

What the U.S. tactical nuclear doctrine means

by Susan Welsh

A shift in U.S. military doctrine, leaked to the press with great fanfare Aug. 6, gives official presidential endorsement for the first time to the idea of waging “limited” nuclear war. The new doctrine, known as Presidential Directive No. 59, has evoked alarmed opposition around the world—from the Soviet news agency TASS, which called it “an insane step,” to the *New York Times*, which editorialized Aug. 13 that a limited nuclear war policy “may actually increase the risk of nuclear suicide.”

PD 59 specifies that Soviet military objectives and the political leadership of the U.S.S.R. would be the prime targets in a nuclear war, although U.S. forces would still be able to destroy Soviet cities and industrial facilities, as specified under the older U.S. doctrine of deterrence through “Mutually Assured Destruction.” The directive, according to press reports, envisages the possibility of fighting a prolonged—but limited—nuclear war, lasting for weeks or even months before one side finally gives in.

From the standpoint of military doctrine, PD 59 contains little that is new, as Secretary of Defense Harold Brown correctly stressed in his Aug. 8 communication to the defense ministers of the NATO countries. The directive formalizes a policy that has existed in basic outlines since James Schlesinger’s tenure at the Pentagon in 1974. And even Schlesinger’s infamous “limited nuclear war” theories were essentially an amplification of the strategy of “flexible response” developed by Robert McNamara during the 1960s and adopted by NATO in 1967. Secretary Brown himself has regularly affirmed a doctrine of

targeting Soviet military objectives—“counterforce” targeting—in his annual Defense Department reports.

The decision to make this strategy official through a Presidential Directive was wrapped up in June by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and a handful of Pentagon and White House aides, according to the Aug. 13 *New York Times*. Brzezinski pushed for the idea in May 1979, following President Carter’s decision to approve the development of the MX missile, but lack of support from Harold Brown and others led Brzezinski to shelve the idea.

Political motivations

The decision to obtain such a directive now must be seen in the context of developments in the Middle East, Europe, and, of course, the U.S. presidential campaign.

Carter is seeking to convey the image of a tough-guy President who would not hesitate to initiate use of nuclear weapons against Soviet forces in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere. Limited nuclear war is a live policy option at the present time for the Carter administration. The circumstances in Iran and the collapse of the Camp David agreements, together with the increased deployment of U.S. forces into the Persian Gulf and the Middle East define a situation in which the unstable Carter and Brzezinski may opt to test their “limited nuclear war” theories. A Pentagon report prepared for Harold Brown earlier this year recommended that “to prevail in an Iranian scenario [such as a Soviet takeover—ed.], we might have to threaten or make use of

tactical nuclear weapons,” according to the *New York Times* of Feb. 2.

Second, the flaunting of PD 59 is intended as a political weapon directed against Western Europe, to force Bonn and Paris to abandon their independent foreign policy based on East-West détente and Third World development. Continental Europe’s refusal to back the Camp David agreements; the European Mid-east initiative with a role for the Palestine Liberation Organization; the July summit meeting between French President Giscard and West German Chancellor Schmidt, where the two launched cautious but unmitigable steps toward independent military cooperation—these moves galvanized Carter and his National Security Adviser to launch a “show of force” against the allies.

Finally, Carter hopes to out-Reagan Reagan by providing executive authorization for a certain kind of arms buildup “in width.” A “counterforce” targeting strategy requires weapons powerful and accurate enough to knock out Soviet missiles in their hardened underground silos.

A counterforce capability is in practice the same thing as a first-strike capability, which accounts for the vehemence of the Soviet denunciation of Carter’s doctrine. PD 59 will provide the authorization for accelerating programs that meet these requirements, like the mobile MX missile, the Trident I submarine-launched missile, satellite reconnaissance and the various targeting devices known as “smart bombs.”

In addition, if a serious “counterforce” doctrine is to be implemented, programs will have to be launched for 1) a new manned penetrating bomber, 2) a second-generation Trident missile more accurate and powerful than the Trident I, and 3) improved stockpiles of strategic nuclear materials for building warheads, according to high-level military and congressional sources cited Aug. 11 by *Aviation Week and Space Technology*.

The sum total of these policies now boils down to the Republican Party platform adopted in Detroit in July. The GOP endorsed a “counterforce” strategy, roundly denounced the foreign policy initiatives of our European allies, and called for an arms buildup along the lines Carter is proposing.

Kissinger consensus

The convergence of the two platforms is aptly illustrated by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s comment in an Aug. 12 speech that he agrees with Carter’s policy, but thinks the timing of the announcement was foolhardy.

“I do not believe that the middle of an election campaign is the appropriate moment to announce a new strategy for conducting nuclear operations, a subject of extraordinary delicacy and profound conse-

quence to the Soviet Union, to our allies and our own people,” Kissinger said. “Many of us have been concerned about the existing strategy. But I do not believe that it is possible at this moment to engage in a major alteration when nobody knows what the exact purpose is, when there are no new forces being announced or created, and no objectives either for diplomatic or for military forces related to it.”

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The identity of the GOP and Carter programs has shaken those policy-making elites who think the limited nuclear war policy is insane. This grouping includes some members of the New York Council on Foreign Relations, the London International Institute of Strategic Studies, the McGovernite wing of the Democratic Party and the State Department crew around Cyrus Vance, Edmund Muskie and Leslie Gelb.

Many in this anti-Brzezinski group are alarmed at the prospect of the “China card” policy going too far and provoking Soviet military retaliation. Two Defense Department weapons experts will go to China in September to inspect ICBM installations and assess the prospects for U.S. direct or indirect military assistance. The Republican Party has made it clear that the “China card” policy would be pursued with equal vigor by a Reagan administration.

Vance, Muskie and their backers therefore have two presidential candidates to choose from, each committed to policies that make World War III very likely. The only option that remains, in their view, is to try to destabilize the advisers to Carter and gain control over him. They would then pursue a similar program in a

more “moderate” form, and attempt to reinstitute the “arms control process” that would induce the Soviet Union to restrict its own development of military technology.

Is Brzezinski on the outs?

This grouping was apparently responsible for “leaking” PD 59 to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The doctrine was not scheduled to be announced until Aug. 20—after the Democratic National Convention—in a speech by Harold Brown at the U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island. Instead, the controversial issue became part of the factional brawls around the “open convention.”

In July, sources close to the Kennedy campaign predicted that a major attack would be launched against Brzezinski on the floor of the convention, and that Carter would receive Kennedy’s support if Brzezinski was ousted. The sources predicted that Brzezinski would be fired between November and January, assuming that Carter won the election.

Now, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie is publicly enraged because he was not informed about PD 59. Columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported Aug. 13 that “Muskie is so furious about not being fully briefed that he talks about demanding that President Jimmy Carter fire his national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. . . ‘Muskie is thinking of going to the President on a “him or me” basis,’ said one well-informed Democrat in New York.” The *Washington Post* focused Aug. 15 on Muskie’s “exclusion from the deliberations” around the directive. “Nothing like this is ever inadvertent,” the *Post* quotes an official as saying.

Leslie Gelb, who was State Department Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs chief under Secretary Cyrus Vance, told a reporter that Brzezinski repeatedly excluded Vance and himself from deliberations on the selection of nuclear targets in the Soviet Union, according to the Aug. 13 *Baltimore Sun*. “It’s a very serious matter when the President is denied possible alternative points of view. We were rejected by the NSC,” Gelb said.

The Vance-Muskie grouping is terrified that Carter and Brzezinski will force the Soviet Union to go to war. Senior officials quoted by the *Baltimore Sun* expressed the hope that the Soviet Union would realize that PD 59 is really not a change in U.S. doctrine, and that Washington does not seek a first-strike capability against the U.S.S.R. “A message to the Russians was due to be sent: that this country is moving in a more militant direction,” one official said. “But the way this has come out in the press gives the appearance of lurching. *We have to watch out for the kind of Soviet miscalculation that led to their invasion of Afghanistan.*”

Europe responds to PD 59

Le Figaro: “Carter directive means NATO must strike first”

Paul-Marie de la Gorce, a leading commentator in France’s Le Figaro newspaper, wrote an analysis Aug. 12 titled “New American Nuclear Strategy.” De la Gorce’s views frequently reflect the unofficial opinion of the French government.

. . . We are not about to minimize that which is new and major in the deployment of the Soviet SS-20 rockets: following the publication of a study by General Gallois [Pierre Gallois, a leading Gaullist military strategist] in a specialized journal, we were the first in the French press to undertake an analysis of the whole situation and to show that due to the invulnerability which their mobility affords, their weak explosive power and their extraordinary precision, they render NATO’s whole military apparatus vulnerable to a first strike and its whole strategy obsolete. But it must be realized that the United States already possesses—albeit in lesser quan-

Cabinet warfare revived

Presidential Directive 59 rejects the doctrine of “Mutually Assured Destruction” in favor of what purports to be a “war-fighting” doctrine: either that new accurate and powerful U.S. missiles could knock out Soviet military objectives in a surprise first strike, or that the two countries could wage limited nuclear war leading to the victory of one side, since the other would not launch its full nuclear arsenal because that would then mean “mutually assured destruction.”

This new insistence on a war-fighting doctrine for the United States reflects a 2 to 3 year debate in the defense community over the implications of the facts that 1) Soviet doctrine insists that nuclear weapons do not invalidate the principle that wars are fought to be won; and 2) Soviet military power is steadily growing,

tity—intermediate-range nuclear weapons capable of striking the European part of Russia, namely their forward base system: the F-111 air bases in Great Britain, the missiles and strategic airplanes deployed on ships of the American Mediterranean fleet. What does “Presidential Directive 59” add to this?

It would permit the use in the same way, that is to say in a counterforce strike, of part of the strategic (long-range) weapons of the United States. There is nothing theoretically impossible about that.

But what should be well understood and not lost sight of is that all this makes sense only if one strikes first. Only in this case could one hope to destroy all the fixed military objectives of an adversary: if it is he who takes the initiative, his forces will already be in motion, his depots, barracks and bases empty or relocated, and a counterforce nuclear strike against objectives of this nature would lose most of its effectiveness.

The question remains whether it is plausible that a Western country would take the initiative in a conflict. General Gallois, who first studied the doctrine of use of new medium-range nuclear weapons and has done the best job, believes that this is unlikely and that the Western leaders are all convinced that they would never be the aggressors. But it is obvious that the potential enemy cannot rely on guarantees of a moral nature. . . .

This directive, so far as the American press has presented it, envisages that the objectives of American strategic nuclear forces would not be only cities, but also transmission centers, communications networks, command posts, etc. The least that could be said about

this “information” is that it is rather disconcerting. For many years the United States has had more than enough nuclear warheads to destroy all the principal economic and demographic centers in the U.S.S.R. They actually have about 10,500 (and the Soviets less than 6,000). One need only consult an atlas to see that the number of Soviet cities that would be significantly destroyed is infinitely more limited than that. For a very long time, planned targets have been diverse, according to what is called an “enlarged countercity strategy.” And this is probably already the case in the French strike plan. . . .

But it is generally insisted in the United States that, in view of the new threat, the application of “Presidential Directive 59” would be directed against silos housing Soviet ballistic missiles. And therefore this directive is presented as inaugurating an era of strategic counterforce, substituting for the countercity strategy. . . .

In order to destroy underground objectives, it is necessary to use what is called a “crater effect” and therefore, unlike other nuclear strikes, the explosion must take place at ground level. In this case, the radioactivity released is at a maximum and its effects are enormous. A one-megaton explosion produces six million tons of radioactive earth. The Soviet Union has 2,200 ballistic weapon silos. Two megatons would be reasonably required to destroy each one of them. Thus the effect would have to be multiplied by 4,400 to measure the results of this “counterforce” strike. This means quite simply that the Russian population would be in large part exterminated. And the Soviets would achieve the same result if they acted that way. An

while that of the U.S. has eroded in depth to the point of possessing very little except for nuclear weapons. The “war-fighting strategy” that both Secretary Brown’s staff and Ronald Reagan’s advisers have come up with is a parody of Soviet doctrine. According to analyst Richard Burt in the *New York Times* Aug. 6, “over the last three years, Mr. Brown, Mr. Brzezinski and other senior national security aides gradually reached the conclusion that Moscow did not accept Washington’s concept of mutual deterrence and that the United States needed to be able to fight a small-scale nuclear war.”

The Soviet doctrine to which these gentlemen are purporting to respond foresees the use of nuclear weapons *only* in a case in which the vital interests of one or both superpowers are at stake, in which full-scale thermonuclear would be unavoidable. Nuclear weapons would be used as one component of *total*

war, with infantry forces moving in afterwards to hold territory that had been “swept” by nuclear bombardment. A first strike by U.S. missiles against Soviet missile silos would find those silos empty, unless complete surprise could somehow be assured—an impossibility under present technologies. Even a “limited” nuclear war in Europe would mean the total destruction of the continent, as European analysts point out (see accompanying article on European reactions).

The only really new feature of PD 59 is the bizarre notion of targeting Soviet “political structures” along with military targets. The author of this idea, Colin Gray of the Hudson Institute, proposes selected strikes against the bunkers protecting Politburo members, against KGB headquarters, and against sensitive ethnic areas in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. This, he hopes, would destroy the political cohesion of the Soviet state and its will to continue fighting.

American study has shown that one single strike against the Minuteman bases in Arkansas would cause between 6 and 16 million deaths. It is perfectly clear that any attack of this type would provoke a counterattack by nuclear weapons which had not been destroyed, that is, minimally naval and submarine-launched weapons. And thus one would return to "Mutually Assured Destruction."

The truth is that at this level there is no counterforce strategy which would not be a countercity strategy.

The Guardian: "Has Mr. Carter subtly changed nuclear rules?"

An editorial in the London Guardian Aug. 9 commented on Presidential Directive 59:

The move is open to several interpretations. It means, for example, that the U.S. does not base its deterrent immediately on the morally offensive threat to annihilate a large part of the Russian population. It also means, however, that the U.S. is preparing for the eventuality of a limited nuclear war. It means that the unthinkable is being seriously thought about. . . .

The notion of limited nuclear war is not as novel as Mr. Carter's announcement would make it appear. It has for many years been engaging strategists in the U.S. and, one may be sure, the Soviet Union. Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger, set out the options in 1974. . . .

Mr. Carter's announcement of the new strategic doctrine will not therefore take the Russians by surprise. It need not add to Soviet-American tensions. But it is bound to add to the new mood of anxiety in Europe about what the two superpowers are playing at. . . .

The theory of deterrence is that no one shall suffer, in Russia, Europe or the United States. The theory of limited nuclear war must be quite different. Russia and America would suffer a little but would not Europe, and certainly Britain, be as totally ravaged as in a full scale ballistic exchange? . . .

The Observer: "Directive 59 increases risk of nuclear war"

Ian Mather, general correspondent for the London Observer, filed a story in the Aug. 10 issue, writing from Strategic Air Command Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska:

A reappraisal of the nuclear strategy by the Carter administration has produced a decision which critics claim could make nuclear war more likely. . . .

The new Carter policy, which its supporters like to think of as substituting surgery for mass butchery, has already been criticised for making nuclear war more likely by making it more "thinkable."

The Observer: "A war Russia will not fight"

The following guest commentary by Mark Frankland appeared in The Observer Aug. 10:

The Russians . . . have to assume that a European war would involve western, "European" Russia. It is not surprising that their military doctrine has rather little to say about limited wars. True, it allows that there may be conventional wars and "conventional" periods during a nuclear war. But the essence of Soviet thinking is that any war between East and West will probably become global and that nuclear weapons will be decisive in it.

This is the war that the Soviet armed forces are trained, in the words of their military manuals, to "fight and win." . . .

The notion that the Russians might be ready to weaken themselves by fighting just in Europe, and leave America (let alone China, Japan and other possible new centres of military power) intact, makes no sense.

Why is it almost inevitable that this limited European war would in fact spill over into western Russia? . . . It is incredible that NATO, fighting for its life, would not attack the rear areas, supporting the Soviet armies. . . . What is more, NATO would be able to threaten some of the Soviet strategic missile sites without the Americans firing off a single one of their Minutemen intercontinental missiles.

But a European war that involved the Soviet Union in this way would make no sense from Moscow's point of view. It would leave it, at the end of it, at a disastrous disadvantage to the United States. It would have achieved none of its war-fighting aims. American strategic nuclear forces would be untouched. . . .

A Soviet Union, after this sort of war, would be at the mercy of America. Even if its troops had occupied part of West Europe they would surely not be able to hold on to it. It is easy to understand, then, that the idea of a limited European war cannot seem realistic to the Soviet leaders let alone desirable. . . .

New York Times: "An intensely risky notion."

From an Aug. 15 New York Times column by Paris correspondent Flora Lewis, "Old Strategy or New Risks?" relaying European questions:

. . . It was James Schlesinger, when he was at the Pentagon, who worked out the doctrine for designating military targets as a deliberate intermediary step before the ultimate "countercity" decision. That used to be called "counterforce." Presumably, Secretary Brown renamed it "countervailing strategy" because he didn't want it to sound as though the United States were planning a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. . . .

But what kind of military targets does the “counter-vailing strategy” now envisage? We haven’t been told, nor have the Russians. If they are “soft”—bases, depots, arms factories—the doctrine is indeed a simple evolution adding Presidential options short of MAD, and doesn’t require MX. But if they are “hard”—the Soviet missile silos that other weapons can’t be sure of hitting but MX probably could—Moscow could feel it had reason to fear a U.S. first strike and decide to launch in anticipation of such a strike. . . .

Credibility requires an arsenal enabling the United States to retaliate, but deterrence now requires a balance assuring Moscow that the United States doesn’t imagine it would win a nuclear war.

A second policy question raised by the latest White House directive is the inclusion of “command and control” targets. One constant of nuclear strategy has been the understanding that, contrary to conventional doctrine, the enemy’s command should be left intact so that there is still someone capable of stopping action with whom to negotiate before escalation becomes automatic and unconditional for humankind.

Is this axiom being abandoned? Some American officials say not necessarily but that the U.S. President should have the choice of liquidating the enemy’s leadership if he thinks there is someone more amenable around to take charge. That is an intensely risky notion which can do nothing to stabilize the balance with Moscow or enhance deterrence. . . .

It’s the sort of thing that makes friend and foe alike complain of inconsistency and uncertainty in the White House.

Soviets respond

The Soviet news agency TASS has issued its analysis of the Carter administration mandate for “limited nuclear war” known as Presidential Directive 59. “The American administration is methodically pushing the world toward a nuclear catastrophe,” said TASS on Aug. 11.

“Only rabid militarists who have lost all touch with reality and are prepared to push the world into the abyss of nuclear holocaust . . . can conceive and sanction such plans now.”

The official Soviet news agency characterized PD 59 as “insane” and warned that “the Soviet Union will have to draw the necessary conclusions. . . . It would be naive to think that the Soviet Union will stand idle while nuclear weapons are being perfected in the United States.”

In a separate TASS release dated Aug. 8, the Soviet military made itself heard on PD 59 as well. Lieutenant General Sergei Radzievskii, Deputy Director of the Institute of Military History, stated to TASS the essence of the Soviet doctrine which renders PD 59 worse than useless as military strategy. “The question of using military strength,” explained Radzievskii, “is envisaged in Soviet military doctrine only in a situation where the aggressive struggle becomes a real fact, when the Soviet Union has no other way out but to *launch all its military might at the enemy to crush it completely*” [emphasis added].

In other words, the U.S.S.R. will not fight a “limited nuclear war” with the United States. It will fire its missiles on North America, both at military targets and population centers. And given Soviet superiority in in-depth convention backup forces, it will be in a good position to win World War III.

Doctrine not new

The doctrine of “counterforce” targeting for a nuclear exchange which the Carter administration projects could be delimited by negotiation without its burgeoning into all-out conflict, is no surprise to Moscow. Throughout 1980, specialized Russian publications have reported on the ongoing elaboration of this strategy as a refined version of James R. Schlesinger’s “limited nuclear war” doctrine instituted in 1974.

Nevertheless, the Soviets responded with one of the most toughly worded attacks they have aimed at Jimmy Carter during his term. The reason is that Moscow deems the international strategic situation to be at an extreme of instability. There is evidence of debate inside the Kremlin over whether a détente policy can make any impact at all on the danger of war, even with a commitment to saving the peace on the part of the continental European NATO members.

In recent articles in Soviet Communist Party publications as well as at party meetings, political allies of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev have gone to great lengths to defend his attempts to keep détente alive, apparently responding to criticisms from the military and other political circles. The announcement of PD 59 can only strengthen the hand of those in Moscow who believe that nuclear war is inevitable given the policy commitments of either a Reagan or Carter administration.

A Soviet commentary on the Democratic Party convention, reported in the Aug. 13 London *Guardian*, predicted that Jimmy Carter might launch drastic actions overseas to boost his reelection chances. Between now and November, the Soviet commentary said, Carter could engineer “political crises” in order to “distract public opinion” and turn the tide in his favor.