

# The Nixon Administration, the “Horror Strategy,” and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1972

Prelude to the Schlesinger Doctrine

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On 27 January 1969 the newly inaugurated U.S. president, Richard Nixon, went to the Department of Defense to receive his first briefing on the U.S. nuclear war plan, known formally as the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP). At the briefing, he learned about plans for nuclear strikes that could have killed as many as ninety million Russians in a matter of hours. An equivalent number of Americans would have perished as a result of a Soviet attack. One National Security Council (NSC) staffer recalls that Nixon was “appalled” by the briefing because he realized how limited his military choices would be if a severe crisis erupted with the Soviet Union. The only available options were for massive nuclear strikes involving thousands of weapons. This realization had a sobering impact indeed. Only a few weeks later, at an NSC meeting when the discussion turned to nuclear war scenarios, Nixon declared: “No matter what [the Soviets] do, they lose their cities. . . . What a decision to make.”<sup>1</sup>

The danger of nuclear crises and confrontations with the Soviet Union had a significant impact on the president’s outlook. Regardless of whether Nixon held strong ethical convictions against the use of nuclear weapons, he undoubtedly understood, as his predecessors and successors did, that the danger of a large-scale nuclear war and the widespread international opposition to nuclear weapons made it almost impossible to use them at all.<sup>2</sup> Yet, even as he

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1. Helmut Sonnenfeldt, telephone conversation, 22 September 2004. For “what a decision,” see “NSC Meeting—February 19, 1969,” in National Archives (NA), Nixon Presidential Materials Project (NPMP), National Security Council Institutional Files (NSCIF), H-109, National Security Council (NSC) Minutes Originals 1969, p. 1.

2. On the notion of a widely held “taboo” against the use of nuclear weapons, see Thomas Schelling, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons,” in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazar, eds., *Turning*

supported détente to mitigate tensions with Moscow, Nixon remained a Cold Warrior who saw the Soviet Union as a dangerous rival and believed that threats of nuclear devastation were necessary to restrain Soviet conduct in Europe and elsewhere. Although the practice of nuclear deterrence made the Cold War a perilous standoff,<sup>3</sup> what concerned Nixon and his advisers was not only the horror of nuclear war but the extent to which a foreign policy that rested on the threat of nuclear holocaust was truly credible. Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, believed that the White House needed "politically plausible" threats that did not involve appalling outcomes. As he put it a few months later, how can "one rationally . . . make a decision to kill 80 million people"?<sup>4</sup>

Believing that the threat of massive nuclear attacks was implausible and irrational, Kissinger wanted the national security bureaucracy to create lesser threats of nuclear destruction—limited nuclear options—that would make nuclear threats and nuclear deterrence more credible to adversaries and allies alike. To give the president choices in a crisis while constraining the destructiveness of nuclear war, Kissinger looked for changes in top-level guidance on nuclear targeting, what insiders would later blandly call "nuclear weapons employment policy." The most famous development in this respect was the promulgation of the "Schlesinger Doctrine" in 1974, when Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger publicly declared that the United States was developing a policy of flexible strategic options designed to give U.S. presidents the range of choices that Kissinger had sought.

For students of nuclear history, the Nixon administration's search for flexibility and limited nuclear options is well known, having been explored in significant studies by historians and social scientists including Fred Kaplan, Janne Nolan, David Rosenberg, Desmond Ball, Henry S. Rowen, and Terry Terriff.<sup>5</sup> These studies have contributed useful information and significant in-

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*Point: The Gulf War and U.S. Military Strategy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 105–115; Peter Gizewski, "From Winning Weapon to Destroyer of Worlds: The Nuclear Taboo in International Politics," *International Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1996), pp. 397–418; and Nina Tannenwald's major study, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

3. For a thoughtful appraisal of the problem of nuclear deterrence, see Raymond L. Garthoff, *Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1990), pp. 6–28.

4. Winston Lord to Kissinger, 6 June 1969, enclosing minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, "Review of U.S. Strategic Posture," 29 May 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCIF, H-111, SRG Minutes Originals 1969, p. 3.

5. Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Janne Nolan, *Guardians of the Arsenal: The Politics of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Henry S. Rowen, "Formulating Nuclear Doctrine," in U.S. Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy, *Report of the Commission, Appendices*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 219–234; David A. Rosenberg, "Nuclear War

sights: for example, Rowen on the gap between high-level policy and “operational behavior,” Kaplan on the impact of the RAND Corporation, Nolan on the Foster Panel’s new targeting concepts, and Rosenberg and Ball on the characteristics of the SIOP. Terriff’s study is the most comprehensive, providing significant insights into the bureaucratic politics of targeting reform and Kissinger’s push for limited nuclear options, especially his desire to make the threat of war more persuasive and thereby bolster the efficacy of diplomacy.

These earlier works, for all their insights, appeared before archival sources were available and crucial documents had been declassified. Moreover, several of the authors depended heavily on the recollections of former officials, some of whom insisted on anonymity. This meant that discussion of Nixon-era developments could not always be precise about key decisions and directives, the details of important proposals, and who said (or thought) what and when. With the availability of growing numbers of declassified documents, it is now possible to reconstruct with considerable precision the Nixon administration’s efforts to promote flexible response in strategic nuclear targeting. Although documents can never tell the “whole story” and can sometimes be misleading,<sup>6</sup> the new material adds depth to our understanding of U.S. nuclear war strategy and the Nixon administration’s secret process of planning and decision.

Declassified documents disclose for the first time the extraordinary characteristics of the SIOP and U.S. strategic planning as of the late 1960s and details on Nixon’s first SIOP briefing. The war plan comprised five attack options involving strikes by thousands of weapons targeting Soviet military forces, nuclear and non-nuclear, and urban-industrial centers, with huge numbers of casualties expected. Consistent with targeting strategy since the 1950s, the attack options were retaliatory or preemptive, depending on the warning time available to decision makers. In addition, a launch-on-warning option was available, although senior officials understood its great risks. As indicated earlier, Nixon found the SIOP options horrendous and authorized Kissinger to devise ways to give the president more useful military choices.

Archival material elucidates Kissinger’s early search, beginning in the administration’s first week, for more carefully tailored nuclear options designed

Planning,” in Michael Howard et al., eds., *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 160–190; Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson, eds., *Strategic Nuclear Targeting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of U.S. Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 60. For useful background studies on nuclear planning, see also Aaron L. Friedberg, “A History of U.S. Strategic ‘Doctrine’—1945 to 1980,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 37–71; and Scott Sagan, *Moving Targets: Nuclear Strategy and National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

6. For some of the problems posed by documentation concerning the policies of Nixon and Kissinger, see Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 208–209.

to make threats of nuclear use credible in the new era of U.S.-Soviet strategic parity. The documents show that Kissinger's initiatives met stiff bureaucratic resistance. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), worried that flexible options could degrade the war plans, deflected Kissinger's requests, and the Strategic Air Command (SAC) deliberately withheld from him information on the SIOF. A request through the National Security Council (NSC) system for a study on "discriminating options" did not produce a ringing endorsement of them. Although the Air Force's NU OPTS project affirmed the benefits of "selective operations," other components of the bureaucracy were skeptical. Civilian and military officials alike questioned whether it would be possible to control nuclear escalation and wondered whether limited options would weaken or strengthen deterrence. Some also argued that the U.S. command and control system could not support a strategy of limited nuclear options. Whether the Soviet Union would even accept the possibility of controlled escalation was an especially troubling problem because it cast doubt on the whole enterprise. Kissinger's requests to, and intermittent hectoring of, the defense bureaucracy for a new approach to the SIOF proved ineffective.

Recently declassified documents show that Kissinger tried to use his own staff to produce studies that would promote changes in nuclear planning, but this effort also failed. Kissinger knew that he wanted options for the president, but he never articulated exactly what he had in mind. A new approach to nuclear targeting would have required fairly specific guidance to the Pentagon that neither he nor his harried staff had the time to devise. Although Kissinger asked Nixon to support new requests for studies, the president may have seen the problem of nuclear options as less urgent and, during his first term, did not go far beyond statements designed to encourage reform of nuclear targeting.

Despite the JCS's dim view of Kissinger's thinking, external and internal pressures in late 1971 induced Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to take initiatives that were responsive to White House interests. He ordered a group of high-ranking civilian and military officials, the "Foster Panel," to conduct a top-secret review of nuclear targeting. Newly declassified documents elucidate the thinking of the panel that developed what Kissinger had been unable to do; namely, to set out a conceptual framework for further studies by the national security bureaucracy and a subsequent presidential directive. The panel's concepts of controlled escalation and various levels of nuclear strikes, from limited to major attack options, would meet Kissinger's demands for presidential nuclear options in an East-West crisis.

Regardless of whether the Soviet Union accepted notions of controlled escalation, the hope that limited nuclear options could strengthen the credibility of nuclear threats and prevent a larger conflagration gave strong mo-

mentum to the drive for a new nuclear policy. Although the Nixon administration sought to limit destruction through small strategic attacks, new research indicates that the targeting methodology used by the U.S. military establishment consistently underestimated the destructiveness of nuclear war.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even a “limited” attack could have devastating consequences. The Nixon administration’s nuclear planning efforts rested on shaky foundations, but the search for limited nuclear options continued as long as top U.S. officials worried about the nuclear capabilities of a seemingly threatening and militarily powerful Soviet Union.

### **The SIOP Briefing and Kissinger’s Initial Search for Alternatives**

When Nixon and Kissinger took office, their first priority was to end the Vietnam War, an objective that would require much time and effort and that had to be balanced with related goals, especially the scaling back of overseas commitments in order to avoid future “Vietnams” and the effort to improve ties with powerful adversaries such as the Soviet Union and China in order to reduce the danger of confrontation and nuclear crisis. Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger intended to preserve a central role for the United States in world affairs and to safeguard strategic, political, and economic interests in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Furthermore, both Nixon and Kissinger worried that the Vietnam War had raised questions about U.S. credibility, and they were therefore anxious to make adversaries understand that challenges to U.S. interests would be rebuffed. So determined were they to bolster the credibility of American power that they even developed a “madman” strategy—the threat of the irrational application of disproportionate force—to make adversaries more compliant. Nixon’s inaugural address suggested the importance of foreign policy credibility in his thinking, especially his conviction that the United States should have the image of a powerful force in world affairs. After inviting cooperation with all countries, he observed: “To all those who would be tempted by weakness, let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be.”<sup>8</sup>

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7. See Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

8. For credibility and the madman theory in Nixon/Kissinger Vietnam policy, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). See also Robert J. McMahon, “Credibility and World Power,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 455–472. For “tempted by weakness,” see “Inaugural Address,” 20 January 1969, in U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), *Public Papers of the President of*

Nixon's concern about "weakness" undoubtedly reflected the great difficulties the United States had had in checking Communist and nationalist forces in Vietnam, despite the massive use of military power. In the event that more serious crises emerged, Nixon believed that the United States needed credible threats. During conversations with British Prime Minister Harold Wilson in February 1969, Nixon questioned whether U.S. nuclear deterrence was credible enough to "blunt or stop a Soviet attack in Europe." Satisfied that the Soviet Union would not launch an attack on Western Europe, Nixon saw no chance of a "major war in Europe in our time" because "rational men," who recognized the military power of the other side, were in charge in both Moscow and Washington. But Nixon believed that political considerations also shaped nuclear deployments. Like his predecessors, Nixon worried that Moscow might use military threats or force to expand its political and diplomatic influence. "It was necessary to remain strong so that the freedom, integrity and independence of the western world cannot be whittled away." Never questioning traditional thinking about Soviet expansionism, Nixon assumed that threats of overwhelming military force were necessary for the political security of the Western system in Europe and elsewhere. The problem was whether such threats were believable.<sup>9</sup>

Kissinger also worried about credibility. Like Nixon, he did not believe that a Soviet surprise attack against the West was a likely contingency; instead, he saw greater danger in Soviet "interventions" in Third World hot spots and what he saw as Moscow's interest in fanning "high levels of tension" abroad in order to maintain a repressive system at home. Kissinger had, of course, made his name as an academic nuclear weapons expert and had been thinking about the problem of nuclear deterrence, including the "graduated use of force," since the mid-1950s. Having supported the "flexible response" strategy of building up conventional forces to strengthen nuclear deterrence, Kissinger was critical of threats of massive nuclear attacks, which he believed had little credibility with allies or adversaries.<sup>10</sup>

A year before Kissinger joined the Nixon administration, he explored the problem of credible threats under conditions of superpower parity. In his

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*the United States, Richard Nixon, Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, 1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 3.

9. "Memorandum of Conversation," 25 February 1969, in NA, Record Group (RG) 59, Records of the Department of State, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, 1949–72, Box 489, Vol. 1.

10. Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), pp. 67, 87, 90. For Kissinger's study of nuclear weapons during the 1950s, conducted under the initial sponsorship of the Council on Foreign Relations, see Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 82–90. See also Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 106–109, 117, 375–376; Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 53–60; and Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp. 68–70.

view, the president was responsible not only for avoiding a “nuclear holocaust” but also for finding ways to “discipline power so it bears a rational relationship to the objectives likely to be in dispute.” A nuclear catastrophe or the threat of one, Kissinger wrote, could have no “rational relationship” to the goals of national leaders. The unimaginable destructiveness of nuclear weapons, he argued, had “turned abstract, intangible, elusive” and become difficult to “translate into a plausible threat.” More and more, deterrence was dependent on “psychological criteria”; it could work only to the extent that it kept an “opponent from a given course by posing unacceptable risks.” Policymakers had to know how to manipulate their adversaries so that a nuclear threat would be taken “seriously,” even if it was not made earnestly. Kissinger remained deeply interested in the problem of how to use military forces to signal political intentions and create “politically meaningful threats.” In other words, U.S. leaders needed military threats that were plausible enough to make an adversary worry about Washington’s willingness to go over the brink during a crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Based on a shared interest in the tools of global influence and the management of threats, Nixon and Kissinger sought a better understanding of the U.S. nuclear posture and the emergency military measures that could be taken in a major crisis. During the first weeks of the administration, they looked at the scope and scale of U.S. nuclear forces, the control of nuclear weapons, alliance nuclear relations, and targeting plans. The first briefing for Nixon and Kissinger on the SIOP was an important moment in their nuclear education and provided the context for Kissinger’s attempts to “discipline power” and develop “politically meaningful” threats.<sup>12</sup>

On 27 January 1969, a week after his inauguration, Nixon, accompanied by Kissinger, went to the Pentagon to meet with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler. After lunch, they repaired to the National Military Command Center (NMCC), where Colonel Don C. LaMoine of the Joint Staff’s Strategic Operations Division used slides to deliver a briefing on the SIOP. The Defense Department has released a heavily sanitized version of LaMoine’s text, and declassified information from other

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11. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, pp. 45, 59–61, 69. See also Henry Kissinger, ed., *Problems of National Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1965), pp. 3–6; and Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 65–70. For a provocative discussion of Kissinger’s thinking about credibility and nuclear weapons, see Bruce Mazlish, *Kissinger: the European Mind in American Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 171–186.

12. Memos from Al Haig to Henry Kissinger, “President’s Visit to Pentagon—January 31, 1969,” 1 February 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCF, Box 955, Chronology File—Haig, 1 February 1969–15 February 1969; and “Actions Resulting from National Security Council Meeting of February 14, 1969,” 14 February 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCF, Box 955, Chronology File—Haig, 1 February 1969–15 February 1969. For persistent structural rigidity of the SIOP during the 1960s and early 1970s, see Rosenberg, “Nuclear War Planning,” pp. 175–182.

sources makes it possible to reconstruct the substance of the briefing.<sup>13</sup> LaMoine described SIOP-4, which had gone into effect in mid-1966 and which the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS) had revised four times since. Approved by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, SIOP-4 was a direct descendent of SIOP-62 (for fiscal year 1962), which was the first U.S. plan for a comprehensive nuclear strike against the “Sino-Soviet bloc.” SIOP-63, which followed, had more attack options and set the mold for SIOP-64, later renamed SIOP-4. As Nixon and Kissinger learned from the briefing, the SIOP was a rigid instrument for launching strikes of horrifying proportions, what one insider waggishly characterized as “five options for massive retaliation.”<sup>14</sup>

LaMoine highlighted the National Strategic Targeting and Attack Policy (NSTAP), which was the basic JCS guidance for strategic war plans. It established three core objectives for nuclear targeting: 1) to destroy nuclear threats to the United States and its allies in order to limit damage to them; 2) to destroy a comprehensive set of non-nuclear military targets such as barracks and tactical air fields; and 3) to destroy war-supporting urban and industrial resources, which in quantitative terms meant inflicting moderate damage to 70 percent of war-supporting industry and killing 30 percent of the population. In sum, LaMoine explained, “the fundamental concept [was] to maximize US power [and] to attain and maintain a strategic superiority which will lead to an early termination of the war on terms favorable to the United States and our allies.” The conviction that nuclear strikes could produce “favorable terms” epitomized the long-standing conviction that air power was the key to successful prosecution of a war against the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Memorandum from Air Staff to the Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, “Joint Staff Briefing of the Single Integrated Operational Plan,” 27 January 1969, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Release, copy at National Security Archive (NSArchive); and Private Diary (1969), entry for 27 January 1969, in NA, RG 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Records of JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler, Box 201. Nixon also received briefings on the Moscow-Washington hot line as well as a mysterious subject, the “COL Blood project.” The late Col. Don C. LaMoine was a career Air Force officer who had two tours at the Pentagon and the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS) respectively. With a reputation as a “talented briefer,” LaMoine gave SIOP briefings to top officials, including Presidents Johnson and Nixon. Don C. LaMoine, telephone conversation, 7 January 2003.

14. For a highly informative overview of the SIOP as it stood in the early 1970s, see National Security Council, Defense Review Program Committee, “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” 3 January 1972, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive. Details on the NSTAP and SIOP-4 attack options are derived from this study. For “five options,” see Leonard Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, Institute for Defense Analyses, Study S-467, June 1975, p. 357 n. 13. For the relationship between SIOP-63 and SIOP-64 see “Review of SIOP-64,” 16 October 1963, in NA, RG 218, 3105 (22 June 1962) Sec. 2, released in heavily excised form.

15. For an important reflection on the centrality of airpower to victory, see Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

SIOP-4 stipulated three “functional tasks” for nuclear strikes, each of which mirrored the NSTAP’s goals. Task ALPHA provided for strategic strikes on the most urgent targets, including missile sites, bomber bases, ballistic missile submarine bases, nuclear weapons storage sites, air defense sites, and military command and control, including the so-called “Moscow-Peking Missile Package.” Task BRAVO, a “lesser priority task,” provided for strikes on depots, tactical airfields, and other non-nuclear military targets that were critical to overall conduct of military operations. Finally, task CHARLIE, a “two-pronged task,” provided for strikes on urban/industrial targets as well as nuclear and other military targets located in urban areas. In other words, if the president ordered an attack solely on ALPHA- and BRAVO-type targets, urban areas would not be attacked and collateral damage to urban populations would be minimized.<sup>16</sup>

Nixon next saw charts and maps showing the breakdown of SIOP targets by task and by country. The mechanism for the assignment of targets was the National Strategic Target List (NSTL) produced by the JSTPS using an inventory of target data provided by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The NSTL was prepared “without regard to the quantity of forces” available for use and was intended to specify targets by task as well as those specifically assigned to the war plan. LaMoine showed charts that identified, possibly in general terms, installations and Desired Ground Zeros (DGZs) or aiming points that would be “subject to attack.” Not necessarily coterminous with specific installations, DGZs could be points near critical facilities such as command centers, missile and bomber bases, and nuclear weapons storage sites that were “co-located” and therefore could be destroyed by high-yield weapons.

During a brief discussion of damage criteria, LaMoine may have mentioned the SIOP’s damage expectancy (DE) requirements, a critically important issue because the JSTPS measured the plan’s effectiveness in terms of how much destruction it could inflict. Damage expectancy was the product of two complex calculations: the probability that a weapon would arrive on target and the probability that the weapon would cause enough damage to destroy the target. DE calculations remain highly secret, but they ranged in the very high levels because the JSTPS wanted a high chance that a weapon would reach its goal and destroy its targets. For strategic and urban-industrial targets, DE was likely in the 90 percent range; for some hard silo targets, it was as high as 98 percent. No doubt, LaMoine understood that high DE required target planners to assign several bombs or missiles to a DGZ, although he

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16. For the “Moscow-Peking Missile Package,” see Lawrence Lynn, “The SIOP,” 8 November 1969, NSC, Box 384, SIOP.

would probably not have used the term “overkill” to characterize this redundancy as some have. Shaped by the World War II legacy of strategic bombing, DE numbers drew on calculations of blast damage, overlooking fire effects altogether. This omission led to a significant underestimation of the destructiveness of nuclear weapons throughout the Cold War.<sup>17</sup>

After discussing the bomber and missile forces available to execute the SIOP, LaMoine reviewed an extremely sensitive issue: the procedures for a presidential decision to execute the SIOP. Important parts of the discussion are still classified, but the general point was that during a military confrontation with the Soviet Union the president should make basic decisions based on the JCS’s recommendations. Nixon had before him a copy of the “Black Book,” the “SIOP Decision Handbook” carried by a military aid in the “football” brief case whenever the president left the White House.<sup>18</sup> The document outlined the five basic preemptive and retaliatory attack options that were available to a president. If warning systems showed an incoming Soviet attack (“tactical warning”), the president could order a retaliatory strike. If however, the intelligence system provided unmistakable “strategic warning” of a Soviet attack, the JCS could advise the president to launch first, preemptively. Whether a president would take the risk that warning information was in fact accurate was a difficult problem that has always made preemption controversial.<sup>19</sup>

It is not known whether the briefing included discussion of SAC’s development of a “launch on warning” posture. There is no doubt, however, that by the late 1960s SAC commanders were worried that atmospheric nuclear bursts caused by incoming Soviet missiles could black out electronic systems and thereby “pin down” the U.S. missile force. An answer to this problem was

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17. “History of Strategic Air Command January–June 1968,” Headquarters, U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC), History and Research Division, Vol. 1, February 1969, p. 96; “National Strategic Targeting and Attack Policy,” 19 August 1960, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) 2056/165, in NA, RG 218, 3205 (17 August 1959); “Target Coordination and Associated Problems,” 22 August 1960, in NA, RG 218, 3205 (17 August 1959); Philip Odeen to Henry Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Memo to the President Dated December 26, 1972 Proposing Changes in U.S. Strategic Policy,” 5 January 1973, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive. For fire effects, blast damage, and the World War II legacy, see Eden, *Whole World on Fire*. For “overkill,” see Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71.

18. For the contents of the “football,” see Stephen Schwartz et al., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons since 1940* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998), p. 222.

19. The concept of strategic warning as understood in the U.S. government at the time was far from precise, but the JCS had apparently developed strict standards for launching a preemptive attack: “incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent.” See Cynthia Grabo, *A Handbook of Warning Intelligence*, Defense Intelligence Agency, July 1972 (released by Central Intelligence Agency, August 2002). For the problem of strategic warning, see Ephraim Kahan, “Early Warning versus Concept: The Case of the Yom Kippur War 1973,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 98.

“a fire on warning doctrine,” which SAC recognized as “politically unacceptable,” not least because of the danger of false alarms. Nevertheless, SAC believed that with the introduction of new warning systems such as satellite-based sensors (the Defense Support System), new procedures to “streamline” decision-making in a crisis, and a “minimum reaction posture” for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), launch on warning could become feasible. The idea was to avoid the terrible risks of preemption, on the one hand, and of absorbing a nuclear strike before retaliating, on the other, by enabling national leaders to order an immediate strike if satellites detected the plumes of nuclear missiles launched from Soviet territory. Certainly within a few weeks of the briefing, Nixon showed awareness of the launch-on-warning concept but also of its perils: who could be “sure” that the warning was not mistaken? Nonetheless, with the administration’s assent, SAC developed a launch-on-warning posture by the early 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever the circumstances of war initiation, the SIOP provided five options for increasingly severe attacks. The first option was a preemptive attack on nuclear targets—task ALPHA only, a counterforce attack that excluded strikes on installations in urban areas. The second preemptive option was a comprehensive attack on military targets—tasks ALPHA and BRAVO simultaneously (but presumably excluding military installations located in urban areas). The third preemptive option was a massive, all-out attack on all targets—tasks ALPHA, BRAVO, and CHARLIE—apparently in the event that the Soviet Union was about to launch a massive attack. The last two options were retaliatory: one was on military targets, ALPHA and BRAVO only; the other was an all-out attack on all target categories—ALPHA, BRAVO, and CHARLIE combined.

LaMoine may have provided Nixon with the numbers of weapons for the various options. Although any numbers mentioned at the briefing are not available, relevant figures for late 1969 have been released. For task ALPHA’s preemptive option, planners aimed about 1,750 bombs and missile warheads at Soviet and Chinese nuclear-related installations. Given the high priority of destroying Soviet nuclear forces, the JSTPS assumed the necessity of a massive strike. To facilitate other missile attacks, an initial salvo of more than one hundred Minuteman ICBMs would have targeted Soviet anti-ballistic missile

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20. SAC, “History of Strategic Air Command January-June 1968,” Volume 1, p. 301, copy at NSArchive; and “NSC Meeting—February 19, 1969,” in NA, NPMP, NSCIE, H-109, NSC Minutes Originals 1969 (1 of 5). For detailed analysis of launch-on-warning, see Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993), pp. 168–195. See also Michael K. Bohn, *Nerve Center: Inside the White House Situation Room* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s Publishing, 2003), p. 49.

(ABM) radars and interceptor sites (some of which were close to Moscow).<sup>21</sup> A full preemptive blow involving ALPHA, BRAVO, and CHARLIE targets would have involved strikes by the committed force of 3,018 bombs and warheads against nuclear installations, non-nuclear military facilities, and urban-industrial centers. A retaliatory strike against these same targets would necessarily have been smaller because of damage inflicted on U.S. installations and the complications of force generation. For task BRAVO, some 454 warheads would have been available to strike non-nuclear military forces and facilities. Some 331 weapons were slated for task CHARLIE, the urban-industrial mission; which was intended to “destroy 70% of the Soviet targets” in that category. It is not known whether LaMoine provided casualty estimates associated with the attack options, but a contemporaneous NSC paper suggested that a massive nuclear strike would have killed 40 percent of the Soviet population, or roughly 90 million people in total (with a corresponding percentage of Americans killed by the Soviet strike).<sup>22</sup>

Consistent with the requirements of minimizing civilian casualties, attacks on ALPHA targets would supposedly be “restrained” unless the president ordered simultaneous execution of task CHARLIE. The assumption about “restrained” attacks to limit damage to urban centers was dubious given the omission of fire effects. Moreover, even the most precise attacks on Soviet ICBM bases could have produced enormous damage in nearby cities.<sup>23</sup>

Another SIOP option was withholding attacks on specific countries or targets. The president could take into account the Moscow-Beijing split as well as possible fissures between the USSR and Eastern Europe and order the omission of China or specific East European countries from the target list if they were not in the war. The “Black Book” also provided for the withholding of attacks in the “Moscow-Peking Missile Packages” in order to protect the adversary’s capital and thereby ensure communication for the purpose of war termination.<sup>24</sup>

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21. For “ABM suppression,” see SAC, “History of Strategic Air Command January–June 1968,” Vol. 1, p. 300, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

22. For numbers that provide useful clues to the size of the other options, see Lynn to Kissinger, “The SIOP,” 8 November 1969, NSC, Box 384, SIOP. For details on SIOP tasks and targets in late 1971, see National Security Council, Defense Review Program Committee, “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary.” For casualties, see National Security Council, “Strategic Policy Issues,” 1 February 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCF, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files (HAKO), Box 3, Strategic Policy Issues.

23. For a construction of the effects of nuclear war on Russian society, see Natural Resources Defense Council, “The U.S. Nuclear War Plan: A Time for Change,” June 2001, available online at <<http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/warplan/index.asp>>.

24. Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, pp. 346–347. Such withholds, by country or city, were not included in SIOP–62, the first such war

After reviewing some still-classified matters, LaMoine discussed ways to bolster the survivability of U.S. strategic forces. One was a JCS declaration of an alert hour (A-hour), most likely to allow the preparation of forces if war was anticipated. Another was SAC's "positive control" (or "fail-safe") system, which protected strategic bombers during a crisis by flying alert aircraft to specific locations near the Soviet periphery. The bombers would subsequently return to base unless their crew received a "go" code to launch a strike. A related SAC program was Selective Employment of Air and Ground Alert (SEAGA), which enabled command authorities to order airborne alerts of strategic bombers during a crisis. The use of SEAGA to increase the readiness of nuclear forces was demonstrated in October 1969 when Nixon and Kissinger secretly raised alert levels to compel the Soviet Union to become more helpful with the Vietnam War negotiations.<sup>25</sup>

LaMoine closed his presentation on a disquieting note. In a prolonged crisis, with a military confrontation looming, a president might be able to make measured decisions on the various attack options as well as on country withholds. But in the event of a "sudden emergency, with little or no warning," LaMoine cautioned, "all of these considerations must be entertained and discussed with the president . . . perhaps in no more than a few minutes." Although Nixon understood that the prospect of a Soviet "bolt from the blue" was remote at best, the problem of insufficient warning time, which had bedeviled defense officials for years, did not have a clear answer.<sup>26</sup>

The substance of the briefing was revealing about the JSTPS, which was responsible for producing the SIOP. As James R. Schlesinger later observed, the SIOP showed the JSTPS's "tendency" to put organizational effort into planning a "perfect attack" designed to destroy all targets. The planners geared the latest intelligence and weapons technology to high DE requirements and constantly updated the strike plan to meet the criteria spelled out

plan, which posited a massive attack on all "Sino-Soviet" bloc targets, leading to concern about the lack of options if China was not an adversary. See Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, pp. 269–270.

25. For SEAGA, see SAC, "History of Strategic Air Command January–June 1968," Vol. 1, February 1969, pp. 77–89, copy at NSArchive; SAC History Study No. 129, "The SAC Alert System, 1956–1970," 19 September 1973, copy at NSArchive; and SAC History FY 1969, pp. 116–122, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive. For "positive control," see Wainstein et al., *Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, pp. 164–165. Target assignment for SAC bombers assigned to SEAGA missions were CHARLIE urban-industrial targets and co-located strategic nuclear sites. For the Nixon administration's attempt to use SEAGA, including airborne alert, to put pressure on the Soviet Union in October 1969, see William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (January 2003), pp. 113–156. A paper covering similar ground appeared later. See Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 150–183.

26. See Wainstein et al., *Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, for evidence on how policymakers grappled with the problem of warning.

in the NSTAP. The conservative damage requirements were one of the essential features of the “organizational frame”—the way of defining and solving problems—that guided the JSTPS’s planning for nuclear war.<sup>27</sup>

The briefing that Nixon heard was, in effect, the strategic legacy of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Eight years earlier, after Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had heard a briefing on the first SIOF—what amounted to a plan for a single attack on ALPHA, BRAVO, and CHARLIE targets combined—he was horrified by the “fantastic” levels of fallout that would have been generated by the attack plans. Convinced that the president needed a better and wider range of choices during a crisis and influenced by the latest thinking about flexible response, McNamara ordered the Pentagon to prepare appropriate military guidance. A RAND Corporation analyst, Daniel Ellsberg, soon drafted guidance directing the JCS to prepare military plans “permitting [a] controlled, discriminating response” in order to strengthen deterrence and, if superpower conflict broke out, to allow the United States and its allies to “secure military, civil and political outcomes more advantageous than might otherwise be expected.” Later, McNamara called for a “no cities/counterforce” strategy designed to minimize civilian losses in a superpower conflict. As it turned out, the Chiefs merely broke down the SIOF into the large preemptive and retaliatory options on which Nixon was briefed; they were reluctant to go further because they believed that multiple options would degrade the war plan. Although McNamara was probably dissatisfied with the small range of choices, he may have concluded that “preplanning nuclear options was hopelessly difficult” because of the unpredictability of nuclear war.<sup>28</sup>

Like McNamara before them, Nixon and Kissinger did not welcome what they heard about the SIOF. Nixon, despite his reputation for tough-mindedness about the use of force and even of nuclear weapons, was plainly troubled by the SIOF, especially the huge number of projected fatalities. A few months after the briefing, he participated in an exercise on the Airborne Command Post, which involved rehearsing the SIOF options. According to H. R. Haldeman’s account, Nixon “asked a lot of questions re: our nuclear capability—and [the] kill results.” He “obviously worries about the lightly-tossed about millions of deaths.” Discussing Nixon’s thinking several years

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27. James R. Schlesinger, interview, 18 April 2003. For the role of “organizational frame” in shaping U.S. nuclear planning, see Eden, *Whole World on Fire*.

28. JCS Cable 995685 to Director JSTPS et al., 9 May 1961, in NA, RG 218, Joint Chiefs of Staff, CCS 3001 (5 May 1961). Daniel Ellsberg drafted the guidance. See Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), pp. 56–58; and Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, pp. 278–279. For JCS concerns about degrading the SIOF in 1961, see Scott Sagan, “SIOF-62: The Nuclear War Plan Briefing to President Kennedy,” *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Summer 1987), p. 51; and Rowen, “Formulating Strategic Doctrine,” pp. 231–232.

later, Kissinger, referring to the SIOP, said that “if that’s all there is [Nixon] won’t do it.” In light of statements that Nixon made to the NSC a few weeks after the briefing, it is possible that Kissinger meant that Nixon might have refused to order execution of the SIOP options. Kissinger himself was also dissatisfied with the JSTPS’s efforts. Soon after the briefing he called former Secretary of Defense McNamara and asked “Is this the best they can do?” A few years later, Kissinger made a rare reference to ethical concerns by declaring that “to have the only option of killing 80 million people is the height of immorality.”<sup>29</sup>

Why Nixon and Kissinger found the war plans less than satisfactory, and perhaps why the president (as Kissinger put it) wouldn’t “do it,” became evident during an NSC meeting on military strategy in mid-February 1969. All the participants recognized that with the United States and the Soviet Union in a state of strategic nuclear parity and mutual deterrence—each had enough weapons to survive a first strike and destroy the other’s cities—they had reached what Nixon called a “balance of terror.” Apparently, however, Kissinger worried that the Soviet Union enjoyed an “assured destruction edge”—that, somehow, they could kill more Americans than the United States could kill Soviet citizens.<sup>30</sup> He was concerned that the advantage might embolden Soviet leaders to take a more aggressive stance in “local” conflicts, especially in Europe. The discussion of launch on warning and first strikes, however, made it plain that threats of massive nuclear attacks might not be useful for countering Soviet risk-taking, because the United States would suffer enormous destruction. In such circumstances, Nixon implied, a president would have to think carefully before automatically ordering nuclear strikes in response to Soviet moves: Soviet leaders, he declared, “used to know [how an] American president might react. But not now.” In other words, they might assume that a U.S. president would decline to launch a suicidal attack to defend allies. As Nixon put it, the “nuclear umbrella is no longer there.”<sup>31</sup>

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29. Helmut Sonnenfeldt, interview, 17 September 2004; H. R. Haldeman Journal, entry for 11 May 1969, in NA, NPMP, Special Files; Memcon, “SALT, Soviet-U.S. Relations, Angola, Cuba, Africa, PRC, TTB, PNE,” 1 April 1976, in NA, RG 59, Records of the Counselor 1955–77, Box 4; and Davis to Kissinger, “Minutes of the Verification Panel held August 9, 1973,” 15 August 1973, in NA, NPMP, NSCIE, H-108, Verification Panel Minutes, 2–15–72 to 6–4–74 (3 of 5). See also James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 63.

30. Kissinger may have been influenced by a recent JSTPS briefing that concluded “we lose over half of our population while Soviets lose about one-third.” “SIOP-September Song Briefing,” 8 February 1969, copy at NSArchive.

31. “Notes on NSC Meeting 14 February 1969,” in NA, NPMP, NSCIE, H-020, NSC Meeting, Biafra, Strategic Policy Issues, 14 February 1969 (1 of 2). A few days later, Nixon observed that the “nuclear umbrella in NATO [is] a lot of crap.” See “NSC Meeting—February 19, 1969,” in NA, NPMP, NSCIE, H-109, NSC Minutes Originals 1969 (1 of 5). Not all of Nixon’s advisers would

In an apparent effort to bolster the credibility of nuclear threats in conflicts with the Soviet Union and thereby offset a possible Soviet “assured destruction edge,” Kissinger broached the possibility of smaller nuclear options. He argued that massive nuclear threats to back up security guarantees were simply not believable: “It’s difficult to believe either side will launch everything.” Nuclear war, he added, “is “more likely to be limited,” and “smaller packages will be used to avoid going to larger one[s].”<sup>32</sup> Kissinger may well have believed that “smaller packages” were the kind of “politically meaningful threat” that he saw as necessary to make adversaries believe that Washington would take the risk of nuclear use. But the meeting record does not show whether Kissinger explained what the purpose of “smaller packages” would be or why he was confident that policymakers could control escalation by using them. Comments that he made some years later suggest that Kissinger came to believe that Soviet leaders had a “strong . . . fear of war.” Perhaps he thought that “smaller” nuclear attacks, or threats thereof, would help the United States prevail over Moscow during a crisis.<sup>33</sup>

During the NSC discussion, Kissinger briefly mentioned the devastation caused by nuclear weapons. Observing that “prompt effects [are] only part of the story,” he stated that “[m]uch more” devastation was caused by other effects. Only a few days earlier, members of the JSTPS had presented more detailed information on the SIOP to Kissinger and NSC staffers, particularly about the net consequences of nuclear exchanges—that is, how much of the population, military force structure, and industrial capacity on both sides would survive an attack. The briefing included some discussion of nuclear weapons effects. In a memorandum to Nixon, Kissinger and NSC staffers noted that fatality figures were from “blast and fallout effects alone,” parenthetically observing that the numbers neglected the “effects of disease, lingering fallout, fire, etc.” Thus, Kissinger recognized that fires were “part of the story” and hinted at the possibility that military planners understated nuclear devastation. Nevertheless, the parenthetical reference suggested that Kissinger and his staff experts did not realize how much the devastation was understated and that fires were as significant as blast in causing destruction. Kissinger’s

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agree; during a meeting of the NSC Senior Review Group, ACDA director Gerard C. Smith declared: “With our 7th Army, tactical nuclear weapons, and strategic forces, the Europeans should not sense that our umbrella is eroding.” See Winston Lord to Henry Kissinger, 6 June 1969, enclosing minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, “Review of U.S. Strategic Posture,” 29 May 1969, in NA, NPMP, H-111, SRG Minutes Originals 1969 (3 of 3).

32. “Notes on NSC Meeting 14 February 1969,” in NA, NPMP.

33. Memorandum of conference with Ambassadors Unger, Swank, Godley, and Bunker, 9 February 1973, in NA, NPMP, HAKO, Box 122, C.D. Related Memcons. See Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 66, for Kissinger’s perceived inability to “articulate with precision the functions that limited nuclear options were to serve in a crisis.”

“smaller packages,” far from being of limited destructiveness, would have been much more devastating than he may have understood. In later discussions of options for the president, Kissinger never called for a close look at damage criteria to ensure that they were compatible with the idea of smaller attacks.<sup>34</sup>

Before the NSC meeting, Kissinger had already made a request to the Pentagon to develop the smaller “packages” that the SIOP did not provide. During a meeting with Laird and Wheeler on 30 January, Kissinger asked for contingency planning to address the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation outside the traditional scenarios of a crisis in Central Europe. He wanted planning for a Middle East crisis involving a Soviet clash with the Israelis: “What would be the U.S. response if the Soviet fleet were to bombard Tel Aviv in retaliation for an Israel retaliatory raid against the Arabs?” As one possible response, Kissinger requested that the Joint Staff prepare a “SIOP package which provided for less force than the standard ALPHA package now visualizes.” Evidently he wanted the option of launching a less-than-massive strike against Soviet strategic nuclear forces, the “ALPHA” target category.<sup>35</sup>

Kissinger did not explain the purpose behind his request; and it is not known whether he discussed it with Nixon. The Cold War dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict—Washington’s support for Israel and Moscow’s close relations with Egypt and Syria—undoubtedly shaped Kissinger’s request for planning. No doubt, Kissinger was interested in finding ways to use a smaller SIOP attack on military targets to signal to Moscow during a crisis that the United States sought to limit the confrontation and that escalation could put urban populations at risk. Given the dangers of nuclear weapons, perhaps Kissinger assumed that he could use “madman”-type threats of limited attacks to exploit Soviet fears of war. To make such a threat plausible, Kissinger wanted the JCS to start creating nuclear options for the president. Regardless of whether Kissinger used the term “madman theory,” he was trying to work out the application of threats of excessive and irrational uses of force for U.S.-Soviet confrontations. In thinking about such risky actions in a crisis, Kissinger was emulating his predecessors from as far back as the Truman administration, all of whom had professed a willingness to risk nuclear war to support their foreign policy goals. Just as Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze had

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34. “Notes on NSC Meeting 14 February 1969,” in NA, NPMP; and “Strategic Forces,” 14 February 1969, NSCIE H-020, NSC Meeting, Biafra, Strategic Policy Issues, 14 February 1969 (2 of 2).

35. “Meeting between Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Secretary of Defense and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Secretary of Defense Conference Room, Thursday, January 30, 1969, 3:00 PM,” enclosed with Haig to Kissinger, “Actions Resulting from the Meeting,” 6 February 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCE, Box 955, Chronology File Haig, 1 February 1969–15 February, 1969.

assumed that the shadows cast by U.S. nuclear force superiority would strengthen Washington's leverage in an East-West crisis, Kissinger may have believed that more flexible strategic options would keep those shadows from receding in the era of strategic parity.<sup>36</sup>

Wheeler told Kissinger that there was no plan for a more limited ALPHA strike but noted the availability of theater nuclear strike plans against “selective tactical targets”—a reference to the General Strike Plan (GSP) of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), which provided for major attacks on Soviet and Warsaw Pact targets in Eastern Europe and the western Soviet Union. Plainly this answer failed to satisfy Kissinger, who asked Wheeler and Laird to instruct the Joint Staff to evaluate the pros and cons of an ALPHA strike with a “lesser increment of force,” which he did not define.<sup>37</sup> The Pentagon's immediate response to Kissinger's imprecise request is unknown, but Wheeler strongly opposed breaking the SIOP into smaller “packages.” In mid-March, Nixon and Laird held discussions about contingency plans available to U.S. and allied forces in a crisis. Apparently, Kissinger raised the question of smaller SIOP options again. Wheeler objected to the concept in a memorandum that Laird sent shortly afterward to the White House. According to Wheeler, the SIOP was too complex to be broken down into smaller parts because it “is based on mutually supporting tasks and options and execution of a selected element would have to be weighed against the degradation that would result to the overall plan.” For example, if the United States limited a preemptive strike to Soviet ICBM bases in the northern USSR, Soviet leaders could launch “an immediate and massive nuclear response with resulting destruction of a large part of our retaliatory forces.” Perhaps to convince the White House that enough military options were already available, Wheeler sent some rather cryptic charts providing capsule summaries of “representative” military plans including the SIOP options, the SACEUR strike plan, battlefield nuclear use, conventional military attacks, and the like. The charts included the option of “Selective Employment” of SIOP forces but ruled it out because it was not covered by current doctrine and “not currently practiced.” Laird evidently sensed that the charts would not satisfy Kissinger, and he suggested that the White House issue a request for “further study of ‘sub-SIOP’ options.” But Laird was not going to take any initiatives on his own.<sup>38</sup>

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36. See Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

37. “Meeting between Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Secretary of Defense and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.”

38. Lynn to Kissinger, “The SIOP,” with Laird memo to Kissinger, 9 April 1969, attached. For Laird's doubts about limited nuclear options, Melvin Laird, telephone conversation, 11 July 2003. Wheeler's

When Kissinger received the material from the Pentagon, he scrawled a note to his military assistant, Colonel Alexander Haig, “What does this mean?” Bypassing Laird, Haig asked Colonel William Lemnitzer, the JCS’s liaison officer to the NSC, for a more straightforward presentation. He directed Lemnitzer to put the charts showing the SIOP withholds “in English” because “I am not privy to the hocus-pocus.” Both Haig and Kissinger had found the charts wanting because they did not give clear answers to White House inquiries about “what options are actually available” and the possibilities for more “selective force delivery.” Haig asked for the charts to be redone so they showed the percentage of nuclear forces that could be used for “varying contingencies.” He speculated that 70 percent would “provide the best line from which any lower incremental deliveries might constitute unacceptable risks to the uncommitted balance of our forces.” In other words, committing more than 30 percent of the forces for use in specific contingencies could jeopardize the forces needed for all-out war. Acknowledging that the issues were highly sensitive, Haig nevertheless demanded elucidation. Although Kissinger had asked the question, Haig raised the stakes by writing “when the President asks a question, it should be answered.”<sup>39</sup>

## Sufficiency and “Less Than All-Out” Attacks

Whether Lemnitzer was impressed by Haig’s invocation of presidential authority and how he responded to it remains unknown. Kissinger, however, eventually found another opportunity to press for further consideration of nuclear options in the context of a general review of the U.S. strategic posture. Soon after Nixon took office, he indicated that the goal of “sufficiency” should shape the size of U.S. nuclear forces. As he explained to Prime Minister Harold Wilson in late February, the “United States should be content with a ‘sufficiency’ of nuclear deterrence.”<sup>40</sup> The president did not explain exactly what he meant, but the implication was that the 1,054 Minuteman and Titan ICBMs, a substantial strategic bomber force, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), along with an ABM system, would be “sufficient” to de-

response exemplifies Rowen’s point about the gap between high-level policy and “operational behavior.”

39. Haig to Lemnitzer, 15 April 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCF, Box 956, Chronology Haig, April 1969 (1 of 2).

40. Memorandum of conversation, 24 February 1969, in NA, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, 1949–72, Box 489, President Nixon’s Trip to Europe 23 February 1969–2 March 1969, Chronology, Memcons, Vol. I of VIII. Nixon credited Kissinger for devising the term “sufficiency.”

ter a Soviet attack. To make sure that this assumption guided policy thinking at all levels of government, Nixon and Kissinger set in motion an NSC study on the U.S. strategic posture to allow the White House to establish sufficiency as a “yardstick . . . for assessing the adequacy of U.S. strategic forces” as well as for “assessing the desirability” of arms control agreements with the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup>

When an NSC review group met to discuss a draft of the study, Kissinger raised the possibility of limited options by challenging assumptions about the nature of a Soviet strike and whether it would be “a general nuclear attack or none at all.” He raised the possibility that Soviet leaders would make a “discriminating” or a limited attack, such as the “use of a few missiles in a Berlin crisis.” When Ivan Selin, chief of Pentagon systems analysis, defended the all-or-nothing assumption, Kissinger asked whether Moscow or Washington could rationally make decisions “to kill 80 million people.” Both Selin and R. Jack Smith, the deputy director for intelligence at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), questioned the likelihood of a small attack. After Smith observed that Soviet strategic doctrine assumed all-out use, Kissinger kept probing. He “wondered whether if we make limited use of nuclear weapons, the Soviets would make an all out response.” For Smith, the answer was obvious: Once a few nuclear weapons were used, “the response is likely to be irrational.” All-out war was the likeliest scenario.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Kissinger’s interest in the problem of discriminating attacks, the NSC Steering Group rejected considering “less than all-out [Soviet] strikes on U.S. forces” as one of the criteria for sufficiency. Although the CIA had insisted that the Soviet Union would rely on massive attacks, Kissinger reported to Nixon that this “was one of the most important issues raised by the study.” Because a less than all-out Soviet attack on U.S. strategic forces could improve Moscow’s relative military position and force Washington to stop the war rather than risk the loss of cities after retaliating, Kissinger believed that the United States should be able to force a comparable choice on Moscow under “the extreme pressures of a nuclear crisis.” As he envisaged it, the United States would use discriminating nuclear strikes to force Soviet leaders to back down in a crisis or else face the possibility of losing their cities. Kissinger believed that most U.S. officials rejected serious consideration of this option because it might provide a “sound rationale” for developing new strategic forces,

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41. Kissinger to President, “June 18 NSC Meeting on U.S. Strategic Posture and SALT,” 17 June 1969, with enclosures, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

42. Winston Lord to Kissinger, 6 June 1969, enclosing minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, “Review of U.S. Strategic Posture,” 29 May 1969, in NA, NPMP, NSCIF, H-111, SRG Minutes Originals 1969 (3 of 3).

an objection that he discounted. Instead, Kissinger advised Nixon to express interest in further analysis of “disarming attacks” when he met with the NSC.<sup>43</sup>

Whether Nixon raised the issue of limited options during an NSC meeting on 18 June 1969 is not known, but he did approve four criteria for determining the sufficiency of strategic nuclear forces recommended in the National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 3 report. The United States, according to the president, would have a “sufficiency” of strategic nuclear forces when 1) it had a credible second-strike capability; 2) it avoided provocative measures that would otherwise provide an “incentive” for the Soviet Union to strike first in a crisis; 3) it had a capability to limit damage to the United States so that U.S. deaths and destruction did not significantly exceed those in the Soviet Union; and 4) it deployed “defenses which limit damage from small attacks or accidental launches to a low level.” Nixon tacitly accepted a recommendation by the NSC Steering Group to exclude a standard sought by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, namely the “capability to insure relatively favorable outcomes if deterrence fails.” The Steering Group had rejected this notion because it would give the Pentagon “an open-ended charter to ask for more forces.”<sup>44</sup>

Some of the criteria were ambiguous and offered little practical guidance for force planning,<sup>45</sup> but Kissinger saw them as a useful step in framing coherent defense and budgetary policies: “Otherwise, each agency will feel free to define the term strategic sufficiency in its own way.” Thus, “sufficiency,” like McNamara’s concept of “assured destruction,” was intended for budgetary purposes and a “metric for deciding how much force was enough.” Drawing on the criteria, Kissinger recommended that Nixon hold to a position of “minimum changes to our present program.” This would allow the White House to take a middle position between SAC, which wanted new missiles and bombers, and elements in the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) that wanted to delay the deployment of multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and ABMs.

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43. Kissinger to President, “June 18 NSC Meeting on U.S. Strategic Posture and SALT,” 17 June 1969, copy at NSArchive. In the discussion, Kissinger posited a scenario of an intense crisis over Berlin that prompted Soviet leaders to launch a first strike using a portion of their nuclear forces to preempt a U.S. nuclear attack. This would force the president to face a dilemma: “Should he respond by striking Soviet cities, knowing some American cities are still hostage, or should he strike Soviet forces in order to redress or improve the relative military situation?”

44. *Ibid.*

45. One of Kissinger’s staffers later reported that officials believed that criterion three “(i.e., not allow significant advantage to the Soviet Union) was subject to broad interpretation and . . . had little relevance for force planning.” See NSC Staff, “Analytical Summary, Strategic Objectives and Force Posture,” c. 20 January 1972, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

With a policy of “minimum change,” Kissinger suggested, the White House could prepare an ABM program that would “limit damage” from a Soviet strike and could proceed with the MIRV program as a relatively inexpensive “hedge against the possible need to penetrate the other side’s ballistic missile defenses.” Such a “clear [demonstration] of U.S. resolve,” Kissinger believed, would relieve European allies and motivate Soviet leaders even more to “slow down . . . the competition.”<sup>46</sup>

Kissinger was not satisfied with the Pentagon’s and CIA’s lack of interest in limited options. Taking up Laird’s earlier suggestion, he asked Nixon to approve a study that would focus on the problem. Kissinger explained that he wanted the Defense Department to study “more discriminating options than the present SIOP,” thus giving decision-makers options that are “appropriate” for “the kinds of situations the President might actually face in a crisis.” A few weeks after the NSC meeting, Kissinger sent NSSM 64 to Laird requesting that he evaluate U.S. strategic forces and their “capability to deter and respond to less than all-out or disarming Soviet attacks” as well as to study a range of possible nuclear war scenarios. In addition, the Pentagon was to take into account command, control, and communications (C3) capabilities and “make recommendations for improving them.” As it turned out, however, the study group charged with responding to the NSSM did not address the SIOP itself because Kissinger believed that the subject was too sensitive for an inter-agency study.<sup>47</sup>

Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard supported Kissinger’s interest in strategic options but suggested that the issue was not simply getting a better set of plans. In a memorandum dated 11 July 1969, he wrote that the government needed to “place greater emphasis on improving our command, control, decision making, and other war-fighting capabilities” so that the president would have choices other than the massive SIOP options. Like senior Pentagon officials before him, Packard worried that the vulnerabilities of the C3 system could make it difficult for command authorities to execute a complex nuclear option in the middle of a crisis.<sup>48</sup> This issue was a recurring theme in the discussion of prospective nuclear options.

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46. Kissinger to President, “June 18 NSC Meeting on U.S. Strategic Posture and SALT,” 17 June 1969, copy at NSArchive. For “metric,” see Rowen, “Formulating Strategic Doctrine,” p. 227. According to James Schlesinger, then with the Bureau of the Budget, Kissinger also believed that MIRVs would serve as a useful demonstration of technological superiority to impress the Soviet Union. James Schlesinger, telephone conversation, 25 April 2003.

47. Kissinger to Nixon, “Additional Studies of the U.S. Strategic Posture,” 1 July 1969, in NA, NSCIE, Box 127, NSSM-3 (1 of 2) (4 of 7); National Security Study Memorandum 64, Kissinger to Secretary of Defense, “U.S. Strategic Capabilities,” 8 July 1969, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive; and Lynn to Kissinger, “The SIOP.”

48. Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, p. 430.

In July 1969, possibly in response to pressure from the White House, the JCS approved “faster procedures for selective options.” The background remains murky, and procedures for creating selective options may already have existed. In any event, the idea was to enable the president to send an emergency action message (EAM) ordering “selective release of individual bombers or missile sorties which are programmed in the SIOP.” If the president made such a request, bombers or missiles could be launched within fifteen to twenty minutes, although the amount of time that such a decision would take was necessarily uncertain. Although the procedure was on the books, there was no follow-up. Certainly in the early 1970s Minuteman launch-control officers were not aware of selective options. Moreover, the possibility of ad hoc planning of small strategic strikes was not exercised, and any such procedure would have been subject to great uncertainty. A small attack involving ten to twenty weapons could take up to a day to plan and execute as long as no retargeting was required (in 1969, it took at least ninety days to retarget a Minuteman).<sup>49</sup>

## **NU OPTS and Obstacles to Limited Nuclear Options**

Even as Defense Department officials prepared a response to NSSM 64, one of Kissinger’s aides worked on an even more secret front to instigate revision of the SIOP. Moreover, by this point some planners in the U.S. Air Force had been investigating the practicality of selective nuclear options. None of these activities, however, produced the changes that Kissinger had in mind.

For several years, the Air Force had been working with the RAND Corporation on a “NU OPTS” (nuclear options) study. The participants included General Richard Yudkin of Air Force Plans and Operations and James R. Schlesinger, director of strategic studies at the RAND Corporation. RAND also had been sponsoring the latest thinking by Thomas Schelling, Daniel Ellsberg, and others on flexible response, limited nuclear options, and the use of nuclear weapons for signaling and bargaining purposes. By the late 1960s a major concern at RAND, Schlesinger later recalled, was the conviction that there was a “deterrence gap”: Even if the prospect of assured destruction could deter a Soviet attack on the United States, Washington would be

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn to Kissinger, “The SIOP”; and “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” 3 January 1972, pp. 30–31. For the selective release procedures, see also Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 109. Information provided to the author by Bruce Blair, who served as a Minuteman launch control officer in the early 1970s, via e-mail, 18 August 2004.

“self-deterred” if a military crisis broke out in Central Europe and the president lacked credible nuclear options.<sup>50</sup>

By the fall of 1969, NU OPTS work on limited nuclear options had gone far enough to allow General Yudkin to present interim conclusions at Los Alamos Laboratory and the Pentagon.<sup>51</sup> The Air Force, Yudkin argued, had reached the conclusion that “limited nuclear warfare is a possibility inherent in the logic of the nuclear environment.” Even under conditions of U.S.-Soviet strategic equivalence and mutual deterrence, he said, great danger persisted. Not only was there the possibility of “more risk taking and greater instability at a number of lower levels” below direct strategic confrontation, but there was also the possibility that Soviet leaders would conclude that Washington was “deterred from escalating to high intensity nuclear war in response to a Soviet non-nuclear attack.” Traditional threats—a massive strategic attack against the Soviet Union if it attacked Western Europe—were losing credibility.<sup>52</sup>

When the “risk or threat of holocaust is no longer enough—by itself—for deterrence,” what Yudkin called “selective nuclear operations” could restore the credibility of deterrence or, if it failed, bring an early resolution to a conflict. The trick was to have plans and capabilities that would “influence the enemy to terminate the conflict on favorable terms before the conflict reaches the most destructive levels.” To make the new approach workable, Yudkin suggested that the military would need a broader range of nuclear weapons and delivery systems with the explosive yields and accuracy that would make them suitable for new strategies.

To make concepts of limited use more tangible, the Air Force NU OPTS group conducted a study showing the feasibility of achieving “precisely specified objectives” with smaller numbers of weapons, ranging up to seventy-five. The study suggested the possibility of striking “point X” in the Soviet Union “without causing collateral damage or involving US losses beyond the bounds set for the problem.” Nearly 3,000 targets could be struck “with less than a hundred casualties per target.” Moreover, to discourage escalation and preserve opportunities for government-to-government communications, NU OPTS proposed treating command centers as “sanctuaries.” Implicitly, the adversary’s leaders would be able to discern the limited nature of the attacks.

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50. Schlesinger, telephone conversation, 25 April 2003. For background on Yudkin and Schlesinger, see Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, pp. 357–358.

51. “The Changing Context,” address by Richard A. Yudkin to the Symposium on Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Los Alamos, New Mexico, 3 September 1969, with memos by Alexander Haig and James Hughes attached, in NA, NPMR, NSCF, Box 818, Hughes Col. James D.

52. *Ibid.*

Specific target restraints would be in effect to control escalation and limit destruction. In contrast to SIOP options that aimed at “massive collateral damage,” NU OPTS sought to minimize such destruction.<sup>53</sup>

Yudkin’s presentation evoked mixed reactions in Washington. At the White House, Alexander Haig was enthusiastic. Believing that the report went a “long way toward meeting the concerns of Dr. Kissinger and the President with the rather rigid nuclear strategies to which they have been exposed so far,” Haig hoped that NU OPTS “went through the JCS system” so that it could be presented to the White House. Seymour Weiss and Leon Sloss of the State Department’s Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, who played key roles in the later thinking about limited nuclear options, heard Yudkin’s briefing on 23 October. They were impressed but saw deficiencies, some of which were “major.” For Weiss, Yudkin had not made a case for the political utility of NU OPTS: When and why would Washington want to use nuclear weapons selectively? “What we really need to persuade ourselves is that there might be circumstances in which US interests might be advanced through this technique, and, moreover, that this technique might be preferable to any other alternatives.” Among other concerns, Weiss wondered what would happen if, in the event of a limited U.S. nuclear attack, the Soviet Union responded by “slightly upp[ing] the bidding”? Because that would present both political and military problems, U.S. leaders would have to know where they wanted a conflict to go.<sup>54</sup>

Weiss also worried about the impact of NU OPTS on alliance relations. In his Los Alamos presentation, Yudkin suggested that Washington might “wish to have the option to decouple theater threats from intercontinental threats.” The implication was that if a U.S.-Soviet crisis erupted in Europe, the United States could launch limited nuclear attacks rather than massive ones, potentially decoupling the threat of strategic retaliation from the defense of Western Europe. Weiss and Sloss agreed that there could be “many circumstances” in which a limited attack would be advantageous for the United States but “would be vigorously rejected by our allies.” Weiss believed that European objections “would not necessarily be overriding,” but the possibility that strategies for limited use of nuclear weapons would have a corrosive

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53. “Description of the Nu Opts Study,” attached to Ronald Spiers and Seymour Weiss to Under Secretary Johnson, “Speech on TAC NUCS by General Yudkin,” 5 December 1969, in NA, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1967–1969, DEF 12 US.

54. Haig to Hughes, 1 October 1969; Spiers and Weiss to Johnson, “Speech on TAC NUCS by General Yudkin,” 5 December 1969, with “Description of the Nu Opts Study” attached, in NA, RG 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1967–1969, DEF 12 US. For the contrasting approaches to collateral damage, see the attached “Description of the Nu Opts Study.”

impact on NATO would be a continuing theme in discussions of sub-SIOP options.<sup>55</sup>

Weiss and Sloss argued that RAND's further work on NU OPTS would address their concerns. But without more information, it is hard to determine whether Kissinger himself or NSC staffers ever became familiar with NU OPTS. Whatever the case may be, the NU OPTS study did influence mid-level Pentagon officials (though perhaps not the JCS or Laird). James Schlesinger, another proponent, also supported planning along NU OPTS lines when he worked at Nixon's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as well as when he served later as Secretary of Defense.<sup>56</sup>

Another effort at rethinking the SIOP occurred secretly on the NSC staff. Laurence Lynn, Kissinger's senior program analyst, completed an investigation of the subject in early November 1969. Although the Pentagon had provided Lynn with information on the war plan, some issues puzzled him. For example, he had learned there were at least ninety "sub-variations" of target withholds, but he could not find out how they worked. But Lynn had no trouble learning why the JCS preferred the massive ALPHA strike and objected to limited options. According to the Chiefs, if Soviet leaders knew that Washington would use limited options, their awareness of this could "downgrade the deterrent value of our strategic posture." A small U.S. attack would also be problematic because it would enable the Soviet Union to increase the readiness of other forces to anticipate a larger U.S. strike. In addition, strikes on Soviet targets required attacks involving hundreds of weapons to destroy air and missile defenses. Hence, strikes could not be small.<sup>57</sup>

Lynn mustered arguments to counter the JCS's views. For example, with respect to deterrence, he contended that a small nuclear strike could strengthen it by showing that the United States "might 'go all the way'" by showing readiness to "cross the nuclear 'firebreak.'" As for the argument that a small attack was likely to warn the Soviet Union, Lynn countered that a period of tension was likely to precede any attacks; therefore, complete surprise in an attack on Moscow was unlikely.<sup>58</sup> Lynn also challenged the air defenses

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55. Yudkin, "The Changing Context," 3 September 1969; and Weiss to Yudkin, "Nu Opts," 12 November 1969, attached to Spiers and Weiss to Johnson, "Speech on TAC NUCS by General Yudkin," 5 December 1969.

56. Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 100. For Schlesinger's advocacy at OMB, Schlesinger, telephone conversation, 25 April 2003. For a skeptical view of Schlesinger's impact, see Nolan, *Guardians of the Arsenal*, p. 118.

57. Lynn to Kissinger, "The SIOP." The JCS had other objections; for example, that "rapid execution of a small strike" using day-to-day ready forces could leave the rest of U.S. forces less ready and more vulnerable to retaliatory attack.

58. *Ibid.* Lynn also argued that the JCS argument would not hold if the United States attacked non-

argument: Destroying air defenses, he argued, could be “destabilizing” by making Soviet nuclear forces more vulnerable. This risk could be minimized by avoiding the “‘overhead’ cost of removing defenses.” Lynn had greater difficulty, however, in countering another of the JCS’s arguments—that a small U.S. strike could induce the Soviet Union to launch more vulnerable “soft” nuclear forces. He also acknowledged that the Soviet Union might not be able to distinguish a “small from a large attack and would feel compelled to retaliate.”<sup>59</sup>

Lynn hoped that the concept of withholding nuclear strikes offered some possibility for expanding the options, and he recommended that Kissinger meet with Wheeler to ask for more information on the SIOP, especially the variety of withholds as well the types and numbers of targets in the CHARLIE category. To get planning for limited nuclear options under way, Lynn suggested that Kissinger offer two new options based on the withhold concept. Both were for small preemptive strikes that involved withholding all elements of the ALPHA strikes except for 1) “soft undefended Soviet nuclear systems in remote areas”; and 2) those same targets along with the defenses assigned to them. He urged Kissinger to ask Wheeler for ways of transforming those concepts into specific plans.<sup>60</sup>

How Kissinger responded to Lynn’s report remains obscure; the file copy lacks annotations or evidence of any follow-up requests. Apparently the need to address more pressing issues such as Vietnam and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) led Kissinger to put the issue on the back burner. When he spoke with Lynn in April 1970, he said, “we have got to do something about the SIOP” but then referred to the problem of being “spread thin.” Kissinger may also have wanted something more far-reaching and comprehensive than the two options suggested by Lynn. Compared to Lynn’s modest proposal, the Air Force’s work on NU OPTS was probably closer to what Kissinger had in mind, but he may not have known about the Air Force project.<sup>61</sup>

Whatever Kissinger thought about Lynn’s report, the NSSM 64 study that he had requested in July 1969 was not the positive analysis of “discriminating options” that he probably anticipated. The study group was not allowed to use SIOP information and therefore could not produce a thorough

alert, more vulnerable “soft” Soviet weapons that would otherwise have been “moved to a higher state of readiness.”

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. Telcon, Dr. Lynn, 11 April 1970, 9:45 a.m., in NA, NPMP, Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Box 4, 10–16 March 1970; and Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 94–95.

report. NSSM 64, completed at the end of 1969, remains classified except for its “gloomy” conclusions. Taking into account command-and-control issues associated with disarming attacks, as Kissinger had required, the Pentagon concluded that the United States had a respectable capability to carry out “pre-planned attacks” but that the U.S. “Command Centers do not possess the combination of survivability and capability which is required for the conduct of limited strategic nuclear war.” Thus, the Pentagon’s National Military Command Center and the Alternate NMCC at Fort Richie, MD, had plenty of capability to conduct complex military operations, but both could be destroyed by a direct hit. The National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP) was far more survivable but had less capability to direct military operations. In other words, as long as command centers were vulnerable or had limited capabilities, the government lacked the secure organizational structure for waging limited nuclear war from start to finish.<sup>62</sup>

Those conclusions poured cold water on the notion of flexible strategic options, but Kissinger’s reaction to them is not known. No doubt the limited results of Kissinger’s initial requests prompted him to approve language in Nixon’s first annual foreign policy report that defined the issue in stark and dramatic terms: the onset of strategic parity posed “new and disturbing problems. Should a President, in the event of a nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans?” Whatever the national security bureaucracy thought, the White House evidently wanted to keep the problem of nuclear targeting on the agenda.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps to encourage war planners to look more closely at the problem of nuclear options and most likely to dig more deeply into the SIOP, Kissinger traveled on 6 March 1970 to Offutt Air Force Base, the headquarters of SAC and the JSTPS. There he received briefings on the strategic threat and “a synopsis” of military options “both within and outside of the SIOP” as well as “options that we probably should have.” The commander of SAC, Bruce Holloway, reported to Earle Wheeler that the “briefings seemed to be well received” and that Kissinger, not surprisingly, “expressed special interest in the flexibility of force application.” Apparently Kissinger raised no questions about weapons effects. If he believed that military planning underestimated

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62. For “gloomy” and a summary of the report, see Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, pp. 431–432.

63. Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 67–68; and “First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970’s,” 18 February 1970, in *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon*, p. 173.

the destruction caused by nuclear weapons, he did not make his concerns known.<sup>64</sup>

Despite Holloway's impression, Kissinger evidently was not impressed by the briefing. He later told Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson that what SAC regarded as "limited options" actually involved an "enormous number of missiles." Nevertheless, Holloway's observation "that certain aspects of the SIOIP . . . were deliberately not gone into" during the briefing suggests that Kissinger had more to learn about the war plan and did not know what the right questions were. Holloway clearly believed that some features of the SIOIP were too sensitive to share even with the president's chief security adviser.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Holloway felt free to withhold information from Kissinger and to tell the JCS chairman about it indicates that the high command had little interest in working with the White House in rethinking the war plan. That was no less true of the Pentagon, where Secretary of Defense Laird had not made flexible strategic options a priority for nuclear planning. The Pentagon's "Strategy Guidance Memorandum" of January 1970 discussed nuclear strategy and deterrence in language that resonated with assured destruction by arguing that the threat of "unacceptable" consequences that underlay deterrence "may require the capability and the clear will to inflict an unacceptable level of damage on any aggressor."<sup>66</sup>

Although the Defense Department guidance suggested that the possibility of "less than-SIOIP options" was under review, State Department officials who read the document were troubled by the lack of interest in "realistic SIOIP targeting options" that would permit discriminating attacks. Laird himself, however, found the concept of limited nuclear use to be impractical and remained generally unresponsive to White House interest in strategic options. Laird was a formidable bureaucratic player, and Kissinger was in no position to force anything on him. Thus, the Defense Department's public report, published in February 1971, had nothing to say about presidential interest in alternatives to all-out attacks or the limited use of strategic weapons, even though Nixon's annual foreign policy statement reiterated his interest in the issue.<sup>67</sup>

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64. SAC message to JCS/CJCS, "Visit of Dr. Henry A. Kissinger to HQ SAC," 10 March 1970, in NA, RG 218, Records of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Records of JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler, Box 10, 031.1 President (1 March 1969).

65. Telcon, Elliot Richardson, 12 March 1970, 2:25 p.m., in NA, NPMP, Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Box 4, 10 March 1970–16 March 1970. For the secrecy of SIOIP information, see Peter Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 56–60.

66. U. Alexis Johnson to David Packard, 2 April 1970, enclosing "Strategy Guidance Memorandum," SN 70–73, DEF 1 US.

67. *Ibid.*; and *Toward a National Security Strategy of Realistic Deterrence: Statement of Secretary of Defense*

Despite these setbacks, Kissinger kept pushing the matter, albeit with little success. During a July 1970 review of the defense posture at the Western White House, Nixon condemned the Air Force for “still fighting World War II” and the Defense Department for its “unbelievable . . . layers of bureaucracy.” Kissinger’s dissatisfaction with the SAC presentations was evident from his desire to “do some bloodletting” at the Pentagon and from his detailed criticism of the SIOP, which he described as a “horror strategy.” He also criticized NATO planning, prompting Nixon to ask “Isn’t it time we get at this thing?” apparently referring to both the SIOP and NATO. But the question was rhetorical because when Kissinger advised “if you order a study, you will get answers,” Nixon responded “I don’t want a study.” A few minutes later, Kissinger said that “we must change SIOP,” but Nixon had already moved on to a different subject. Perhaps Nixon believed that the Pentagon would produce the necessary studies on its own. Given the low odds of nuclear confrontation and war, he may have seen the issue as less pressing than Kissinger did and wanted to focus on the problem at hand—determining where to cut military spending.<sup>68</sup>

## New Studies

Throughout this time, Nixon and Kissinger were preoccupied with Vietnam, arms control negotiations, and a secret approach to China, among other high-priority issues. Hence, nuclear targeting received only intermittent attention. Nevertheless, targeting issues and the problems of the SIOP were studied anew in a series of reports in 1970 and 1971. The JCS conducted a major review, and the NSC’s Defense Program Review Committee (DPRC) produced a major study of U.S. strategic objectives that looked closely at the problem of limited nuclear operations. Certainly, Kissinger expected no less. As he explained during an August 1971 DPRC meeting, “I have often asked myself under what circumstances I would go to the President and recommend that he implement the SIOP, knowing that this would result in a minimum casualty level of 50 million.” He did not believe that the SIOP’s “fifteen contingencies” could be used or that an adversary would believe that the White

*Melvin R. Laird on the Fiscal Year 1972–76 Defense Program and the 1972 Defense Budget* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971). In a telephone interview Melvin Laird said that the idea of improving credibility through limited options “sounds great, but the idea of dropping a few nuclear weapons somewhere was not practical.” Melvin Laird, interview, 11 July 2003.

68. “President’s Review of Defense Posture San Clemente July 28, 1970 Selected Comments,” in NA, NSCIF, Box 100, DPRC Meeting 11–24–70. For the cuts in the FY 1972 defense budget, see Chalmers Roberts, “Defense Economizing Is Near the Bone: Critics Not Content,” *The Washington Post*, 18 October 1970, p. A5.

House would order their use. The obvious implication was that he wanted the bureaucracy to continue looking at the problem, but he did not give any guidance on an approach to solving it.<sup>69</sup>

In August 1970, Laird asked JCS Chairman Thomas Moorer to prepare an analysis of the SIOP for presentation to the NSC. Laird was concerned that the presidential advisers did not appreciate the relationship between the SIOP, the strategic sufficiency criteria, and other important guidelines for planning strategic forces, such as a “visibility capability” to support allies. He requested a detailed and thorough study of SIOP forces, attack objectives, targeting criteria, and current capabilities. Laird wanted the study to analyze the relationship between SIOP goals and capabilities and sufficiency criteria, the Triad concept (e.g., impact on targeting if one of the components was absent), and the ability to assist allies in nuclear war. Tacitly addressing White House interest in flexibility for a range of crises, Laird asked that the study take into account “other criteria of importance in determining our . . . force posture, such as the degree of flexibility to respond to various situations.” But he treated this as only one problem in a larger study rather than asking for a specific review of the issue.<sup>70</sup>

Before the JCS and DPRC studies had been completed, a report issued in early 1971 by the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group/Institute for Defense Analyses (WSEG/IDA) suggested that the Pentagon had not fundamentally changed its gloomy prognosis about the feasibility of limited strategic options, at least for the short term. The authors of the WSEG/IDA study challenged the traditional view that the command-and-control apparatus was robust enough to help the president “decide how and when to execute the SIOP.” They argued that, on the contrary, “our warning assessment, attack assessment, and damage assessment capabilities are so limited that the President may well have to make SIOP execution decisions virtually in the blind, at least so far as real time information is concerned.”<sup>71</sup>

The command and control studies showed why the Defense Department

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69. Minutes, Defense Program Review Committee, 5 August 1971, in NA, NSCIE, H-117, Defense Program Review Committee Minutes Originals 69–73 (2 of 3). By “fifteen contingencies,” Kissinger was referring to alternative force configurations available for attack depending on warning time. See, for example, the fifteen different options indicated in U.S. Pacific Command, “Pacific Command General War Plan,” 26 January 1961, in NARA, RG 218, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 3146 (26 January 1961), Sec. 1.

70. Laird to Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Analysis of the SIOP for the National Security Council” (18 August 1970), FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

71. Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, pp. 432–433. This was prepared some months before the complete orbiting of the satellite-based Defense Support System (DSP), which had significant “real time” capabilities to detect and assess missile attacks. Whether the WSEG/IDA analysts would have modified their pessimistic assessment in light of that development is uncertain.

saw limited strategic options as difficult and not immediately feasible. The JCS's SIOP study, completed in the spring of 1971, shed further light on the limits of the war plan. The study remains classified, but some of its major conclusions are available. The report stressed that the SIOP could not prevent damage to the United States and its allies. Although U.S. strategic forces could destroy roughly half of Soviet military targets, damage as much as 70 percent of "war-supporting" urban-industrial installations, and destroy a "significant number" of Soviet bomber bases and fixed medium and intermediate range missiles, a "significant part" of Soviet nuclear delivery capability would survive the attack. Therefore, the United States could not meet SIOP objectives by ensuring "termination of hostilities under conditions advantageous to itself" or its allies. Without changes in strategic programs or SIOP planning objectives, this situation was not expected to change during the 1970s, although "our ability to support NATO operations will decline if the Soviets harden more of their IR/MRBM sites."<sup>72</sup>

For all of the SIOP's limitations, Wheeler's successor as JCS chairman, Admiral Thomas Moorer, saw little need for basic change in the war plan. He explained to the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control in June 1971 that as long as the United States had survivable and redundant nuclear forces that could cause enormous destruction, "the other fellow" would not be tempted "to give it a try" to see if he can get away with it." Moorer had little use for the idea of limited strategic operations—"protracted nuclear war with a few weapons at a time," at best seeing them as a "good mental exercise," possibly useful for specialized contingencies involving new nuclear powers. He equated the idea of limited nuclear use with a U.S. preemptive strike, but he said it was "highly unlikely that the United States would ever pre-empt and make a first strike." Such a move, he added, would happen only if Washington had "positive assurance" of an imminent attack" but "I don't see how we could have such assurance."<sup>73</sup>

Ordinarily, Kissinger might have dismissed Moorer's generally disparaging view of limited options, but the DPRC strategic-objectives study provided a sobering picture. Prepared by an interagency group coordinated by the NSC staff in response to Kissinger's request for a comprehensive review of U.S. stra-

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72. Except for the title pages and table of contents, the JCS study remains classified, but the DPRC study, "U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary," 3 January 1972, pp. 29–30, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive, drew on it. For the title page and table of contents, see Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Analysis of the Single Integrated Operational Plan for the National Security Council," 23 April 1971, in NA, RG 59, Top Secret Subject-Numeric Files, 1970–73, Box 3. For the incorporation of the SIOP study findings into the DRPC report, see NSC Staff, "Analytical Summary, Strategic Objectives and Force Posture" (cited in n. 45 *supra*),.

73. Moorer quoted in Meeting of the General Advisory Committee, Wednesday 8 June 1971, "SALT, Nuclear Testing and Nuclear Strategy," p. 140, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

tegic policy, the report, titled “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture,” was a long and complex document. It cast a critical look at the NSDM 16 planning criteria, offered possibly more useful benchmarks, and proposed General Strategic Alternatives (e.g., a flexible attack planning system, a hard-target kill capability, and a full range of war-fighting alternatives, all with or without various ABM defense alternatives).<sup>74</sup>

Feeding into the preparation of the DPRC study were reports by the Pentagon’s Systems Analysis office, some of which had been sent directly to Laird. These studies looked closely at the possibility of limited strategic options, noting the relevance of U.S.-Soviet strategic parity (implying that the nuclear balance made the old nuclear options even more perilous) and Nixon’s “desire for flexibility in our nuclear employment capabilities.” Nevertheless, as with the earlier studies, the analysts pointed to vulnerabilities in C3 arrangements and the need for improvements if limited nuclear options were to be possible. They also highlighted another problem: the “fundamental uncertainty concerning Soviet responses to limited nuclear strikes on the USSR.” For example, if the Soviet Union had a “launch-on-warning doctrine,” an “all out” Soviet attack might follow a “very selective US first strike.”<sup>75</sup>

The final DPRC report looked closely at the pros and cons of strategic flexible response options. Echoing the concerns expressed by Nixon and Kissinger, the authors acknowledged that the lack of “appropriate strike options” would put a president in a horrible position if there were no choice “between general nuclear war and backing down in a deep crisis.” More broadly, the analysts saw flexible response strategies as useful for supporting U.S. diplomacy and reinforcing deterrence by increasing Soviet uncertainty about U.S. responses to attacks on allies as well as by “providing suitable responses to a Soviet . . . attack on a limited set of U.S. targets.” With respect to NATO allies, the DPRC’s analysts were more optimistic than Seymour Weiss had been a few years earlier. Strategic flexible response, they argued, could demonstrate U.S. “resolve” in a crisis without worrying the allies that the United States would “decouple” its strategic forces from the defense of Europe.<sup>76</sup>

The DPRC analysts also maintained that strategic flexible response could

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74. Odeen to Kissinger, “DPRC Meeting, U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Study—January 20,” 18 January 1972, in NA, NSCIE, Box 104; “DPRC US Strategic Objectives and Force Posture”; and “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary.”

75. Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945–1972*, pp. 433–435. For the thinking of officials at Systems Analysis, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 227.

76. “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” pp. 45–51.

help terminate a conflict before it became a cataclysm. According to the study, if the Soviet Union miscalculated during a crisis and launched deliberate strikes, a U.S. response that showed “restraint and resolve: through a combination of diplomatic maneuvers and limited strategic strikes might end a nuclear conflict without sacrificing vital . . . interests.” This, of course, would depend on close coordination between the White House and the Pentagon of specific strike options, tight White House control over nuclear weapons, success in controlling “Soviet deaths,” and avoidance of attacks on Soviet facilities that could disrupt political control over nuclear weapons.<sup>77</sup>

Yet, the DPRC authors saw serious risks that cast doubt on the whole enterprise of limited nuclear planning. Reflecting the views of ACDA and Pentagon analysts, one section of the report argued that flexible options could create greater instability in U.S.-Soviet relations. Moscow might construe a U.S. flexible strategic-options posture as a signal that Washington would not launch a massive strike except in the most extreme circumstances. Tacitly, this would broaden “the range of hostile actions the Soviets believed they could get away with.” Kissinger, however, rejected this line of argument, dismissing it a year later as the “theory that we will make war look so attractive that we undermine the deterrent. That’s never never land.”<sup>78</sup>

Another problem raised by the DPRC report was the threshold for nuclear use. A capability for limited strikes could make it “more ‘tempting’ to exercise” the nuclear option in a crisis that could otherwise have been resolved through conventional force and diplomacy. If that were the case, flexibility would increase the danger of a nuclear catastrophe.<sup>79</sup> An even more dangerous risk was the possibility that limited nuclear use in a crisis “could trigger uncontrolled escalation to general nuclear war.” No one could be sure how the Soviet Union would respond during a confrontation. If Soviet leaders launched a limited nuclear strike, that could be a sign that they were willing to “play the flexible response game.” But there was no “reliable evidence” that Moscow had any plans for limited strikes. According to the report, Soviet officials had long maintained that a conflict with the United States would escalate quickly, and Soviet military theorists had argued that “a limited conflict is both unlikely and inherently unstable.” In keeping with the concerns raised by Pentagon analysts, the DPRC study noted that if Washington ordered limited nuclear strikes on Soviet targets, there would be no “sound way” to “pre-

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77. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

78. “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” pp. 50–52. For “never never land,” see Davis to Kissinger, “Minutes of the Verification Panel held August 9, 1973.”

79. “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” pp. 50–52.

dict the Soviet response, which could either be to negotiate, to reply with limited strikes, or to escalate to large nuclear attacks.” It is now known that Soviet leaders were in fact beginning to think about limited nuclear war and that some Soviet military commanders had discussed the possibility of a limited response to a NATO nuclear attack. Yet how Moscow would have responded to a limited U.S. strategic nuclear attack on the Soviet homeland was impossible to say.<sup>80</sup>

Given the risks and uncertainties, the DPRC report concluded that Washington should consider limited strategic strikes 1) “only if faced with a challenge to vital national interests”; and 2) only after using diplomatic channels, public announcements, and the Hot Line to avoid escalation and strictly avoiding attacks that could weaken Soviet central control over nuclear weapons.<sup>81</sup>

The DPRC also reviewed some items then on the Pentagon’s wish list, including programs to improve the accuracy of Minuteman III ICBMs and to equip the missiles’ MIRVs with larger-yield warheads that would give them a counterforce hard-target kill capability.<sup>82</sup> Proponents of counterforce argued that it would provide more options in a crisis, bolster the confidence of allies, and strengthen deterrence by showing an “ability to respond ‘in kind’ to any attack.” But the option had its critics on the panel, who argued that improved counterforce capabilities would be “destabilizing” in a crisis by encouraging “Soviet escalation.” Moreover, such capabilities could undermine negotiations with Moscow (which would perceive a U.S. drive for a “disarming strike capability”), and trouble allies (who were more concerned about the “coupling of U.S. strategic forces to their defense”). This equivocal review did not stop the Pentagon from pressing for Minuteman accuracy improvements, although action by the U.S. Senate temporarily halted it later in 1972.<sup>83</sup>

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80. *Ibid.*, p. 50; Garthoff, *Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine*, pp. 52–69, 83; and Raymond Garthoff, *Journey Through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), p. 358. See also Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 88, for concerns about limited options and uncontrolled escalation.

81. “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” 3 January 1972, pp. 51–52. Besides looking at the pros and cons of limited strategic options, the authors of the DPRC strategic-objectives study revisited arguments that treated more robust command and control arrangements as a condition for flexible nuclear strategies. See “U.S. Strategic Objectives and Force Posture Executive Summary,” pp. 51–53.

82. According to the report to the DPRC, the Pentagon anticipated Minuteman III warheads with explosive yields reaching five megatons and accuracy (circular error probable) of 0.15 nautical miles.

83. See Alton Frye, *A Responsible Congress: The Politics of National Security* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), pp. 79–80.

## The Foster Panel and Its Origins

The DPRC study did not lead to the decisions on nuclear policy that its sponsors had anticipated, but it presaged a major targeting policy review at the Pentagon. Except for the comment about “never never land,” Kissinger’s general reaction to the DPRC’s analysis is unknown. Although the sponsors of the report expected that it would lead to a high-level decision on one of the General Strategic Alternatives and then to a targeting study, NSC staffer Philip Odeen realized that such an approach was “too simplistic” because nuclear attack policy was an integral part of strategic objectives and force posture. The failure of the DPRC study to address nuclear “employment” policy in a comprehensive way added pressure for a new approach to targeting. In the meantime, for the third year in a row, Nixon publicly reiterated his interest in a “flexible range of strategic options.” But even before Nixon made this statement, Laird had begun to shift his position. Despite his skepticism of concepts of limited strategic use, he ordered a review of the SIOP as Kissinger had sought. This planning initiative occurred while Washington and Moscow were finalizing the SALT I arrangements and making plans for a top-level summit in Moscow. Détente was flourishing, but traditional Cold War concerns induced leaders on both sides to be ready for the possibility of an East-West crisis and the possible breakdown of détente.<sup>84</sup>

Exactly why Laird became more responsive to the White House’s interest in selective nuclear options is unclear. The work of the Systems Analysis office and the DPRC may have influenced his thinking. Laird may have found it fitting to respond to Nixon’s repeated public requests for more options. The prospective SALT I arrangements played an important role in Pentagon decisions on targeting. By the fall of 1971 Moscow and Washington had reached an agreement in principle that the SALT agreements would include a treaty severely restricting or banning ABM deployments in the Soviet Union and the United States. This had significant implications for nuclear targeting policy because the treaty undercut a significant reason for the ongoing deployment of MIRVs: as a means of evading Soviet anti-missile defenses. If the Soviet Union deployed only a minimal ABM system, the Pentagon would have to re-

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84. Odeen to Kissinger, “DPRC Meeting June 27 on Strategic Policy,” 24 June 1972, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive; “Secretary Laird’s Memo to the President Dated December 26, 1972 Proposing Changes in U.S. Strategic Policy,” 5 January 1973, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive; and “Third Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy,” 9 February 1970, *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon*, p. 307. See also K. Wayne Smith to Henry Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Defense Policy and Planning Guidance for FY 74–78,” 8 November 1971, in NA, NPMP, Box H-109, DPRC 11–11–71 (NSSM 69). For Terriff’s detailed coverage of the Foster Panel, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 97–158.

think its targeting plans to accommodate the unexpected supply of MIRVs. The chief SALT negotiator, Gerard C. Smith, already believed “we are going to have trouble finding appropriate targets for the more than 7,000–9,000 reentry vehicles that we will soon have.”<sup>85</sup>

With an ABM treaty in place, targeting policy would have to be updated, as would a Strategic Guidance document used by Secretary Laird to evaluate plans submitted by assistant secretaries and the Joint Chiefs. When Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis Gardiner Tucker heard a SAC briefing on targeting, he realized that the problem posed by the ABM treaty for the MIRV had to be addressed. It was time, Tucker believed, to update targeting guidance so that it was in “tune with the latest strategic thinking.” In the fall of 1971 Laird signed off on a “Policy and Planning Guidance” that showed strong interest in revising targeting policy and the SIOP. The document emphasized Nixon’s previously stated desire for strategic alternatives “appropriate to the nature and level of provocation without resorting to mass destruction of population.” Laird, however, did not provide specific instructions on alternatives. The new guidance also called for a comprehensive SIOP review to ensure that “strategic nuclear attack plans” were “consistent with planning guidance.”<sup>86</sup>

Laird soon ordered a review of nuclear targeting. In January 1972 he authorized a special committee, chaired by Director of Defense Research and Engineering John Foster, to devise a “National Nuclear Target and Attack Policy” to provide guidance to the JCS. Later known as the DOD Strategic Target Policy Committee, or Foster Panel, the members of this highly secretive body included two assistant secretaries of defense (Gardiner Tucker and Warren Nutter), JCS Chairman Thomas Moorer, Joint Staff Director General John Vogt, and Admiral John Weinle (who took over the Joint Staff when Vogt left). General Jasper Welch of the Air Force, Foster’s deputy, chaired the working group that prepared the draft reports. For the first time, a group of top Pentagon officials, both civilian and military, with considerable expert knowledge on nuclear weapons and targeting, subjected targeting policy to close review, exactly what Kissinger had been seeking since the beginning of the of the administration. Moreover, because the Foster panel represented key

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85. Gerard C. Smith to Kissinger, 5 November 1971, FOIA release to NSArchive; and Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 100–102. For numbers of MIRVs coming on line during the 1970s, see Natural Resources Defense Council, “Table of U.S. Nuclear Warheads,” in *Nuclear Stockpiles and Forces* (New York: NRDC, 2004), table 2; also available on-line at: <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab9.asp>.

86. Gardiner L. Tucker to Terry Terriff, 12 February 1990, copy provided by Gardiner Tucker to author; Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 100–102; and K. Wayne Smith to Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Defense Policy and Planning Guidance for FY 74–78.”

elements of the Pentagon bureaucracy, it was well-positioned to have its work approved, especially by the JCS.<sup>87</sup>

The turf-conscious Laird did not want Kissinger involved in the study. He rejected a JCS proposal to include the NSC in the SIOP review. No doubt the great sensitivity of the issue, a desire to avoid leaks, and a strong wish to maintain control of the project informed his stance. The NSC staff learned about the panel in due course, but Kissinger did not intervene, probably to avoid a clash with Laird. As Philip Odeen put it, “we have not been involved in this effort because of Laird’s sensitivities.”<sup>88</sup>

That the Pentagon was shifting its targeting policy was by no means a state secret. Laird’s annual report to the Congress for 1972 quoted, for the first time, one of Nixon’s statements on the need to replace assured destruction with a “flexible range of strategic options.” The report claimed that to maintain the required flexibility “we design our forces so that we have strategic alternatives available for use depending on the nature or level of provocation.” This meant that the U.S. government had the capability to “carry out an appropriate response” without massively destructive attacks. Laird was exaggerating the Pentagon’s capabilities, but he was making an explicit commitment to the White House’s search for a range of options.<sup>89</sup>

The Foster panel completed its initial report in June 1972, although Laird did not submit a finished product to Nixon until December 1972. Because much of the relevant documentation is still classified, it is not yet possible to identify the ideas and influences that shaped the panel’s thinking. Terriff’s study suggests that the RAND NU OPTS project had an impact on the participants, but almost nothing else is known at this point. Whatever the specific influences were, Odeen explained to Kissinger that the panel’s initial report was a “radical departure” from the NSTAP in substance and in format: “The difference is that the current policy is to win the war through the destruction of the enemy’s forces and military capability,” whereas the “new, proposed policy aims at trying to stop the war quickly and at a low level of destruction.” In contrast to the NSTAP, the Foster panel sought to control escalation and “re-establish mutual deterrence” by providing limited options. Odeen pointed out the advantages to Kissinger, especially that the new ap-

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87. Odeen to Kissinger, “DPRC Meeting, June 27 on Strategic Policy,” 24 June 1972; and Tucker to Terriff, 12 February 1990. For the membership of the Foster panel, see Seymour Weiss, “National Target and Attack Policy,” 2 October 1972, FOIA Release, copy at NSArchive. For the Foster panel and bureaucratic politics, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 102–108.

88. Odeen to Kissinger, “DPRC Meeting, June 27 on Strategic Policy,” 24 June 1972. For Weiss’s participation, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 161–165.

89. *Statement of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird before the House Subcommittee on Department of Defense Appropriations on the FY 1973 Defense Budget and FY 1973–77 Program, February 22, 1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 66–67.

proach would make it possible to “demonstrate our resolve in a crisis and punish the enemy, but to refrain from striking cities so as to provide an incentive for terminating the conflict.” Moreover, unlike the NSTAP, which was predicated on the unlikely scenarios of a Soviet first strike or surprise attack, the new proposal recognized the “great uncertainty that exists as to how a war might begin.” Kissinger probably saw all those changes as advantageous, although he may have found the point about demonstrating “resolve in a crisis” particularly responsive.<sup>90</sup>

The report was in two parts: one section on nuclear weapons targeting and employment policy and the other on nuclear weapons policy, drawing on the first section. Following the logic of General Yudkin’s NU OPTS presentation, the panel proposed to strengthen deterrence by developing procedures for controlling escalation. One of the procedures would be the establishment of “boundaries” for escalation, for example, by limiting the destructiveness of weapons and also by striking targets that minimized civilian losses. The United States would also seek to maintain a survivable reserve or “swing force” (e.g., of missile-launching nuclear submarines) that could limit escalation by threatening urban-industrial targets. Moreover, targeting would avoid command and control facilities to ensure that the adversary could “control escalation and not resort to ‘automatic’ responses.” Like the DPRC, the Foster panel had no great confidence that escalation could be controlled and deterrence reestablished once nuclear weapons had been used; nevertheless, the panelists believed that the new approach might “furnish a few precarious handholds” for averting a plunge into general war.<sup>91</sup>

To give policymakers a broad choice of attack options, the Foster panel proposed four categories of options for conflicts with the Soviet Union or China. The first category, “major attacks,” were essentially the same as the SIOP strike plans that would be invoked if deterrence failed altogether and escalation could not be controlled: 1) attacks on major Soviet and East European nuclear and conventional forces; 2) attacks on Soviet and East European military targets plus political and urban-industrial targets; 3) attacks on major Chinese nuclear and conventional forces; and 4) attacks on Chinese military targets plus political and urban-industrial targets. As with SIOP-4, thousands of weapons would strike targets either preemptively or in retaliation. As one of Kissinger’s aides later remarked, the major attack options would “still essen-

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90. Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, p. 100. The following discussion draws on Odeen to Kissinger, “DPRC Meeting, June 27 on Strategic Policy,” 24 June 1972; “HAK Talking Points DOD Strategic Targeting Study Briefing, Thursday, July 27, 1972,” FOIA release, copy at NSArchive; and Odeen to Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Memo to the President Dated December 26, 1972,” 5 January 1973, enclosing “Analytical DoD Targeting Study Results and Proposals,” FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

91. For “handholds,” see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 156–157.

tially destroy all of the Soviet Union and China.”<sup>92</sup> Those, of course, were the plans that Moore and Laird saw as most relevant to deterrence.

To supplement the major attack options and also to draw on the thousands of sorties that constituted them, the Foster panel proposed three new categories of nuclear strikes: selected, regional, and limited attack options. Twelve “selected options” were proposed, amounting to “smaller packages” of military targets found in the major attack plans. They included groups of targets that threatened the United States, NATO, and other allies. Among the targets of selected options were Soviet nuclear threats to the U.S. homeland, Soviet nuclear threats to NATO, Soviet naval threats to NATO, Soviet air defenses, Soviet conventional threats to U.S. allies and forces in Asia, Chinese nuclear threats, and Chinese command and control. To control escalation and to help the adversary understand the limited nature of the attack, each of those categories would come with withholds, such as targets collocated in urban areas, Moscow or Beijing, or even targets in a particular country. For such options, the United States would preserve a “swing force” to “discourage the enemy from a major attack on our cities.”

The Foster panel envisaged “limited options” for use when major or selective attacks were inappropriate and policymakers wanted to contain the scale of violence. Limited options could be created from parts of the selected and major attack options. Recognizing the need for a menu of limited options, the panel suggested that the JCS establish a special staff to develop “pre-planned limited options and design ad hoc options as required.” Using either strategic or theater nuclear forces, limited strikes could serve several purposes: “signaling” (to demonstrate the great risk of combat), “response in kind,” or the gaining of “local advantage” (if, for example, U.S. forces were under an onslaught of enemy conventional forces). The notion of using nuclear weapons to convey simultaneously a message of heightened danger and of limited use posed a difficult problem but one that the panelists believed could be resolved to create a meaningful barrier to escalation.<sup>93</sup>

The last category—“regional options”—could be designed to counter “threats to any region.”<sup>94</sup> The panel did not provide specific guidance but directed the JCS to “prepare general plans for attacks on deployed enemy forces, their local control, reserves, reinforcements and support facilities.” Nuclear

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92. Jan M. Lodal to Secretary Kissinger, “DOD Follow-Up on New Nuclear Employment Policy (NSDM 242),” 9 February 1974, FOIA release, copy at NSArchive.

93. On the problem of signaling, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 136–137.

94. This option did not appear in Odeen’s first summary (which was detailed on the various options) but appeared in a later iteration. The regional option may have been devised in a subsequent stage of the panel’s work. Compare “HAK Talking Points DOD Strategic Targeting Study Briefing, Thursday, July 27, 1972” and Odeen to Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Memo to the President Dated December 26, 1972,” enclosing “Analytical Summary DOD Targeting Study Results and Proposals.”

strikes would be possible under three conditions: in the event of Soviet nuclear attacks, during a “prolonged conventional war” (presumably to break a deadlock), or “after a short war” (perhaps to avert escalation). Regional commanders—the CINCs—would prepare detailed plans as required, although the National Command Authority (NCA)—the President and the Secretary of Defense—would closely control any use of nuclear weapons, with high priority placed on minimizing collateral civilian damage.

To make flexible options feasible, the panel also recommended priorities for allocating weapons among various target categories. In contrast to the existing SIOP, which treated strategic nuclear targets as the highest priority, the Foster panel wanted urban-industrial “counter-value” targets to be given top priority to ensure that SLBMs and other weapons with “enduring survivability” would be available to strike them. Under both preemptive and retaliatory scenarios, the survivable forces were to be available “to deter the Soviets from hitting our U/I targets.” In a preemptive situation, Soviet nuclear targets would be the second priority for weapons allocations, followed by command and control and general-purpose military forces. For retaliatory options, command and control targets would have second priority, followed by non-silo nuclear targets and general-purpose forces, and then hard silos. Targeting hard silos in retaliation had the lowest priority for weapons assignment presumably because most or many would already be empty after an attack.

If limited options failed and major war broke out, the Foster panel proposed using U.S. nuclear forces to destroy military, political, and economic assets that would be “essential” to the enemy’s “post war recovery.” Presumably, these classes of targets would be covered by the thousands of MIRVs that were being deployed and that needed retargeting. To the extent that recovery targets were destroyed, U.S. “post-war power and influence would be enhanced relative to the adversary.” Recovery was defined broadly—for example, conventional forces would be a significant target category because of their importance in exercising “internal control over post-attack recovery, [securing] external resources for the enemy’s post-attack recovery, and [continuing] to threaten the United States and its allies.” Moreover, political control centers could also be targets because of their importance for recovery. Thus, while destroying populations as such was not, and could not be, an objective, political leaders, armies, and industrial facilities were valid targets. That, of course meant destroying people even if targeting was carefully tailored to minimize fatalities.<sup>95</sup>

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95. Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 177–178. See also Nolan, *Guarding the Arsenal*, pp. 109–110. Targeting populations as such was in violation of international law (specifically the Fourth Geneva Convention). See Rosenberg, “Nuclear War Planning,” p. 165.

To limit civilian fatalities, the Foster panel proposed changes in the degree of destructiveness of nuclear attacks by slightly lowering DE requirements, especially against hard targets like silos. Reducing damage expectancy from as high as 98 percent to no more than 90 (still very high) would make more weapons available for other targets. The panel also proposed that damage calculations take into account fatalities caused by radiation (instead of using blast damage calculations only) as a way to provide a “yardstick . . . for avoiding collateral nuclear damage in Limited Options.” Although an adjustment of this sort would lead to a more realistic assessment of the destructiveness of nuclear weapons, the panel apparently paid no attention to fire effects as a significant cause of destruction. To the extent that fire doubled (or more) the destructiveness of a nuclear weapon, limited nuclear options could be massively destructive and far from “limited” if targeted on or close to urban-industrial centers.<sup>96</sup>

The work of the Foster panel represented the kind of basic challenge to JSTPS nuclear planning that Kissinger had been seeking. Appraisals of the panel’s report were generally favorable. Odeen later commented that it was “high quality work.” At the end of August 1972 the Joint Chiefs offered their support. Despite their earlier concern that SIOP reform would degrade U.S. nuclear plans and capabilities, they deemed the panel’s findings “acceptable and in the US interest.” Nevertheless, they believed that because of all the complexities, it would take roughly two years to develop fully the Foster panel’s concepts and integrate them into “U.S. planning and capabilities.” Even if JCS Chairman Moorer may have regarded the Foster panel’s work as “mind games,” he was no longer going to stand in the way.<sup>97</sup>

Kissinger received a briefing on the Foster panel’s report in late July 1972, but details on his reaction are unavailable. No doubt he saw the panel’s proposals as highly responsive to concerns he had expressed about the president’s need for options “short of an all-out SIOP response.” Kissinger all along had wanted to avoid the “risk of our being paralyzed in a crisis” by the lack of plausible threats, and he had also declared that “deterrence has to be based on war-fighting capability.” He probably saw work on the conceptual basis for planning limited nuclear options as contributing to such a capability.<sup>98</sup>

Over the next two years, the Foster panel’s planning concepts went through interagency review and approval. With strong support for change ev-

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96. Rosenberg, “Nuclear War Planning.” For fire effects, see Eden, *Whole World on Fire*.

97. Odeen to Kissinger, “Secretary Laird’s Memo to the President Dated December 26, 1972”; and Weiss, “National Target and Attack Policy,” 2 October 1972.

98. Ambassador Johnson to Acting Secretary, “DPRC Meeting—June 27, 1972,” 29 June 1972, SN 1970–73, DEF 1 US; and Minutes, Defense Program Review Committee, 22 February 1971, in NA, NSCIE, H-117, Defense Program Review Committee Minutes Originals 69–73 (1 of 3).

ident at the Pentagon, Nixon readily signed National Security Decision Memorandum 242 in January 1974 instructing the high command to begin revising “operational plans” and improving command and control arrangements to make controlled escalation possible. In April 1974, Secretary of Defense Schlesinger signed the Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP), which gave detailed guidance to military planners for the creation of the major attack, selected, regional, and limited nuclear options proposed by the Foster panel. Nevertheless, the path to the new policy was far from direct. Schlesinger was less interested than Kissinger in nuclear options to support U.S. policy in Third World crises. Moreover, nuclear planners at the Pentagon and the JSTPS never completely bought into the new concepts. For them, the “organizational frame” of a massive attack and high DE had great tenacity. By early 1976, Schlesinger’s successor had approved the latest version of the war plan, SIOP-5, but its emphasis was on major attack and selective options. Apparently, the new SIOP contained relatively little provision for the limited options that Kissinger and Schlesinger had sought. When the Carter administration came to office a year later, the national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, complained that the SIOP options were “relatively [rigid]” and that they afforded the president “limited choice” in a crisis. Thus, the Carter administration and its successors sustained the search for limited nuclear options to strengthen deterrence and limit damage in nuclear war.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

When the Nixon administration came into office, the new president and his national security adviser were concerned that, in the era of Vietnam, the credibility of American power was in doubt. Kissinger believed that credible military threats were necessary to deter conflict, especially superpower confrontation, and to strengthen U.S. power in world affairs. He was worried that U.S. nuclear war plans did not serve useful political purposes. Early in the administration, a briefing on U.S. nuclear war plans showed that the execution of the SIOP would be a catastrophic event. Kissinger later characterized the war plan as a “horror strategy.” Possibly following the emphasis of the “madman theory” on threats of disproportionate force, Kissinger believed that U.S. presidents needed more plausible threats than a nuclear holocaust to manipulate adversaries. He wanted the Pentagon to develop plans for limited nuclear

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99. For details, see Terriff, *The Nixon Administration*, pp. 159–222; William Burr, “Is This the Best They Can Do?: US Nuclear War Planning in Search for Limited Options, 1969–1976” (paper presented at June 2003 Conference of Norwegian Defense Institute and Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Svalbard, Norway).

options to deter war and strengthen U.S. diplomacy and, if war could not be averted, to control nuclear escalation. In the era of parity, Kissinger believed, nuclear war might be controllable because neither side would take the horrible risk of launching “everything.” His assumption that presidents needed credible military threats to strengthen U.S. diplomacy showed that he, like his forerunners in earlier Cold War administrations, believed that Washington might have to run risks in diplomatic crises by raising the level of danger to an adversary. Kissinger, no less than Dean Acheson or John Foster Dulles, saw nuclear weapons and risky threats of nuclear use as providing necessary and powerful support for U.S. foreign policy. For Kissinger, the prospect of limited nuclear use would pose one of those “unacceptable risks” that might keep an “opponent from a given course.”

Nuclear planning was, of course, contested terrain, and Kissinger was pressing concepts of limited nuclear options against a background of doubts in the national security bureaucracy regarding their feasibility and validity. Although some elements of the Air Force provided ideas in support of limited nuclear operations, more powerful elements of the bureaucracy were skeptical. Senior and mid-level Pentagon officials believed that massive attacks were enough of a deterrent and questioned whether it was even possible to constrain nuclear war. Other skeptics wondered whether the proposed strategy might weaken deterrence, damage relations with Western Europe, and lower the threshold for nuclear weapons use. Kissinger was also challenging deep-seated organizational routines that were difficult to reshape. Planners at the JSTPS were accustomed to developing and refining massive nuclear strikes, and they were doubtful that civilians, even top presidential advisers, should be involved in the most sensitive nuclear targeting issues.

Kissinger was not in a strong position to ask the Pentagon for a major review of targeting, and he therefore had to wait for Laird to take the initiative. Not until senior Pentagon officials decided to rethink nuclear targeting policy (if only to adjust war plans for the anticipated stock of MIRVed missiles) did they become more responsive to proposals for limited options. With the creation of the Foster panel, Pentagon experts developed concepts for the range of nuclear threats that Nixon and Kissinger believed were necessary to support U.S. diplomacy, strengthen deterrence, and limit nuclear war if deterrence failed. If escalation could not be controlled, the panel’s proposals for major attacks included “recovery” targets, thus giving nuclear planners some verbal distance from the ethically problematic concept of explicitly targeting urban-industrial population centers.

The Nixon administration laid the groundwork for an approach to nuclear targeting policy that successive Cold War presidents would sustain to varying degrees. Yet, plans for limited use of nuclear weapons posed enor-

mous risks. As the internal debate on the U.S. side suggested, the course of nuclear conflict was unpredictable, not only because C3 systems remained vulnerable to disruption but also because Soviet leaders were deeply skeptical that nuclear escalation could be controlled. Given the high risk of any nuclear use, it was far from clear that a threat of limited nuclear use would have any credibility. Moreover, policymakers did not fully understand the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. As long as explosive blast was the sole criterion for understanding nuclear devastation, the search for limited options would necessarily remain chimerical. Nevertheless, the Nixon White House saw the Soviet Union as a threat to international order that had to be checked or punished if deterrence failed. Nixon and Kissinger therefore wanted presidents to have plausible nuclear threats. It is easy to understand why policymakers sought military strategies that could reduce the risk of catastrophic war; but whether strategies of controlled escalation could actually mitigate the horror of a nuclear exchange was a gamble whose consequences would be incalculable.

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