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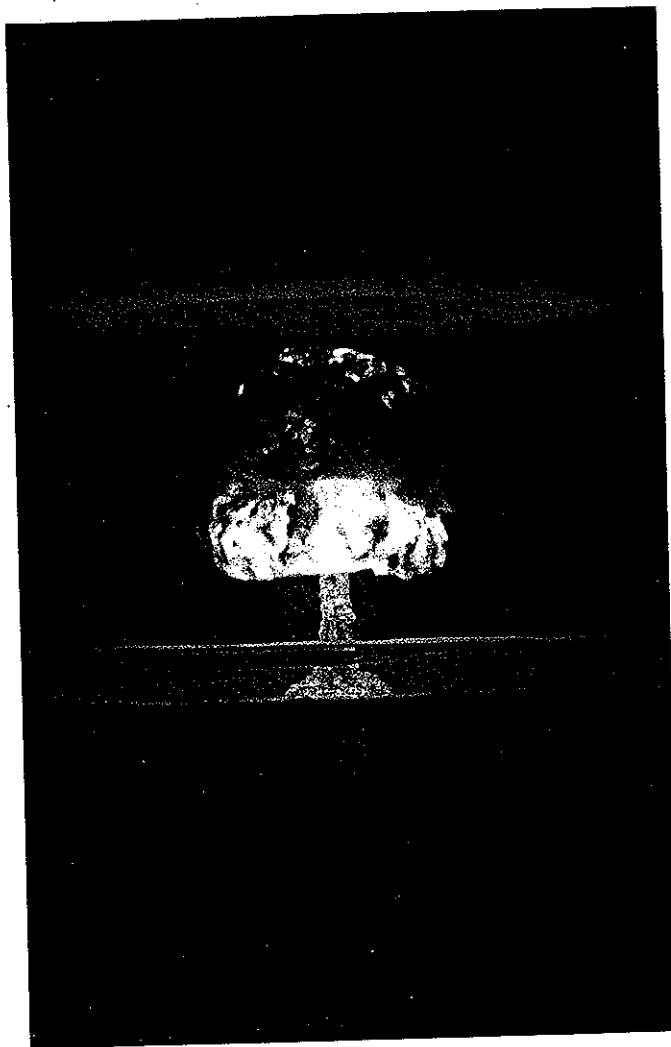
William Werpehowski

In a July interview with NBC, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs sought to counter charges that the Obama administration has not done much to change the foreign policy of George W. Bush. President Barack Obama's foreign policy, Gibbs insisted to *Meet the Press* host David Gregory, has helped give the United States "better relationships with virtually every country in the world." Yet critics on the left—pointing to such evidence as the stepped-up war in Afghanistan, the failure to close Guantánamo, and mixed signals regarding detention and rendition—continue to claim that, in effect, the new boss is the same as the old boss.

Is this true? Does the Obama administration represent a departure from Bush foreign policy, or a continuation of it? By way of answering, I will focus on one aspect of that policy—the intention, which Obama announced in Prague in April 2009, to move toward abolishing nuclear weapons. The president himself admits it may take generations to reach this goal. His plan for multilateral disarmament will inevitably cross paths with the moral aspirations of the Roman Catholic Church.

For decades Catholic social teaching has condemned excessive and competitive arms expenditures. In *Gaudium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council called the arms race "an utterly treacherous trap for humanity" that "ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree." More specifically, the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* tied American Catholic moral reflection on nuclear weapons to three clear judgments: (1) both nuclear uses and deterrent threats directed

at noncombatants are absolutely impermissible; (2) first use against counterforce targets are invariably disproportionate; and (3) a second strike against an adversary's nuclear forces is almost sure to be disproportionate as well. The first conclusion follows from a thoroughgoing rejection of attacks on noncombatants in wartime. Vatican II judged nuclear acts "aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities... along with their population" to be crimes meriting "unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation." Threats to invoke such destruction, even for the sake of deterrence, are criminal as well, since it is wrong to threaten what it is wrong to do.



William Werpehowski teaches theology at Villanova University. This essay is adapted from a presentation made at the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Conference in Trent, Italy, in July 2010.

Homecoming

The dead whom I called forth in poems
stayed the night and show no signs of leaving yet.

I cancel appointments to spend the time with them
before they thin and slip the bonds of earth.

—Norita Dittberner-Jax

The position concerning “first use” rests on a rejection of the enormous dangers of nuclear escalation, reflecting the bishops’ “extreme skepticism about the prospects for controlling a nuclear exchange, however limited the first use might be.”

The third conclusion, finally, allows for what Fr. Bryan Hehir, principal adviser to the bishops at the time, called a “centimeter of ambiguity” regarding the legitimacy of second-strike retaliation following a nuclear attack. A counterforce deterrent threat might conceivably be legitimate, but *only* on condition that such deterrence is the sole purpose of possessing nuclear weapons, and in a quantity limited to that purpose—and that such deterrence is used as a step toward progressive disarmament. This last criterion forms the gold standard for judging U.S. nuclear-weapons policy. “Each proposed addition to our strategic system or change in strategic doctrine,” the bishops wrote, “must be assessed precisely in light of whether it will render steps toward ‘progressive disarmament’ more or less likely.”

Recent statements from Rome have urged progress toward mutual and total nuclear disarmament—a recurring refrain in Pope Benedict’s World Day of Peace messages. Last May, during the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See’s permanent observer to the United Nations, highlighted the perils of proliferation and nuclear terrorism, forcefully criticizing states that “continue to rely on nuclear weapons as a means of security and defense or even measure of power,” accusing them of slowing down disarmament and nonproliferation. These weapons “are no longer just for deterrence but have become entrenched in the military doctrines of the major powers,” Migliore asserted. Furthermore, “as long as nuclear weapons exist, they will allow and even encourage proliferation and there will always be a risk that nuclear material produced for the peaceful use of energy will be turned into weapons.”

Led by Edwin O’Brien, archbishop of Baltimore, the U.S. bishops have joined this chorus. In July of last year, O’Brien spoke on the topic “Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero” at a Deterrence Symposium sponsored by

the U.S. Strategic Command. There and elsewhere, O’Brien has attempted to restate Catholic nuclear ethics in terms of current political realities. Deterrence is not a basis for genuine peace, he points out; indeed, when it drives the development of new weapons it effectively prevents genuine nuclear disarmament. Even the possession of these weapons, in fact, undermines nonproliferation strategies and contributes to the danger of nuclear terrorism. Accordingly, given the moral end of “a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons,” a “path to zero” requires that “every nuclear-weapons system and every nuclear-weapons policy...be judged by the ultimate goal of protecting human life and dignity and the related goal of ridding the world of these weapons in mutually verifiable ways.”

Obama’s Prague speech, made just ten weeks after his inauguration, announced the U.S. commitment to lead an international movement for total disarmament, and rejected the “fatalism” of those who resign themselves to continuing nuclear proliferation. “If we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable,” the president remarked, “then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable.”

One year later, in mid-2010, each week seemed to bring another new initiative to our nation’s nuclear-weapons policy. The new START treaty, signed on April 8, committed the United States and Russia to reducing deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 (30 percent below the existing ceiling), to limiting each nation to a maximum of seven hundred delivery vehicles, and accepting new verification requirements. In mid-April, the Nuclear Security Summit ended with an agreement by forty-seven nations to counter the threat of nuclear terrorism by securing their vulnerable nuclear materials. The commitments, though voluntary, were accompanied by a series of specific pledges to advance nuclear security and dispose of enriched uranium storehouses. The bishops, by way of an April letter to Obama from USCCB president Cardinal Francis George, responded favorably to these advances. They have in addition endorsed the proposal, presented in Prague, to adopt a treaty that prohibits the production of weapons-grade fissile material.

In late May, the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference succeeded in securing more concrete recommitment to the treaty and its threefold bargain of disarmament by nuclear states, nonproliferation for the others, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy for all. Specific action plans were produced to measure progress and ensure accountability. In a statement that sparked controversy, the conference repeated its decade-long encouragement to Israel (as well as India and Pakistan) to sign the treaty, and called for all states in the Middle East to discuss establishment of a weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) free zone in the region.

This past spring also saw the promulgation of a new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), stating our government’s intent to advance nonproliferation efforts, fight nuclear terrorism, reduce the number of nuclear weapons, and continue to seek



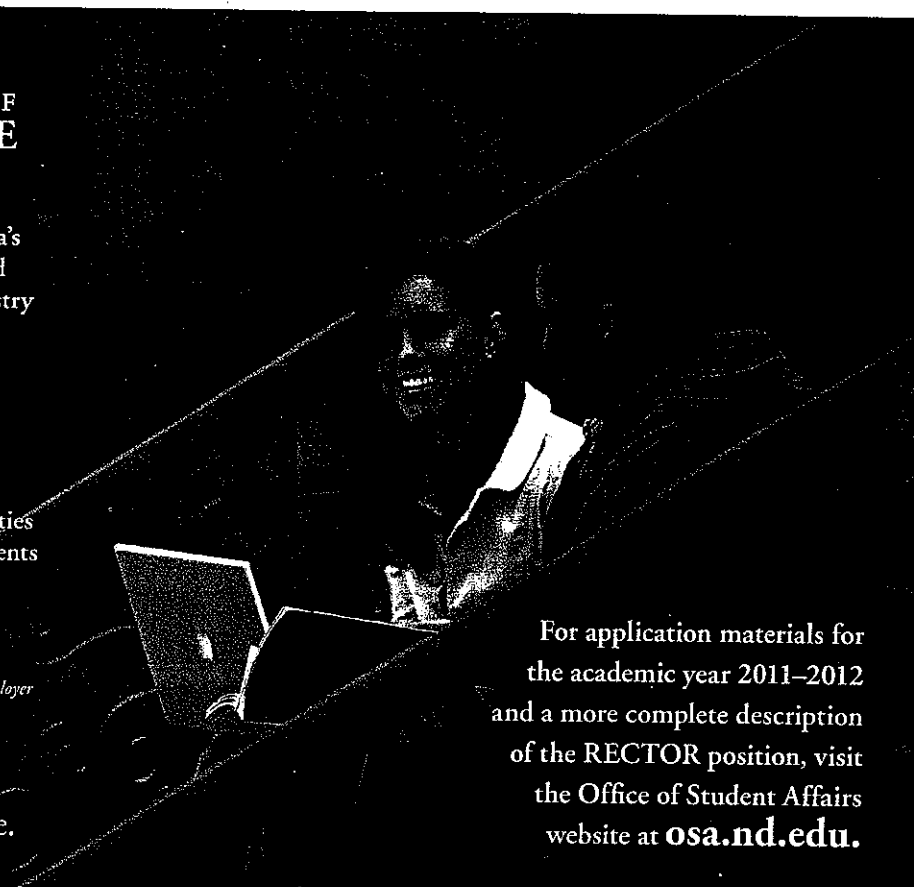
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a safe, secure, and effective deterrent *without* development or testing of new weapons. The review changed national-security policy, announcing that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear arms against nonnuclear signatories of the NPT who are in compliance with their treaty obligations. As for states "that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations," the review continued, "there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW [chemical/biological weapons] attack against the United States or its allies and partners."

The NPR does not take the route, encouraged by the bishops and argued in *The Challenge of Peace*, of declaring that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter against nuclear attack. It holds only that such is their "fundamental" purpose, and that the nation will work to establish conditions under which the more restrictive policy may be safely adopted. Despite this disappointment, Archbishop O'Brien commended the NPR as "morally sound," albeit requiring "more progress." Cardinal George's missive also offered general support for the NPR's beginning efforts to reduce dependence on nuclear weapons.

The path to zero has linked unlikely pilgrims walking arm in arm. Noteworthy in this regard was the call issued by Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry, and Sam Nunn in two *Wall Street Journal* articles published in 2007 and 2008.

Referring to the twin dangers of proliferation and nuclear terror, and calling current deterrence policies "increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective," the gang of four urged the type of measures traditionally associated with doves—not just reducing our reliance on nuclear weapons and preventing them from falling into "potentially dangerous hands," but "ultimately ending them as a threat to the world." Obama's NPR follows this threefold framework, and the U.S. bishops have paid its authors the compliment of featuring them in an online study guide for a documentary, *Nuclear Tipping Point*, based on the *Journal* articles and produced by the nonprofit Nuclear Threat Initiative together with Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

The new NPR notably reverses a number of policies of the Bush administration. Bush's Doctrine of Joint Nuclear Operations countenanced using nuclear weapons in a number of scenarios: to preemptively attack nations or terrorists threatening the use of WMD against the United States or its allies; to destroy WMDs in hardened bunkers; to rapidly end a war on terms favorable to the United States; and "to make sure U.S. and international operations are successful." Obama follows Kissinger et al. in taking steps to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, rendering adherence to nonproliferation more credible. And O'Brien's insistence that nuclear decisions be measured against the goal of eventual abolition is mirrored in a number of Obama initiatives that encourage

nonproliferation and an international institution of rules to promote disarmament, remove incentives to acquire nuclear weapons, and hold noncompliant states accountable.

The policy regarding “outliers,” however, as it applies to nations like North Korea and Iran, raises the question of whether retaining a “calculated ambiguity” of nuclear threat against conventional or biological attack effectively encourages those nonsignatory states to retain or develop nuclear weapons. The NPR attempts to build agreement among states to a set of enforceable norms (and Obama himself has promoted this goal in several statements, including his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance address). Enforceability and accountability crucially involve isolating the noncompliant from the international community; a unilaterally imposed “cost” may actually prompt noncompliance. Complementary multilateral moves, such as the Iran sanctions, hold great importance, then, for this particular kind of regime building.

In July Obama announced a plan to increase the country’s nuclear spending from \$6–7 billion to \$8 billion, even while we begin to reduce the country’s nuclear stockpile by 30 to 40 percent over the next two decades. The president argues that new funds are necessary for infrastructure maintenance. The technology and engineering base for stockpile stewardship has to be strengthened; moreover, as nuclear weapons are reduced, “the reliability of the remaining weapons in the stockpile—and the qualities of the facilities needed to sustain it—become more important,” posing refurbishment and replacement costs.

This invites several questions. How does the July plan jibe with the NPR’s promise to develop no new weapons? What does “new” mean? And does the increase in weapons spending send a mixed message to the international community—“like having an antiwhaling treaty,” in the words of one critic, “while killing whales”? Washington observers tend to believe that Obama is offering the spending boost in exchange for Republican support for the ratification of START and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). One need not be cynical about this—those ratifications are themselves worthwhile (though they may be harder to get now than they were before the midterm elections); and there is plenty of support for the planned expenditures, even among those who hope to abolish nuclear weapons in the future. In a follow-up *Wall Street Journal* op-ed in January of this year titled “How to Protect Our Nuclear Deterrent,” Kissinger and company recommended precisely those investments in infrastructure that the administration’s July plan subsequently proposed, deeming the scientific capability required to maintain America’s nuclear arsenal “important to the long-term goal of achieving and maintaining a world free of nuclear weapons—with all the attendant expertise on verification, detection, prevention, and enforcement that is required.”

Reflection should continue on these and several other matters, including proposals for missile-defense systems and the future of tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and

Russia. In addition—and more fundamentally—the very notion that a world without nuclear weapons would be a better and safer world has also come under scrutiny, most notably in a 2009 study by Thomas Schelling. Just as the U.S. bishops have warned that their critique of nuclear policy is not meant to make the world safe for conventional weapons, so we should be careful that support of Obama’s aspirations for nuclear abolition does not make the world “safe” for continuing or escalating American military dominance in the service of narrow nationalist self-interest. On this matter, the new National Security Strategy (NSS), issued in late May, presents something of a mixed bag. On the one hand, the strategy rejects Bush’s policy of unilateral preventive war and replaces it with pursuit of a rule-governed international order. On the other hand, there is (as with Bush) the reservation of “the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend our nation and our interests,” as well as a presumption that global security requires us to maintain American military superiority.

A better, more coherent vision would regard national security as strengthened by adherence to the rules binding all and weakened by overreaching departures from them. Obama envisioned as much in his Nobel Peace Prize speech. “I—like any head of state—reserve the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend my nation,” the president said in Oslo. “Nevertheless, I am convinced that adhering to standards [governing the use of force] strengthens those who do, and isolates and weakens those who don’t.”

What happens, however, when this fine sentiment runs afoul of a national-security establishment that pledges the United States, as Andrew J. Bacevich puts it in his recent book *Washington Rules*, to “lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world”? Those who think American military supremacy is good for both international order and American political purposes must show that their view is not founded on too rosy a view of American power. Bacevich believes that military supremacy “is an illusion and its pursuit an invitation to mischief, if not disaster.”

We stand at a nuclear tipping point, with the dangers of nuclear attack critically rising. Both the murderousness and the cost of nuclear weapons demand action on behalf of abolition. This is the challenge of peace today. But answering that challenge will include reckoning with the shadow peace casts over the path to zero. In Catholic social thought, the meaning of peace extends beyond nuclear policy. Peace demands defining the legitimate role force can play in resolving conflict. It demands enfolding such just force in a broader vision of peacebuilding that seeks to remedy the social, economic, and political sources of conflict, especially the neglect or violation of human rights. It envisions, as the philosopher Harry van der Linden has argued, a global common good that construes a just military preparedness as one sufficient to advance that good and no more—not a military superiority designed to gain competitive advantage. Only then will we Americans find ourselves truly advanced along the path to nuclear zero. ■