be tantamount to suicide, whereas its employment against significant military targets would have a negligible effect on the outcome of the conflict. Meanwhile, the creation of a single additional national nuclear force encourages the proliferation of nuclear power with all its attendant dangers.

In short, then, limited nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence, and lacking in credibility as a deterrent. Clearly, the United States nuclear contribution to the Alliance is neither obsolete nor dispensable.

At the same time, the general strategy I have summarized magnifies the importance of unity of planning, concentration of executive authority, and central direction. There must not be the contingency of nuclear war.

Commencement Address

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Mich.
June 9, 1962

Find the full text on the
Air Force Magazine's website
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"Keeper File"

We are convinced that a general nuclear war target system is indivisible, and if, despite all our efforts, nuclear war should occur, our best hope lies in conducting a centrally controlled campaign against all of the enemy's vital nuclear capabilities, while retaining reserve forces, all centrally controlled.

We know that the same forces which are targeted on ourselves are also targeted on our allies. Our own strategic retaliatory forces are prepared to respond against these forces, wherever they are and whatever their targets.

This mission is assigned not only in fulfillment of our treaty commitments but also because the character of nuclear war compels it. More specifically, the US is as much concerned with that portion of Soviet nuclear striking power that can reach Western Europe as with that portion that also can reach the United States. In short, we have undertaken the nuclear defense of NATO on a global basis. This will continue to be our objective. In the execution of this mission, the weapons in the European theater are only one resource among many. ...

We want and need a greater degree of Alliance participation in formulating nuclear weapons policy to the greatest extent possible. We would all find it intolerable to contemplate having only a part of the strategic force launched in isolation from our main striking power.

We shall continue to maintain powerful nuclear forces for the Alliance as a whole. But let us be clear about what we are saying and what we have to face if the deterrent should fail. This is the almost certain prospect that, despite our nuclear strength, all of us would suffer deeply in the event of major nuclear war. ■