ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Menace Or Deterrent? The Post-Cold War Debate Concerning American Nuclear Alert Status

The end of the Cold War presented a powerful exigency for advocates and critics of American nuclear deterrence policies. The transformation of the Soviet Union from America's archenemy to a Russian Federation occupying the role of sometimes strategic partner has altered the justificatory environment for public defenders of Cold War deterrence doctrines. Anti-nuclear advocates from many backgrounds and theoretical perspectives have attempted to capitalize on the fading of the Soviet threat by advancing policy proposals that de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in security policy. The successful negotiation of several arms control initiatives, most notably the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START), suggests that such proposals have had some effect on the trajectory of American strategic policy. However, a number of critics argue that such vertical disarmament initiatives, which drawdown the number of nuclear weapons, do little to decrease the threat of nuclear annihilation in a world that still has thousands of warheads. Defense analyst Bruce G. Blair and over advocates instead recommend the adoption of horizontal disarmament measures, such as taking nuclear weapons off high alert status, as a means of jump-starting the arms control process.

This essay is divided into two sections. The first discusses the major argument structures articulated by defense analysts and public officials in the ongoing de-alerting controversy. Particular attention is paid to the arguments of Blair, who is the most publicly visible de-alerting advocate, and Dr. Kathleen C. Bailey, who is a vocal critic of de-alerting initiatives. Both of these figures have been called to testify before congress, detailing their perspectives on the relative merits of various de-alerting proposals. The second section provides an assessment of the effectiveness of the campaign to remove American nuclear weapons from high-alert status, analyzing the debate it has unfolded from the perspective of several public sphere theories derived from the work of Jurgen Habermas.This analysis is

a part of a larger project concerning the evolving nature of post-Cold War policy debates. The author argues, as an initial preliminary, that although horizontal disarmament measures, such as those articulated by Blair, have considerable merit as policy proposals, their deployment in public debates about nuclear weapons has been largely unsuccessful in altering American nuclear policy because they have yet to effectively challenge institutional justifications for Cold War era nuclear deterrence doctrines.

1. Hair-Trigger Deterrents

Bruce G. Blair, head of the Center for Defense Information and a former missileer, is arguably the individual most responsible for bringing the potential problems with keeping an arsenal on high alert status to the attention of the public. He has written several books and articles dealing with the subject, and has also been asked to testify before congress on a number of occasions. Blair and other de-alerting advocates, such as General Lee Butler, former head of the Strategic Air Command, claim that adopting lower alert postures, an example of horizontal disarmament policies, is an important supplement to vertical disarmament measures. Despite START I & II and the recently signed Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty, both the United States and Russia will continue to deploy thousands of strategic nuclear warheads for the foreseeable future. De-alerting proposals, they maintain, represent the best way to decrease the risk nuclear war short of total disarmament (Blair 1998). Blair, along with other critics of 'hair-trigger' alert postures, offers several arguments in favor of adopting a less belligerent nuclear policy.

An initial set of claims thematizes the necessity of de-alerting in a changed threat environment. Three observations about global security politics are regularly advanced. First, advocates argue that the end of the Cold War has fundamentally altered the relationship between the United States and Russia. However, the continued prevalence in both nations of launch-on-warning postures indicates that the former rivals "remain stuck in the Cold War logic of 'mutual assured destruction'" (Blair & Nunn 1997: C1). The Clinton/Yeltsin detargeting initiative is described as hollow because missiles can be retargeted in seconds (Blair 1997). The reconciliation between the former rivals, the relative weakness of the Russian military, and the continuing deterioration of the Russian nuclear arsenal dictate that hair-trigger deterrence postures are no longer needed to ensure American security interests (Blair 1995, 1998).

Second de-alerting advocates cite a number of factors indicating that the American and Russian high alert launch policies may actually increase the prospects of an accidental, miscalculated, or unauthorized nuclear strike. Blair argues that high American alert postures compel Russian military planners to adopt a similar stance. A 1997 *Washington Post* editorial by Blair and former Senator Sam Nunn claims that a severe Russian budget crunch has led to the deterioration of its nuclear arsenal, leaving it unable to ensure second-strike capability in the event of a nuclear attack. The Russian military has thus shifted to a launch-on-warning posture. Unfortunately, this posture exists in an environment where early warning systems are faulty, risking a miscalculated nuclear launch. Likewise, a hair-trigger posture also undermines command and control procedures, increasing the likelihood of an unauthorized or accidental attack. Advocates argue that "the main current threat to our mutual survival stems from the growing risk that weapons on hair-trigger alert will be fired illicitly or accidentally because of technical failure, human error, or internal military and political disintegration" (Rosenberg 1999: A6). A 1998 report, which received considerable press attention, claims that such an event would result in millions of casualties and risk escalation to an all-out nuclear exchange (Forrow et al. 1998). Advocates frequently point to a recent incident as evidence for their concerns (Blair, Feiveson & Von Hippel 1997a). On January 25, 1995, a rocket containing scientific equipment was launched from the coast of Norway. The launch alerted the Russian early warning system as a potential nuclear strike, which was communicated to the political leadership. Several reports indicate that the Russian leaders activated a nuclear suitcase, which is only a step away from initiating a nuclear counter-strike, before they realized the missile was benign (Flam 1997).

Third, advocates of de-alerting argue that rapid-fire nuclear postures in other regions create ominous security concerns. Blair (1998) points to the modernization of Chinese nuclear forces, the development of advanced ballistic missiles by the Indian government, and the likelihood of continued proliferation as evidence that dangerous launch-on-warning postures, modeled on Russian and American doctrines, could become the international norm, increasing vulnerability to nuclear accidents.

Blair (1998) has proposed a long list of policy steps that the United States should take to move away from a launch-on-warning posture, each of which is designed

to decrease the ability to launch missiles quickly. Blair & Nunn (1997) argue, "de-alerting would lead to much safer nuclear postures… [and] would greatly reduce the serious dangers associated with the deterioration of Russian nuclear control – as well as relegate to history the already remote threat of first strike" (p. C1). Blair, Feiveson & Von Hippel (1997a) claim that precedent exists for reciprocal de-alerting between the United States and Russia, pointing to the success of President George Bush in removing American bombers from twenty-four hour alert status in 1991. Von Hippel (1997) claims that American leadership is necessary in this arena, and that START's verification procedures could be readily adapted to ensuring compliance with any de-alerting agreements. Blair (1998) characterizes his de-alerting proposals as occupying a middle ground between the dangers of current force postures and unilateral disarmament.

De-alerting proponents address the obvious concern about the effect of such proposals on American deterrence. Several responses are typically offered. First, they claim that Russia is so weak that it is incapable of threatening American interests, and that the risk of a deliberate attack is quite low (Blair 1998; Blair, Feiveson, & von Hippel 1997b). Second, advocates argue that the United States would still be able to deter any nuclear threats with even a de-alerted arsenal, pointing to the survivability of its submarine and Minuteman III systems (Blair 1998). This system survivability also ensures American security in the event that the Russian government was to shift to a more aggressive launch posture in the future. Third, Blair argues that the advocated de-alerting proposals would not preclude shifting to a higher alert posture in the event of a crisis. Finally, advocates claim that an accidental launch is a much larger threat than a deliberate attack, observing, "the breakdown of control has replaced a breakdown of deterrence as the basic problem of nuclear security" (Blair 1995b: 9).

Dr. Kathleen C. Bailey of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory has been called upon to articulate her views in several congressional hearings. In recent testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee's Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Bailey articulates three major sets of arguments against de-alerting the American nuclear arsenal.

First, Bailey (1998) argues that a range of threats necessitate strong American nuclear deterrence. She points to increased Russian reliance upon its nuclear arsenal, embodied in a May 1997 reversal of its long-time no-first-use pledge, and ongoing Russian force modernization as evidence that the United States still faces

a substantial strategic nuclear threat. Further, Bailey maintains that the People's Republic of China poses a relatively increasing threat to the United State, citing efforts to expand and modernize its nuclear arsenal and its ballistic missile forces. Bailey also argues that emerging nuclear powers, such as India and North Korea, present a significant threat to American security interests. Finally, she claims that the worldwide spread of chemical and biological weapons capabilities increases the necessity of a strong U.S. deterrent, a function that can only be served by alerted nuclear weapons.

Second, Bailey (1998) attempts to deflate the purposed risk of a miscalculated, accidental, or unauthorized Russian nuclear attack. She directs attention to ongoing Russian efforts to modernize its nuclear command and control, claiming that Russian warnings of internal instability are "motivated, at least in part, by a desire to increase the amount of U.S. funding to Russia" (para. 46). Bailey further claims that prominent American and Russia defense officials believe that the Russian arsenal is secure, pointing to public statements from Major General Vladimir Dvorkin of the Russian Defense Ministry and General Eugene Habiger, head of the U.S. Strategic Command.

Third, Bailey (1998) echoes other critics in arguing that de-alerting initiatives would undermine the international stability founded on a robust and ready nuclear deterrent. She identifies two potential areas of concern. Initially, Bailey claims that de-alerting would erode the survivability of American retaliatory forces, making a debilitating first strike more likely. This force vulnerability, she contends, would lead to a destabilizing regeneration-of-arms race where nations would streamline the re-alert process, fearing rapid redeployment of de-alerted weapons by enemy countries (Bailey: para. 30). Further, Bailey maintains that de-alerting would erode the credibility of American deterrence postures because it would delay retaliatory capabilities. Dr. Keith B. Payne (1998), a long-time critic of disarmament initiatives, shares this concern, arguing that delaying a nuclear response would increase the likelihood of attack by a potential challenger. Bailey also argues that de-alerting proposals would erode the safety and security of the American nuclear arsenal, claiming that tried-and-true security measures would have to be redesigned. She insists that some initiatives, such as removing warheads from missiles, would increase the risk of theft.

This erosion of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, Bailey (1998) alleges, comes at the price of a potentially unverifiable de-alerting agreement that subverts effective

arms control. She asserts that "most proposed de-alerting measures are either unverifiable or only verifiable with low confidence" (Bailey: para. 33). Bailey claims that de-alerting is really an effort to circumvent the arms controls process, observing that many advocates support de-alerting "because they believe that disarmament is not moving quickly in the post-Cold War era" (para. 34). She cautions that engaging in de-alerting proposals outside of the arms control framework may compromise American security interests.

2. De-alerting, the Technical Sphere, and Institutional Argument

Rhetorical scholar Gordon R. Mitchell explores an emerging collaboration between communication and international relations scholarship in a forthcoming book review essay in Argumentation and Advocacy. Mitchell cites recent developments in German international relations theory and American public sphere scholarship as evidence that the study of foreign policy debates can be enhanced by the application of contemporary argument theories. Mitchell turns our attention to a recent article in the journal *International Organization* by Thomas Risse (2000) of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, which argues that the argumentation theories of Jurgen Habermas and other public sphere scholars have considerable applicability to the study of foreign policy controversies. Risse claims that Habermas' theories of argument may prove useful in addressing empirical questions in both global and domestic politics by offering an alternative to the endless debate between social constructionist and rational choice international relations theorists. Risse posits that focusing on argumentation in analyzing international politics is fruitful for two reasons. First, it expands the understanding of how actors develop common knowledge relating to defining a communicative situation and determining the underlying 'rules of the game' that permit such interaction in the first place. Echoing Habermas, Risse argues that argumentation is a vehicle for problem solving that directs actors in controversies toward a consensus aimed at overcoming collective action problems. Second, argumentative rationality is linked to the constitutive, rather than regulative, role of communication, permitting an analysis of how actors explore and contest validity claims concerning those norms. Risse maintains that public controversies can be analyzed descriptively in terms of what type of communicative behavior, strategic, rhetorical, or argumentative, is evident. A normative critique of foreign policy debates is also possible based upon the degree of inclusiveness, transparency, and commitment to reaching a consensus apparent in the deliberations. Risse ends his essay with a call for American

international relations scholars to reconsider contemporary political controversies in light of argumentation theory.

Although Risse largely ignores the utilization of theories of communicative rationality by a number of American public sphere theorists (see Goodnight 1982; Goodnight & Farrell 1981), his arguments about the utility of argumentation theory merit our consideration. A recent book review by Goodnight & Hingstman (1997) describes public sphere theory as being "at the center of lively discussions crossing academic disciplines, local communities, social institutions and international borders" (1997: 351). A frequently cited essay in this tradition is Goodnight's (1982) description of the differences between personal, technical, and public spheres of argument and the challenges that arise when the communicative norms of the technical and personal spheres replace public deliberative norms. Goodnight cautions that the technical norms of expression that increasingly dominate contemporary public policy debates constrain the capacity for public debate. These emerging technical norms privilege a rigid orthodoxy of communication and acceptable forms of justification that are exclusive of the rules of thumb and sensitivity to the contingency of knowledge and judgment that have traditionally characterized public debates, substituting "the semblance of deliberative discourse for actual deliberation, thereby diminishing public life" (Goodnight: 220). The subversion of the public sphere by technical discourses in both domestic and foreign policy contexts has been described by many scholars, including Goodnight & Farrell's 1981 discussion of the public debate about the Three Mile Island accident, Goodnight's 1986 analysis of Ronald Reagan's 'Zero Option,' 'Evil Empire,' and 'Star Wars' speeches, and more recently in Doxtader's 1997 dissertation dealing with Cold War deterrence debates, to name but a few. These and other studies detail the prevalence of what Risse would describe as bargaining or rhetorical behavior in a broad array of public policy debates.

Doxtader (1995, 1997) also claims that Habermas' argumentation theories can inform potent critiques of institutional arguments in nuclear and other public policy deliberations. He argues that institutions utilize argumentation to "interpret public interest in order to define, articulate, and support the norms that sustain public life," and cautions that institutional arguments about the public good frequently use instrumental rationalities that erode the ability of advocates to articulate visions of collective interest running counter to those

advanced by institutions (Doxtader 1997: 29-31; see also Habermas 1984: 322-9). Doxtader advises that institutional argument analysis can serve two purposes. First, because argumentation is used to perpetuate rationalizing systems, studying institutional justifications permits an examination of how communicative practices and structures perpetuate norms of truth and control in perpetuating particular visions of the public interest. Definitions of public interest "are important because they reveal how institutions conceptualize the value of public participation relative to the process of policy making. In other words, institutional arguments betray how management systems constellate pluralistic interest formation" (Doxtader 1995: Lifeworld section para. 15). Second, institutional argument norms can be evaluated to determine if they "invite reciprocal participation or if they enact a form of violence in which opportunities for deliberation are foreclosed" (Doxtader 1997: 30). Analysis of public debates reveals "how institutions enter into, structure, and perhaps take over public debate" (Doxtader 1995: Lifeworld section para. 16).

The controversy surrounding de-alerting is fascinating in its own right. However, the case is also useful in illustrating several points about the continuities and divergences between post- and Cold War deliberations about the purpose of nuclear weapons. In particular, analyzing the de-alerting debate permits an assessment of whether the rhetorical strategies advocating horizontal disarmament, as currently deployed, are effective in challenging institutional claims justifying nuclear deterrence. The author begins by detailing several important differences in the argument choices of both critics and proponents of de-alerting as they move between deliberative spaces. Four elements of the argument structures in the debate are then offered as prospective explanations for the relative lack of success experienced by de-alerting advocates. First, government officials utilize inflated threats as a means of justifying the existence of nuclear deterrence. Once deterrence is accepted as a necessity, it becomes much more difficult for de-alerting advocates to sustain criticism of current retaliatory postures. Second, the tendency of de-alerting proponents to isolate accident risks within Russia as the primary justification for changing hair-trigger alert status forecloses upon important opportunities to foster public dialogue about the dangers inherent in American nuclear postures and the appropriate place of nuclear weapons in American policy. Third, the failure of de-alerting proponents to strongly challenge governmental assumptions about the necessity of nuclear deterrence and American international predominance shift the terms of

the debate to technical questions that are dominated by representatives of the nuclear establishment. Blair's (1998) efforts to occupy the middle ground between nuclear abolition and nuclear recklessness are ineffective because they play into the illusion, perpetuated by pro-nuclear discourses, that institutions can control nuclear weapons. Finally, recent efforts by the Bush administration to co-opt the discourses of de-alerting and other anti-nuclear advocates threaten to quash any meaningful public debate about the role of nuclear weapons in post-Cold War American security policy.

There are a number of distinctions between the framing and content of arguments made in different communicative settings by pro- and anti-nuclear advocates that warrant attention. Initially, Blair (1998) chooses to not seriously discuss the potentially horrific effects of an accidental Russian strike in his congressional testimony, despite the fact that many of his public statements include an extensive discussion of the millions of casualties expected in the event of an accidental attack. Additionally, Blair's testimony is largely concerned with questions of verification, the probability and effect of the 're-alerting' of Russian weapons, and the effect of various de-alerting proposals on the deterrence capabilities of the American arsenal, subjects that warrant only brief discussion in newspaper editorials he has authored (see Blair & Nunn: 1997; Blair, Feiveson & Von Hippel: 1997). Blair apparently judges that these concerns merit little attention in his efforts to persuade the general public as to the necessity of taking the American arsenal off of high-alert status. The shift in the tenor and focus of Blair's justifications for de-alerting suggests that the setting of the congressional hearing, where advocates purportedly hope to persuade members of congress, places different argumentative demands upon advocates. Specifically, the congressional debate is focused on technical questions concerning verification and deterrence, whereas public discussions about de-alerting are more likely to emphasize questioning basic assumptions about the merits of deterrence postures.

Advocates of robust deterrence adopt a more pejorative stance when discussing de-alerting proposals in public forums, such as the pages of the nation's newspapers. For example Frank Gaffney (1998), the head of the Center for Security Policy, has described de-alerting as a plot by liberals to denuclearize American security policy. Gaffney portrays de-alerting initiatives as "wooly-headed delusions whose only certain result will be nuclear disarmament" (p. A14).

Gaffney argues that nuclear weapons and the necessity of deterrence are facts of life, and that efforts to de-emphasize nuclear weapons will only undermine important American security interests. Gaffney outlines a seemingly improbable scenario in a 1997 *Washington Times* newspaper editorial, where he argues that weakening the U.S. deterrent would embolden Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to attack his neighbors, leading to a region-wide conflict involving the use of unconventional weapons. This argument not only exhibits a noteworthy degree of threat inflation, but also demonstrates the willingness of deterrence advocates to inflame public fears about new security threats as a means of sustaining support for Cold War era deterrence postures. In contrast Bailey (1998) and other de-alerting opponents only vaguely sketch potential threats when speaking before congress, allowing the audience to reach their own, potentially ominous, conclusions about the grave nuclear dangers facing the United States.

So why have de-alerting advocates been relatively unsuccessful in both the opinion- and will-formation public spheres? The number of purported threats to particular notions of the public interest certainly plays a role. Previous work by Doxtader (1995, 1997) and Goodnight & Farrell (1981) suggests that contestation over different constructions of the public interest is an important element in determining the outcome of policy controversies. The opposing sides in the de-alerting debate evidence markedly different perspectives on how nuclear weapons intersect with public goods. Blair and other de-alerting advocates argue that nuclear weapons, particularly those on high-alert status, play a mixed role in protecting the American people. Although they concede that nuclear weapons may serve some valuable function as an existential deterrent, they argue that current nuclear postures risk an accident that would result in potentially millions of casualties. Blair (1998) in particular argues that the end of the Cold War has fundamentally altered the role of nuclear weapons in advancing the common good. Such weapons are no longer necessary to deter an intentional Soviet attack. Instead, the weapons increase the danger that a Russian attack will occur by accident. Blair claims that the public interest would thus be best served by moving away from Cold War era launch-on-warning doctrines, which he claims make no sense in the post-Cold War world. The strong public response to de-alerting consciousness-raising campaigns, such as “Back from the Brink,” as well as initial overwhelming support for the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, indicates that many Americans are ready to reconsider the role of nuclear weapons in national security policy (Graham 2000; Traynor 2002).

An analysis of the arguments of Bailey (1998) and other critics of de-alerting proposals reveals a very different understanding of how nuclear weapons affect public life. Although Bailey acknowledges the geopolitical changes resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, she argues that the central role of nuclear deterrence remains unchanged. One tactic frequently deployed by defenders of aggressive nuclear postures is the inflation of nuclear and other non-conventional threats facing the United States. Old threats prevalent during the Cold War, such as a deliberate attack from the Russian Federation, are now combined with new, 'emerging' threats from 'states of concern' such as Iraq, North Korea, Iran and Syria, and new rivals such as the People's Republic of China. Bailey's testimony underscores how shifting the debate about nuclear policy from the desirability of deterrence in and of itself to an analysis of purported threats can effectively short-circuit public debate. The positing of prima facie threat privileges pro-nuclear arguments by placing the United States in a position of weakness and vulnerability, justifying an aggressive nuclear posture as an act of self-defense. Although the cast of characters in the list of new threats changes on a regular basis, the fact remains that so-called states of concern are a powerful rhetorical resource for pro-nuclear advocates. Like Bailey, Payne (1998) concludes that nuclear weapons are now more important than ever before in guaranteeing American security interests.

This argumentative move leaves anti-nuclear advocates with two, equally undesirable, responses. One available strategy is to argue that the threats themselves are exaggerated, but rendering this a persuasive position is difficult because of information gaps between institutional and outsider speakers. These gaps allow pro-nuclear advocates to claim that they have superior, often classified, intelligence proving the existence of the alleged threat. The second approach is to concede the existence of the threat but argue that nuclear weapons are incapable advancing American security interests. Blair and other de-alerting advocates typically utilize a mix of the two options, arguing that the risk of an intentional Russian launch is low and that the new international belligerents are not particularly threatening. De-alerting proponents effectively thematize the threat of Russian accidents and miscalculation, but are unable to make similarly effective claims about other rivals to American power. Unfortunately, this hybrid approach is unable to challenge the assumed desirability of at least some level of deterrence, and Blair (1998) concedes in his testimony that nuclear weapons may be necessary to deter some future nuclear threats. The acknowledgement of the

inevitability of deterrence runs counter to beliefs Blair has expressed in other forums. The use of exaggerated threats by pro-nuclear advocates thus structures the public debate about de-alerting towards an outcome that accepts and justifies the existence of deterrence doctrines.

A second shortcoming of de-alerting advocacies is the strong tendency to foreground Russian weakness and nuclear instability as a justification for taking weapons off high-alert status, while U.S. nuclear force instabilities are often only cursorily mentioned. Examples of this phenomenon abound in the literature. Journalist Ira Shorr (1999) describes Russia as "a blind man in a dark room who has a gun and is afraid he is going to be attacked" (para. 2). Blair & Gaddy (1999) characterize the Russian missile force as "crippled," while policy analyst Arjun Makhijani (1999) argues that the nation is plagued by a "deteriorating nuclear weapons command-and-control infrastructure" (p. 20). Other news reports outline numerous "nightmare scenarios" for a Russian attack, including theft, miscalculation, and civil war (Nelan 1997; Rosenberg 1999). Potential problems with the United States' arsenal, on the other hand, are less often discussed, despite extensive earlier work by Blair (1985, 1993) on the subject. Although the widely covered *New England Journal of Medicine* (1998) study contained a section describing accident risks within the U.S. arsenal, press coverage focused almost exclusively on the effects and probability of a Russian accidental attack. Although Blair's 1998 testimony references problems with the American arsenal, his case for de-alerting rests firmly on Russian nuclear instability.

Not only does focusing on the Russian arsenal unnecessarily overlook serious problems with American nuclear posture, but it also weakens the persuasive force of de-alerting justifications for at least two reasons. First, this strategy distances responsibility for accident risks from federal institutions. Instead of arguing that millions of Americans are threatened by the reliance of the U.S. government on faulty nuclear security systems, de-alerting advocates place the blame firmly on the Russian government. Although advocates link Russia's launch-on-warning posture to U.S. retaliatory policy, defenders of deterrence still have ground to argue that responsibility for accident risks rests with the Russians. Further, this stance lends credibility to the claim made by de-alerting opponents that Russian internal instabilities justify an aggressive American deterrence posture designed to protect the U.S. from rogue Russian commanders. Just as importantly, centering justification for de-alerting on Russian instability shifts the focus of the

debate to whether the Russian government would reciprocate any American de-alerting initiatives. De-alerting advocates would be more effective in generating a general outcry about the issue if they foregrounded problems with the American arsenal, bringing the U.S.'s long history of nuclear near-accidents to the attention of the public. Publicizing U.S. safety concerns would be more likely to cultivate a public debate about the necessity of nuclear deterrence in light of its inherent dangers. Second, the strategy of focusing on Russian instability while ignoring safety problem with the American arsenal leaves the impression that some arsenals, namely the U.S.'s, are safe. Failing to emphasize domestic safety problems lends public credibility to the claims of Bailey (1998) and Habiger (1998) that the American arsenal is secure. Constructing Russian incompetence as the problem supports claims of safety and expertise advanced by the nuclear establishment.

Third, Blair's (1998) claim that de-alerting is a preferable policy alternative because it occupies a middle ground between dangerous deterrence policies and complete abolition is more than a simple argument fallacy. Blair's claim is particularly odd because he has frequently argued that de-alerting is a step towards eventual disarmament.

The middle ground argument allows pro-nuclear advocates to shift the grounds the de-alerting debate from public questions about the morality and necessity of deterrence to a technical debate about whether particular de-alerting initiatives undermine American deterrence. Blair's middle ground concedes that deterrence is necessary, allowing institutional advocates to draw upon powerful Cold War arguments detailing the necessity of high alert postures. Likewise, Blair's claim that de-alerted weapons could be put back on alert status in the event of a crisis reinforces institutional arguments about the substantial international threats that justify an aggressive deterrence posture in the first place. The debate thus concentrates on the consequences of de-alerting proposals for the public good of nuclear deterrence. Deliberations become dominated by what Cohen (1987a, 1987b) describes as technostrategic argument. The claims to privileged knowledge advanced by official defenders of nuclear deterrence doctrines are used to exaggerate threats to the American public and minimize the dangers of high alert status. Lifton and Falk (1982) similarly maintain that deliberating over how to create the best deterrent obfuscates the fundamental irrationality of nuclear deterrence. Cohen argues that technostrategic discourse removes the

horrific consequences of deterrence failure from the public view by creating a false sense of control over nuclear weapons.

De-alerting advocates may experience greater success by foregrounding Makhijani's (1999) argument that American deterrence postures are themselves responsible for the bulk of threats facing the United States, not just those posed by a deteriorating Russian arsenal. He argues that U.S. de-alerting initiatives will be ineffective in reaching an international consensus because these steps will not mitigate the threat posed to other nations by American conventional and nuclear superiority. Bailey (1998) and Gaffney (1997) frequently claim that Russia, China, and other nuclear states would never follow American de-alerting moves. This claim is very effective as a public argument, as evidenced by the positive response from several senators. The difficulty posed by proving that other nations would agree to de-alert their weapons suggests that criticism of hair-trigger alert postures needs to be combined with an honest assessment of the risks posed by the growing international resentment toward American foreign policy arrogance. William D. Hartung (2001) of the World Policy Institute argues that we are witnessing the emergence of American "nuclear unilateralism," where foreign policy conservatives use ballistic missile defenses and aggressive nuclear postures as a means to expand American power.

Finally, despite generating considerable press coverage, de-alerting advocates were unsuccessful in affecting a change in American security policy during the Clinton administration. However, in a surprise move during a May 23, 2000 campaign speech designed to outline a vision for American security policy, then-presidential candidate George W. Bush pledged to "remove as many weapons as possible from high alert, hair-trigger status" noting that "keeping so many weapons on high alert may cerate unacceptable risks of accidental or unauthorized launch" (Remove 2001: A11). Despite rumblings of an imminent de-alerting agreement during the last several meetings between President Bush and Russian President Putin, the Bush administration has yet to carry through with the campaign promise. The administration's recent Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), as analyzed by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), decreases the number of high-alert weapons but does not recommend any concrete steps towards the de-alerting of the American nuclear arsenal. The NRDC report (2002) argues that the nuclear drawdown projected by the NPR and codified in the recently signed Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty does not necessitate the

destruction of any strategic weapons. Instead, warheads slated for removal from high-alert delivery platforms will be 'de-mated,' separated from their delivery devices and put into storage. These weapons will then be available to use in the event of a crisis. Therefore, although SORT may claim to decrease the size of the Russian and American arsenals, the total number of strategic weapons available to each nation remains largely unaltered. The administration's move represents an attempt to use a de-alerting initiative as a justification for circumventing meaningful arms control. 'Horizontal' disarmament initiatives may be vulnerable to co-option by nuclear institutions. This is an example of what Dr. Hugh Gusterson (2001) has described as the Bush administration's program to create a "radical shift in our discourse about nuclear weapons" (p. 65). He argues that the White House is hijacking the arguments of the anti-nuclear movement in an attempt to bolster public support for ballistic missile defenses, the development of a new generation of 'usable' nuclear weapons, and the militarization of space (p. 66). Gusterson concludes that the anti-nuclear movement faces the difficult task of articulating a new justification for disarmament; else the Bush administration's vision of American nuclear hegemony will dominate public discourse.

Blair and other de-alerting advocates are probably correct in arguing that hair-trigger alert deterrence postures pose a grave threat to the public interest. Further, their message has been effective in garnering support for de-alerting initiatives from a substantial portion of the American public. However, an initial assessment of de-alerting advocacy in public discourse suggests that current strategies are only partially effective in overcoming institutional justifications for nuclear deterrence. Additional study in this area promises to not only reveal how the nuclear establishment has adapted its institutional rationalities to the post-Cold War era, but may also suggest new argument strategies that can effectively challenge official nuclear discourses.

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