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Reconsidering the Morality of Deterrence

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CISSM Working Paper

March 2012

This paper was prepared with generous support from the Skoll Global Threats Fund.

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In 1983, at one of the more intense moments of the Cold War period, the United States Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter addressing the moral implications of the deterrence doctrine. The letter observed that the mass attack plans on which the operational practice of deterrence was based could not be reconciled with traditional just war principles and declared that the practice was only provisionally acceptable in moral terms. That formulation expressed reluctant deference to the prevailing belief that national security depended on the deterrent effect of a massively destructive threat actively deployed and that there was no viable alternative.

A decade later, after the alliance confrontation that defined the Cold War had dissolved, the bishops issued a commentary on the original letter. They reaffirmed their original judgment on deterrence and broadened their discussion to address the problems of civil conflict and basic human rights then emerging into greater prominence. They reiterated their support for policies that would restrain the practice of deterrence, but they did not intensify their moral prescription. They acknowledged differing judgments regarding the strategic justification of the deterrence doctrine and set no time limit on provisional moral acceptance. They did not issue a moral mandate to transform the legacy practice.

Nearly three decades after the pastoral letter, the practice of deterrence continues essentially unaltered. The number of operationally deployed nuclear weapons has been substantially reduced, but their destructive potential has not been proportionately affected. Urban industrial infrastructure and human population concentrations are nearly as vulnerable as they ever were. If the mass attack plans embedded in continuously alert deterrent forces were ever implemented, they would inflict tens of millions of immediate casualties and so damage social capacity that recovery would be a distant and uncertain question. The potential destructiveness of contemporary deterrent forces poses by far the greatest immediate physical threat to human life as we know it. As a result the security of all people and all countries fundamentally depends on the justifying doctrine – that is, on the assumption that continuously wielding a massive threat reliably assures it will never be carried out.

Because of its central importance and potential consequence, the deterrence doctrine has become both an axiom of security policy and a matter of intense personal belief. In both countries primarily engaged in the operational practice of deterrence – The Russian Federation and the United States -- the doctrine has evolved beyond the status of a justifying assumption and is generally treated as an elemental truth not open to meaningful doubt. But that is an attitude not an assured reality, and there are strong reasons not only to question the core validity of the basic deterrent assumption but also to fear that prevailing operational practice involves an unacceptable and unnecessary risk of catastrophe. That in turn implies that provisional moral acceptance of the doctrine needs to be reconsidered.

Practical Issues

Those who defend the prevailing practice of deterrence generally argue that the asserted infallibility of the doctrine is not an assumption but rather the assured result of a carefully designed arrangement. They acknowledge that deployed weapons vulnerable to decisive preemptive attack would provoke such an attack rather than deterring it, and they claim to have achieved the reliable capability to retaliate under all conceivable circumstances, thereby assuring a decisive deterrent effect. That assurance depends on rapid response to evidence of impending attack, however, in particular on the dissemination of authorization to retaliate before the command system that issues legitimate instruction can be disrupted. The forces are said to be configured so that deployed weapons cannot be used unless legitimate authorization is provided, but that means that in principle they could be disabled by being decapitated.

Under normal circumstances there is a presumption that attack is not imminent and that authorization to operate is not disseminated to the deployed forces. Under those conditions nuclear weapons could not actually be used, and since their full maturation decades ago, neither of the two principal forces has experienced any other circumstance. They have not encountered a situation in which the internal command priorities began to shift from withholding authorization to assuring it. But despite categorical public statements to the contrary, neither force is confident of enabling the use of weapons and assuring implementation of a coherent attack plan unless that is accomplished before experiencing the full weight of attack. Like zoo animals that have never hunted in the wild, nuclear forces have never used their weapons and in recent decades have not experienced the conditions that would make their use an immediate question. There is distant evidence, however, deriving largely from the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, strongly suggesting that the central management of active nuclear forces under conditions of apparently imminent threat cannot be reliably assured. It is prudent to assume and mandatory to acknowledge that the active deployment of those forces entails some irreducible risk of inadvertent triggering under conditions of tension, and it is not evident how acute the tension would have to be to create an unmanageable danger.

Responsible officials from all of the governments that deploy nuclear weapons regularly declare the risk to be negligible – too remote to be of practical significance. But categorical assurances of that sort are not reliable, however subjectively sincere the officials who make them may be. Since the inherent danger lies outside the bounds of experience, there is no objective means of measuring the underlying risk, and the control procedures on which the claim is based are protected by classification rules from anything that would count as independent scrutiny. In recent years we have seen two major instances of highly consequential regulatory failure – the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Japanese nuclear reactor accidents in 2010. In both instances it became glaringly evident in retrospect that responsible officials and institutions had tolerated readily conceived and feasibly prevented risk in order to justify their established modes of operation. The financial crisis and the reactor failures were calamities that could and should have been prevented with reasonable prudence. The breakdown of deterrence would be a global

catastrophe of much greater proportions. Mercifully, such a catastrophe has yet to occur but that does not mean it has been reliably prevented. Categorical assurances on that point give more reason for alarm than for comfort.

Implementation of the American and Russian attack plans is the largest catastrophe that can currently be coherently imagined, but there are at least two lesser variations derived from it: a nuclear engagement involving one or more of the smaller national nuclear forces; and terrorist use of a nuclear weapon. With regard to the first of these risks, it is important to notice that India and Pakistan are headed for a dangerous operational coupling in emulation of the deterrence logic pioneered by the two global forces. Iran and Israel are also drifting toward the same situation as are North Korea and its neighbors. With regard to the second risk, the operational dispersion of the all national deterrent forces and the associated support services creates some opportunity for terrorist organizations to seize a fabricated nuclear weapon or yet more likely the nuclear explosive materials from which weapons are made. We cannot immediately know whether there are people heinous enough and capable enough to deliberately indulge in the massive destruction that a single nuclear explosion could cause, but it is prudent to consider the possibility and to assume that the deterrent effect would not work with such people.

That set of risks is an historical legacy whose indefinite extension would be unreasonably dangerous even if the simple passage of time and opportunity for trouble were the exclusive concerns. But in addition, the risks embedded in traditional deterrent practices will predictably be intensified by imperatives derived from the process of global warming. At the moment it has been established beyond any reasonable question, that aggregate human activity will generate a global thermal impulse that will raise average surface temperature by 2° Celsius or more unless the effect is counteracted by some process not yet identified. It is also established that the current average surface temperature of the earth is already the warmest it has been for 115,000 years and that the projected increase if not counteracted will be the most rapid temperature rise in all of geological history as currently understood. The consequences of these observations are massively uncertain, but they include catastrophic possibilities; most notably perhaps, a surging release of frozen gas hydrates that would accelerate the magnitude and rate of the warming effect. That situation presents a monumental problem of prudence. At current rates of investment in scientific exploration, it has to be considered doubtful whether an effect of global warming that would be catastrophic to the human species could be identified with sufficient clarity and confidence sufficiently far in advance to prevent it. The inertial momentum of the earth's climate system requires decades of anticipation but there is essentially no institutionalized decision process currently operating on that time scale. The central question is where the burden of proof should lie. As a practical matter it is imposed at the moment on those projecting danger and arguing for decisive mitigation of the global warming effect. Were the burden to be shifted, those arguing that the danger is tolerable could not defend their case and mitigation would become an urgent priority.

The mitigation question creates a strong link to the legacy risks of nuclear weapons deployment. If the anthropogenic thermal impulse is to be held to the 2° Celsius increase in average surface temperature to which we are already committed, there will have to be a major transformation of energy generating technology by mid century. Sources that do not emit greenhouse gases will have to provide 80% of the total energy output by that time as compared to 20% at the moment, and total output will have to have doubled or tripled to accommodate the projected increase in the total human population at minimally tolerable standards of social equity. Transformation on that schedule and scale cannot be achieved without far more extensive expansion of nuclear power generation than could realistically be accomplished on the basis of current nuclear reactor designs, current fuel cycle management practices and current security relationships, but there are innovations in all three areas that would make it feasible. Of necessity those innovations would substantially reduce the legacy risks associated with nuclear weapons deployments.

It is not difficult to visualize a technically feasible outcome that would be far superior to the current practice of deterrence both in strategic and in moral terms. All nuclear weapons and all nuclear explosive isotopes that are not immediately being utilized for power generation would be removed to secure storage areas and would be continuously monitored. That would enable a far more accurate count than is currently possible and would establish a much higher standard of managerial control. Provisions would be made for reactivation of nuclear weapons if circumstances created an apparent need for an active deterrent threat, but the process of reactivation would be reliably transparent and designed to preclude effective preemptive attack. Nuclear power generation would be based on passively safe reactor designs with sealed fuel cores manufactured in highly secure locations managed by a representative international consortium that would provide all fuel cycle services and would control all of the radioactive products. Such an outcome would require development of reactor designs that have been defined but not yet created and similarly the development of accounting and monitoring arrangements that are feasible but not yet available. There is no reason to expect that fundamental technical barriers would be encountered in either case.

Prevailing political attitudes and institutionalized security policies do nonetheless pose formidable barriers to that outcome, and at the moment it lies beyond the scope of any official discussion. The presumption of antagonism on which the deterrence doctrine rests has so far survived both the proclaimed end of the Cold War and the widely acknowledged process of globalization. The catastrophic risk entailed in operational deterrent practices is yet more categorically denied than the financial risks of sub-prime mortgages or the vulnerability of the Fukushima reactors ever were. Nuclear reactor vendors are far more committed to defending and preserving reactor designs that are dependent on emergency cooling than they are to developing designs that are not. Concern about terrorist access to nuclear explosives frequently appears in political speeches and general policy documents, but there is as yet no attempt to develop the comprehensive global accounting arrangement that would be necessary to establish higher standards of control. Preservation of national prerogative easily prevails over common interest in

global managerial control. In general, initiative for constructive transformation is very unlikely to emerge from current governments or from the current political processes to which they respond.

The Morality of Technology Management

This paper has, so far, argued that nuclear practices inherited from the Cold War – in particular, deterrence – are inadequate at best, and dangerous at worst, for a post-Cold War, twenty-first century strategic context. And, if Cold War paradigms for deterrence no longer function as a strategic solution to the destructive powers of nuclear weapons, one natural temptation would be to ask how we can fix deterrence: as conventional wisdom has it, since nuclear weapons can never be uninvented, we will need nuclear deterrence to prevent their use.

The conventional wisdom is half right. It realizes that humans must now live with the consequences of knowing how to build and deploy nuclear weapons. It was not a necessity of human history that our species learn how to release, with devastating effect, the energy that binds atomic material together. Having done so, however, we cannot now collectively unlearn it. The “Bomb in the mind,” as Jonathan Schell calls it, will always be with us. This knowledge has become a necessity of history. But the conventional wisdom on deterrence possesses a fatal flaw in its logic. It conflates the necessity of the knowledge of the Bomb with the necessity of the primary tactic – deterrence – used to manage its destructive potential during its first historical era, the Cold War. It treats deterrence as inherent to the Bomb as an oak tree is inherent to an acorn.

Without detailing all the conceivable alternatives, it is still clear that this connection between the Bomb as a historical-empirical reality and deterrence as a strategy to manage it is not at all self-evident. There are many ways for a country to avoid being attacked with nuclear weapons. Threatening the use of nuclear weapons is one of them. In some circumstances, deterrence may well seem indispensable. But – and this is important – nuclear security and deterrence are not the same thing. The latter is one conceivable means to the former. And this wedge in the conventional wisdom opens the space for the essential contribution of a moral perspective to nuclear security.

The morality of nuclear security is, fundamentally, the morality of technological risk management. For better or for worse, we now have the capacity to build devices that, en masse, threaten the existence of all life on the planet. Our species will always now have this capacity. And we therefore also have, in perpetuity, the question of how we will manage this knowledge.

It is worth noting here that the morality of technology management is something we are highly accustomed to. Every complex technology or body of technological knowledge is subject to management, official or otherwise. Technology gives us new capacities; we then have to

conform these new capacities to what we believe are morally acceptable ends (and, let's also admit, our altered capacities also change what we believe to be morally acceptable). To take another example: we have a vast amount of knowledge about human physiology, and physicians entrusted with that knowledge pledge to “do no harm” with that technology. This is what we do, as humans: we make a technological discovery, and then we circumscribe it with our moral norms. When we consider nuclear weapons from this perspective, there is no *categorical* difference between a world with a verifiable disarmament regime, our current context of 23,000 weapons spread between nine countries, and the Cold War apex of 70,000 weapons worldwide. In each of these scenarios, nuclear weapons technology is being managed in a certain way to alleviate risk; in the latter two, deterrence is a component of that risk management.

Technology management is not the usual mode of conceiving nuclear morality. A far more common approach is to conceive of one or more of the management *tactics* – disarmament, non-proliferation, arms control, counterproliferation, deterrence, etc. – as inherently moral. What is often overlooked in such arguments is that morality does not inhere to any particular tactic, but is actually conditional on the tactic's efficacy in attaining another, morally normative goal. But because this goal is often assumed and rarely articulated, nuclear moral judgments often have the character of commenting on the quality of someone's driving, without ever evaluating whether they are on a road that leads to their desired destination. Instead, by conceiving our task as technology management, we rise above partisan moralizing and focus on this goal as the matter of central concern.

The moral task regarding nuclear weapons is thus twofold, as with all technologies. The first is to determine their normative orientation by asking what are the legitimate manifestations of the technology: What is it for? What is it not for? The second task is to evaluate actual practices and policies against that normative benchmark: i.e., how well do our actions conform to our moral purposes?

Nuclear Non-Use as Moral Norm

In considering the first question, we cannot in this space review and morally evaluate each of the historical or conceivable orientations for nuclear weapons technology, so—acknowledging the leap being made here—let us skip to what is perhaps the most self-evident and self-authenticating moral norm that orients the governance of nuclear weapons technology: namely, nuclear non-use. That is, nuclear weapons should never be used, under any circumstances, because even a single violation of this norm opens the door to uncontrollable use of nuclear weapons, with potentially limitless catastrophic effect. If we accept this norm, then governance of nuclear weapons technology should be oriented toward perpetuating its non-use.

The norm of nuclear non-use has both descriptive and legal force. Regarding the former, it is a norm that is empirically true: no nuclear power has detonated a nuclear weapon on an

adversary's population or military since the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The intervening sixty-seven years have created a de facto taboo against nuclear use that grows stronger both with the simple passage of time and the successful resolution of various crises without recourse to nuclear weapons. And this taboo has legal validation, as well, considering that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – which restricts the spread of nuclear weapons, and is the most adhered-to multilateral agreement besides the UN Charter – opens by “[considering] the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war.”

The philosophical assumption that undergirds this norm is the conviction that there is no political outcome whose benefits would outweigh the cost of its being attained by the use of nuclear force. Put positively, the continued non-use of nuclear weapons is more essential than any political outcome that their use might bring about. They are a category of device that is simply too deadly and too devastating to be employed in war, which is, after all, a temporary exercise of force designed to yield a politically constituted outcome. And this theoretical framework bears out in the historical fact of the Cold War: the only war in which nuclear weapons can be used is in a war that is never actually waged. As a result, nuclear non-use is the moral end unto itself.

This is, of course, an arguable assumption. One dissenting point of view might be summed up in the Cold War slogan, “better dead than Red”—i.e., that there are political outcomes (in the case of the Cold War, preventing the global spread and eventual triumph of Communism) that are so important as to morally justify nuclear war toward their achievement, even at the cost of millions or billions of lives. But, while such sentiment might have had an emotional appeal for some (and, for others, will seem patently insane), it is hard to balance “better dead than Red” as a moral equation. Nuclear risk management is, by nature, a game or gamble. It traffics in probability, not certainty. And this gamble is potentially ready to wager all of human existence, current and future, for the sake of the existential security of a limited and imperfect political structure. It disparages neither the United States nor the Western free market capitalism that it champions to say that they are not more morally weighty and worthy than the human species and every possible future that we might realize. “Better dead than Red” thus puts down infinite stakes for the sake of a profoundly finite payout, and this is both logically and morally incoherent.

Moreover, this moral evaluation is not the imposition of some interloper coming in and slapping Western democracy with an alien ethical standard. Rather, it is an evaluation consistent with the very values of those who would be “better dead.” After all, if the West stood for the freedom of self-determination during the Cold War, it could hardly claim with any integrity that all the people whose lives it wagered—namely, everyone on the planet, and everyone who might ever exist—had freely granted the U.S. government the permission to conduct such a high-stakes game on their behalf.¹

¹ A side note: if there was an analogous Communist saying—“better dead than Blue,” or perhaps something that rhymes pithily in Russian—we don't know about it. The logic of disproportionate wagers holds in the reverse, of

Some contemporary hawks might object to “better dead” as the only alternative to nuclear non-use. Leaving aside questions of history, they might say, it could still be the case today that a limited use of nuclear weapons, in rigorously circumscribed circumstances – an attack against hardened nuclear command bunkers, for example, in a breakout state like North Korea or Iran – would be morally merited. This would be a use of nuclear weapons that did not wager the existence of the species for a limited political outcome. In the terms of the Just War tradition, it would be proportional and discriminate. Would not this counter-example disprove the nuclear non-use norm?

But this is a defective counter-argument, for a variety of reasons. The first and primary reason is that this argument relies on extraordinary exceptions to the norm of nuclear non-use, and in so doing, affirms the norm. No advocate for the possibility of using nuclear weapons in exceptional circumstances thinks that nuclear weapons should be regularly employed as instruments of war. That is, their norm is non-use, but they believe that certain exceptions exist. The fundamental problem in this reasoning is that it treats exceptions as ahistorical events, and thus fails adequately to consider the consequences of breaking the nuclear taboo. The use of nuclear weapons in these exceptional circumstances would create an example of nuclear weapons being used by legitimate powers toward (ostensibly) legitimate purposes. So the actual effect of making an exception to the absolute norm of non-use would be to create a new norm – erecting a conditional norm with a demonstrated exception, where once stood a categorical, history-defining taboo. But every actor is inclined to see its own circumstances as exceptional. And so the effect of one actor breaking the taboo is to open the possibility for future nuclear use by other actors, including adversaries – regardless of whether the original actor thinks that subsequent actors’ circumstances are exceptional enough. A door left ajar is some degree of open, but entirely not shut, and cracking the seal on the nuclear taboo would open a pathway for nuclear usage beyond any control of the original violator. And even if the original violation were carried out under the most stringent moral conditions – preventing deaths of noncombatants, limiting destruction and fallout, ensuring that more good came from the action than its intrinsic harm – it defies credulity to imagine that all subsequent nuclear actions would be as morally scrupulous. Thus the violation of the taboo can be seen as directly leading to uses of nuclear weapons that could not be morally circumscribed.

Evaluating the Current Context

The above is not an exhaustive rebuttal of every possible counter-argument to the norm of nuclear non-use. Inasmuch as it possesses both legal and de facto legitimacy, however, we can move to the second contribution of the moral perspective to nuclear weapons, and apply the

course, but this argument wouldn’t even need to be made vis a vis the USSR, because the varieties of Western democracy were morally superior to Communist totalitarianism. So, not only was it not better to be dead than Blue, it wasn’t even better to be Red than Blue.

norm of non-use as a benchmark for evaluating the current context for nuclear weapons technology management. To paraphrase George Shultz, we must hold the “ought” of our norm against the “is” of our present and work to bridge the gap.

This task mitigates against overreach in two directions. First, by holding firmly to our moral norm as an orienting benchmark, we create a barrier against the excesses of tactical temptation in resolving a particular and complex historical moment. That is, we remember that there is more to life than the situation we find ourselves in, and foreclose on a sort of existential pragmatism.

Second, we remember that nuclear security never exists in sterile, laboratory conditions; it lives only in the actual, messy, constantly evolving wilds of contemporary geopolitics. Put side by side in a conceptual vacuum, a world without nuclear weapons may have a natural moral appeal over the inherent gamble of deterrence. But if attaining a world without nuclear weapons entailed such likely instability that it actually made the use of nuclear weapons more likely in the process of getting to zero, it might be morally less plausible than an unpleasant but relatively stable balance of deterrence. As such, the moral evaluation of nuclear security is inextricably tied up in the prudential evaluation of how well it performs what it sets out to do.

For this reason, we should also acknowledge that the norm of non-use is necessary but insufficient to attain its own perpetuation. That is, though non-use is critical as an absolute operating principle, it does not, in itself, resolve all derivative policy questions. Additional ethical reflection is certainly necessary concerning the more focused and specific questions relating to various strategic postures, implicated policies, operational guidelines, etc.

With this in mind, we can examine deterrence as a contemporary practice of nuclear technology management, as well as the corollary issue of presumed intrinsic hostility.

Deterrence

The question of context allows some understanding of why a practice like deterrence – given the critique above as an infinite wager for a finite payout – might have the sanction of a body like the US Conference of Catholic Bishops during the Cold War, but not today. The bishops held to the norm of non-use when they wrote their pastoral letter in 1983, and they hold to it today. Why, then, has their position on deterrence changed? After all, if it is the case that it is so obviously immoral to make this kind of disproportionate wager, then isn't it the case that deterrence itself is inherently morally compromised?

But the morality of nuclear deterrence must be considered as relative, at least to some degree, to the alternatives available in its particular historical moment, rather than to every alternative available to the human imagination. During the Cold War, strategists saw deterrence as a barrier both to nuclear aggression and to the spread of totalitarian Communism (whether this perception

was accurate is another question, unrelated to our purposes here). The perceived choices were not, therefore, the uneasy security afforded by deterrence versus a world in which nuclear weapons did not exist and nations were at peace. In applying our norm of non-use, we can see that the context of the time was one of extraordinary tension, between two global ideologies championed by two global powers. It makes sense, therefore, that the management of nuclear technology toward the end of non-use would echo the tension of the system in which it was obtained: deterrence, as an architecture, is held up by the dynamic balance between opposing parties.

This very insight, however, also compels us to seek an alternative to deterrence that better aligns with our current context, in pursuit of the same norm of non-use. The twenty-first century, globalizing, post-Cold War, post-9/11 era exists under a much more complex set of tensions than those that prevailed in the latter part of the last century. The sumo ring of the Cold War, with its two equally matched titans straining for advantage, has been replaced by a far more diverse field. The relationships are multilateral and hugely varied and the actors are fundamentally imbalanced. The smallest and weakest – non-state actors, including a handful of individuals – are now able to strike against the largest hyperpower, the United States. In this context, for all the reasons argued above and elsewhere (e.g. Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, and Nunn., “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 Jan 2007), deterrence is fundamentally unsuited to perpetuate nuclear non-use. Like France’s infamous Maginot Line, it prioritizes bygone threats – and, worse, by directing attention and energy toward them, takes away from our capacity to address more current dangers. In sum, deterrence cannot receive moral sanction in the present, not because it is absolutely intrinsically immoral (though it is certainly inherently morally problematic), but because it is not an adequate strategy of management for maintaining nuclear non-use in the presently foreseeable context. One wonders to what degree different defenders of deterrence, then, are operating in genuine good faith versus seeking to preserve attendant benefits of being a nuclear power.

Intrinsic hostility

In practice, advocates of the deterrence doctrine often make the presumption of intrinsic hostility: a belief that a designated enemy is inclined to violent attack for reasons of aggrandizement derived from the existence of the victim rather than its behavior. Such an opponent does not honor any legitimate interest beyond its own and can only be prevented from assault by the credible prospect of effective defense or retaliation so extensive that it would negate any advantage to be gained. On a conceptual level, deterrence does not require this presumption: one could argue that an actor might take actions that would be opposed for entirely rational reasons by an adversary, and a deterrent capability would be required to counter this opposition. But, both in operational practice as well as political discourse, rhetoric of intrinsic hostility prevails, and is currently imposed by the United States on Russia, China, North Korea

and Iran with varying degrees of explicitness. The evidence typically demanded is best described as subjective impression. Those who adhere to the presumption can get away with simple assertion. Those inclined to question it face a heavy, emotionally charged burden of proof they cannot realistically meet, and very few make more than a nominal effort.

The relevant moral question is whether the United States or any other society is justified in imposing the presumption of intrinsic hostility on a contemporary opponent, and that question has major practical significance. The actions taken to deter an opponent so designated create a major threat to that opponent, not only justifying but virtually mandating preparation of a countervailing threat. If the presumption of intrinsic hostility is not valid, then the practice of deterrence actually helps to create the threat it purports to defend against. Therefore, the presumption of intrinsic hostility is not oriented toward our norm of nuclear non-use.

Additionally, this presumption raises serious problems at the level of theological ethics. The Christian ethical command to love enemies is absolute. The Just War doctrine represents, in part, an attempt to take this love seriously while also recognizing the call to justice, order, and neighbor love as well. And, while it may be unwarranted to argue that Christian ethics hold equally for the Christian individual and the state (whether Christian or not), it is certainly reasonable to say that a minimum requirement of enemy love – by which we do not mean romantic sentiment or even affection, but rather a genuine commitment to the other's well-being, despite their adversarial nature – is seeking to comprehend or understand them. This is precisely what the presumption of intrinsic hostility fails to do, and for this reason Christians in both private and public life should resist the temptation of such presumption.

It is worth noting that Christian tradition may offer unique resources for enacting a rejection of presumed hostility. In secular discourse, informed by paradigms derived from sociology, the attempt to understand a phenomenon is often seen as tantamount to acceptance or justification of it. A comprehension of the circumstances that give rise to wrongdoing – such as the background of abuse shared by many domestic abusers – frequently serves morally to justify it, or at least mitigate it. But this tight linkage between comprehension and absolution is deterministic, and a fundamentally atheistic conception. The Christian doctrine of depravity here provides a welcome alternative: at the core of this Christian belief is the conviction that 1) all of humankind and creation itself labors under the curse of sin, 2) we know it, and 3) knowing why we do wrong does nothing to absolve us of the wrong we do. This alternative paradigm to conventional secular wisdom opens up the freedom to understand the adversary without any expectation that doing so will mitigate appropriate moral judgment – though a genuine attempt would certainly serve the purpose of humility. If the entrenched presumption is to be subjected to meaningful test, a broadly based process of constructive engagement with the suspect societies would have to be sustained over some extended period of time.

Concluding Reflections on Vocation

If the analysis above stands up to critique, then clearly a profound reassessment of nuclear policy is in order. As a concluding question, we might then ask to whom the analysis is directed, and who is responsible for doing the reassessing? Those who oversee the various aspects of the nuclear security apparatus – from elected officials to policymakers to military leaders – are certainly one, primary audience, as they bear direct responsibility for the system that we believe requires reconsideration. But the invocation of a moral dimension to nuclear weapons policy has a rather intrinsic populist effect: it is to say that this is a matter of concern not simply to those who exercise direct responsibility, but to the broader public interest in the nation's moral conduct.

We would suggest that some careful discernment is in order regarding how this analysis should affect public interest. American civil society's instincts for public change often seem to be grounded in the experience of the 1960s, with the assumption that every public ill should be met with an organizing campaign to advocate for change. But it seems that a more interesting alternative might be suggested by the Christian theme of vocation, or calling. That is, various schools of Christian thought have explored the spiritual sense of quotidian life: understanding one's marriage, parenting, work, etc. as specific callings of God, to be exercised with a spiritual sensibility. What would it look like to take seriously an imperative as critical as nuclear security within a robust sense of vocation? Most people do not lead daily lives that give them any influence over nuclear decision-making. But an understanding of vocation might offer people an outlet for implementing the norms that should govern nuclear weapons – and the commitment to values like peace, mutual understanding, the common good, etc. The response to this message, then, is to integrate the particular value set of the non-nuclear norm *as appropriate* into specific vocations. This response would of course differ greatly from someone exercising a vocation in the security establishment, as opposed to a homemaker or business leader. But in each vocation, to greater and lesser levels of explicitness, the values upholding the norm of nuclear non-use might still be manifested. And this still permits a shared vocation of active citizenship, across other callings, through which we might support policies and officials who comply to greater degrees with the norms we hold dear.

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