

News and Comment

First Strike: Some Notes on Nuclear Semantics

Stewart Alsop's recent article in the *Saturday Evening Post* included a remark that "Kennedy inherited [from the Eisenhower Administration] two basic doctrines on nuclear war. One. . . was that any war bigger than a brush-fire war would be a nuclear war from the outset. The other was that the United States would never strike first with the nuclear weapon. Under the Kennedy grand strategy, both doctrines have been quietly discarded."

The article attracted special attention since it was based on a personal interview with the President. But it illustrates the more general problem that always seems to come up when the words "first strike" are used.

In the extreme case, some saw the remark as an avowal of a preventive war doctrine: an assertion that we might decide to attack the Russians under circumstances where the attack was in no real sense a retaliation.

This "preventive war" view of what was meant by the purported abandonment of the "no first strike" doctrine formed the basis of a number of Soviet comments on the Alsop article. *Pravda* announced that "the gist of the President's statement was that the government of the United States . . . considers itself entitled to strike the first nuclear blow, to become the initiator of a war of aggression." A Tass broadcast to Europe went further, and referred to "Kennedy's statement that the United States intends to attack the Soviet Union."

But such a view requires that the remark be taken completely out of context. The whole point of the article was that (quoting Kennedy) "the situation has changed . . . we have to realize that *both* sides have these annihilating weapons" and therefore that an effort to deter Soviet aggressiveness by relying

solely on nuclear weapons was no longer satisfactory, assuming it ever was satisfactory. The nuclear threat, because it now implies devastation of *both* countries, is credible, to the extent that it is credible at all, only under extreme circumstances. Therefore, and this was the main point of the article and hardly news, we must build up our non-nuclear military strength.

The point about "first strike" comes in this context; for if you are building up conventional forces, there is the danger that your opponent will now see far less risk in aggressive action, since, if war comes, it will "only" be a conventional war. Therefore (to quote Alsop), "Khrushchev must not be certain that, where its vital interests are threatened, the United States will never strike first." The argument is often made that we should not leave this uncertainty, that we should leave ourselves the option to retaliate with *nuclear* weapons only as a response to a *nuclear* attack, or perhaps only as a response to a nuclear attack or an overwhelming ground attack in Europe. This kind of argument may, or may not, be compelling, but it has nothing to do, one way or the other, with the doctrine of preventive war. Indeed, if Kennedy were actually toying with the idea of preventive war, the last thing he would do would be to give any hint of it to a reporter.

This leaves the question of whether it is sound to have a policy which deliberately leaves the Russians uncertain about the precise degree of provocation that *might* bring a nuclear response. Here Alsop's article is misleading, for whether this policy in general is sound or not, the direction in which Kennedy has moved within its framework is toward giving the Russians *greater* assurance that we will not respond to a relatively minor provocation with nuclear weapons. The U.S. always had, and still has, a policy of "no first

strike" in the sense of "no preventive-war strike." We never had a policy of "no first strike" in the sense of "no retaliatory first nuclear strike." What we had, and what Kennedy has abandoned, was a policy of never discussing the first-strike possibility (however remote) *in public*.

Plainly, we could not hold as "two basic doctrines" that "any war bigger than a brush-fire war would be a nuclear war from the outset" and simultaneously that "the U.S. would never strike first with the nuclear weapon." After all, how could we possibly be sure that any major war would be a nuclear war from the start (and therefore feel able to downgrade our conventional forces, as we did) unless we intended to use nuclear weapons from the start whether the Russians used them or not? Since this was clear to everyone with a serious interest in such matters, including the Russian leaders, there was no need to state it. There was, on the contrary, reason to avoid stating it—in effect, to avoid giving the Russians the opportunity to distort any explicit statement for propaganda purposes, precisely as they have distorted President Kennedy's remarks to Alsop.

A good example of this policy of avoidance is the State Department comment on a proposed speech by then-Army chief of staff (now Kennedy's personal military adviser) Maxwell Taylor. "It seems fair to assume," Taylor had written, "that if the [U.S. and Russia] are governed by rational men, they will initiate general atomic warfare only as a last desperate act *in extremis*." The State Department censor commented: "It is questioned whether this sentence . . . should usefully be said *in public* [*italics added*]. We have never implied in any way that [the U.S.] will 'initiate' atomic warfare but only retaliate. . . ."

So although you can question Kennedy's making such a statement in public, the question is one relating to propaganda considerations, not to military policy. If we wanted to reassure the Russians that our finger is not continually on the nuclear button, we would abandon the doctrine of massive retaliation and build up our conventional forces so that we would not have to rely solely on a threat of nuclear response to aggression. This, of course, is precisely what we are doing.—HOWARD MARGOLIS.