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Strategy for an Atomic Monopoly

Atom bombs and the American way of war

Americans were accustomed to viewing international politics, which up to 1940 was to all intents and purposes European politics, with a certain detachment. The European propensity to war was symptomatic of its dominance by reactionary and decadent élites and the persistence of imperialist instincts. Furthermore, there was little reason to view war as a grim struggle for survival, let alone a time for defiant resistance. The United States’ industrial and economic resources were so vast that there were few doubts that, once she put her mind to the task, any enemy would be eventually overwhelmed. The United States was the weary policeman, slow to be roused and loath to get involved in the internecine quarrels of European states. Once aware of danger and into action, she was unbeatable.

Any threat to American security was to be found in the prospect of the hegemony of a strong and malevolent state in Europe or the Pacific. As there was little danger of a direct invasion there had been little interest in the development of forces mainly suitable for territorial defence. A strong Navy combined with sheer distance kept any enemy at bay. At the outbreak of war, US forces would be small. Mobilization would proceed and men and equipment would then be sent overseas where their intervention would inevitably be decisive. The fighting was remote – ‘over there’.

This mobilization would involve time and effort, while the despatch of American ‘boys’ to fight abroad was considered the most evil of necessities. The Americans were happy to keep wars at a distance but felt that they should be prosecuted in an efficient manner. The enemy should be crushed expeditiously, exploiting America’s technological strength
rather than its precious manpower. The requirements for effective punish­ishment of an aggressor also pointed to an unambiguous and certain sanction capable of disabling any offender, inflicted with ease and at minimal cost to the forces of law and order.

For both these purposes airpower, combined with the added strength of atomic weapons, seemed eminently suitable. Airpower put the polit­ical and economic centres of the enemy at risk. Rather than grapple with the tentacles, the octopus could now be hit right in the eye. Here was a means of defeating and punishing an aggressor not requiring the victim to be overcome laboriously before sanctions were applied. Other forms of military power took too long to have an effect and were too costly and labour-intensive. War should be similar to the spanking of a naughty child; not a wrestling match. America could both isolate itself from the effects of war and decide the issue.

Walter Lipmann noted, unsympathetically, how to many Americans the arrival of atom bombs and rockets appeared as:

the perfect fulfillment of all wishful thinking on military matters: here is war that requires no national effort, no draft, no training, no discipline, but only money and engineering know-how of which we have plenty. Here is the panacea which enables us to be the greatest military power on earth without investing time, energy, sweat, blood and tears, and – as compared with the cost of a great Army, Navy, and Air Force – not even much money.¹

The limits of the bomb

The preoccupation with the new means for inflicting death and destruc­tion over great distances and at great speeds had meant that few had con­cerned themselves with the purposes for which these means might be employed. Strategy became separated from diplomacy and from the analysis of interests, values, and motives. The changes were coming too fast for their meaning to be properly understood and digested. Specific conflicts, with added complications supplied by geography and the weight of past military traditions, were not revisited with the new technology. There were some nightmarish speculations on the subject of how Hitler might have acted if he had been in possession of a nuclear arsenal, but there seemed no new conflict so immediate or so dangerous that it could provide an occasion for nuclear attacks. Meanwhile, politicians and the public could content themselves with the thought that these most decisive and punishing of weapons represented an Anglo-American