The Nuclearist Codex at the Onset of the Obama Era

Bruce D. Larkin

In September 1965 I stumbled across a Jungian article titled “Halloween, the 50-Megaton Bomb, and the Cuban Crisis.” Today is Halloween 2008, and I have in front of me four scary, related texts by which the dying Bush Administration justifies ongoing nuclearism.

Two are public talks. US National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley spoke to the Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, in February 2008. Hadley addressed “proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials into the hands of nations or individuals who would do us harm,” reminding his audience that “the threat of a nuclear attack on the American homeland remains very real.”

US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates spoke in October to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Gates’ remarks are a defense of the necessity of deterrence and the utility of the ‘reliable replacement warhead.’

Here Gates is the public face of the Department of Defense. Whether he would repeat these shibboleths once freed from the prison of the GW Bush administration remains to be seen.

Government relies on authoritative texts to summarize policy, guide the bureaucracies, and cement policy against anticipated

opposition. The bureaucracy itself, internal dissidents, public critics, and opposition parties may try to erode or undo the government’s initiatives. Steps by the Bush Administration to establish a nuclear policy consistent with its ‘national security strategy’ began with the December 2001 Nuclear Posture Review, followed by the 2002 and 2006 papers titled National Security Strategy of the United States.4

As its second term approached a close, some elements of nuclear policy were set out by the three Secretaries of Defense, State, and Energy (July 2007), the third text on my desk.5 Policy was then further confided in a classified document (February 2008) that remains hidden from the public. The fourth text: in September 2008 the Secretaries of Defense and Energy issued a “redacted and edited” version of the February 2008 document, providing the public a summary of the internal Administration position.6

Gates, whose remarks to the Carnegie Endowment are the most recent, speaks disarmingely, answers questions directly, and summarizes the aims of nuclear deterrence. His talk bears close examination, revealing the persistent tropes of nuclearism.

**Standard Claims: A Dangerous World**

Nuclearists say that the world is dangerous—will always be dangerous—and therefore nuclear weapons must be retained.

Gates: “Our nuclear arsenal is vital for a final reason … we simply cannot predict the future. … We have to be prepared for contingencies we haven’t even considered.”

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Gates: “As long as human nature is what it is, as long as the tragic arc of history continues its course, we cannot eliminate the need to be prepared for war …”

There are two problems here. First, Gates assumes that nuclear weapons are a necessary component of a country’s repertoire to cope with the unexpected. But states have other means. For many future contingencies, perhaps for all, nuclear weapons will be inappropriate. Second, Gates takes nuclear weapons only as part of a solution-set, not as a source of danger themselves. Such a posture is risk-blind.

If war is bound to occur, is it better to have a war in which nuclear weapons are ready to use, or a war in which nuclear weapons—having been eliminated—could not be used?

**Standard Claims: Abolition, but Long In the Future**

Some acknowledge ZNW as an aim, but distance it. Gates makes this move by saying “as long as human nature is what it is …”

And Gates: “While we have a long-term goal of abolishing nuclear weapons once and for all, given the world in which we live, we have to be realistic about that proposition.”

**Standard Moves: Equating ZNW with Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament**

Regrettably, Gates dismisses his predecessors in high office:

Gates: Presidents Carter, Reagan and GHW Bush “genuinely wanted to eliminate all nuclear weapons and said so publicly. More recently, George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn echoed that sentiment in The Wall Street Journal, but all have come up against the reality that as long as others have nuclear weapons, we must maintain some level of these weapons ourselves to deter potential adversaries and to reassure over two dozen allies and partners …”

And Gates quotes Theodore Roosevelt: “It would be a fatal thing to leave ourselves unarmed against the despotisms and barbarisms of the world.”

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But none of the seven cited advocated unilateral disarmament. They were not naifs who “came up against ... reality.” Instead, it was just that ‘reality’ that they proposed be addressed. Current calls—for example, by Shultz et al.—assume the need to negotiate, especially among the nuclear weapon states.

**Standard Claims: NWs Are Needed for More than Nuclear Deterrence**

Nuclearists repeatedly try to grow the list of nuclear missions. The ‘unpredictable world’ argument is one form of this. Others are more concrete.

Gates: “As long as other states have or seek nuclear weapons and potentially can threaten us, our allies and friends, then we must have a deterrent capacity that makes it clear that challenging the United States in the nuclear arena or with other weapons of mass destruction could result in an overwhelming, catastrophic response.” And he adds: “Our nuclear arsenal also helps deter enemies from using chemical and biological weapons.”

There may be two further missions in this phrase. One is certain: that nuclear weapons are required to deter “other weapons of mass destruction.” But is that true? One problem lies in using the category ‘weapons of mass destruction’ which erroneously equates the one true ‘weapon of mass destruction,’ nuclear weapons, with ugly but much more limited biological, chemical, and radiological weapons. ‘Conventional’ capabilities may be more than adequate to deter state use of biological weapons, for example. A second problem is that deterrence, if it is to work, must be focused on the agent and at least minimally credible, conditions which can only be met for the case of a state agent, if they can be met at all.

Deterrence, as a developed concept in nuclear strategy, deters use. But how does a ‘deterrent’ capacity counter ‘potential threats’ or ‘challenges’? Is the term ‘challenge’ unambiguous, clearly signaling the provocative step which could provoke an “overwhelming, catastrophic response”? Is not every other nuclear weapon state’s nuclear force open to the interpretation that it poses a ‘challenge’?

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Another mission developed in Gates’ talk is ‘reassuring allies,’ or what we term extended deterrence:

“as long as others have nuclear weapons, we must maintain some level of these weapons ourselves … to reassure over two dozen allies and partners who rely on our nuclear umbrella for their security, making it unnecessary for them to develop their own.”

Gates does not quite make a claim that the United States must keep nuclear weapons to guard ‘allies and partners’, even in an otherwise denuclearized world, against conventional attack. Nor should he. But we can imagine cases in which an ‘ally’, ‘partner’, or ‘friend’, rather than preparing to assume responsibility for its own safety in a denuclearized world, inveighed against US abandonment of nuclear weapons on the grounds that only US nuclear guarantees kept it from being ‘destroyed’ or ‘shoved into the sea.’ Or made the argument, if it itself was nuclear-armed, that any US moves to negotiate ZNW threatened its nuclear capacity, and therefore its existence. Can you imagine a state that might make such an argument? The client tail must not wag the dog, by insisting on an ongoing mission to ‘reassure’.

The claim that “our arsenal plays an irreplaceable role in reducing proliferation” deserves examination.

**Standard Claims: US NWs Reduce Proliferation**

“[F]riends and allies perceive different levels of risk within their respective regions,” Gates observes, claiming that “Here our arsenal plays an irreplaceable role in reducing proliferation.” He spells out how US nuclear weapons have this effect: “our nuclear umbrella, our extended deterrent underpins our alliances in Europe and in the Pacific and enables our friends, especially those worried about Tehran and Pyongyang to continue to rely on our nuclear deterrent rather than to develop their own.”

US nuclear capabilities did not prevent Israel, Pakistan, or India from developing nuclear weapons.

Gates may correctly assess that US ‘extended deterrence’ has been a significant factor in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

If the US were convincingly committed to global denuclearization, encouraging China and Russia to join that
project, would Asian ‘friends’ insist that the United States stick to providing them a ‘nuclear umbrella’?

Is Design Ongoing?

A main point of successive Administration papers in 2007 and 2008 is to urge the ‘reliable replacement warhead.’ Among the reasons offered are that

- “At a certain point, it will become impossible to keep extending the life of our arsenal … ”
- “the United States is the only declared nuclear power that is neither modernizing its nuclear arsenal nor has the capability to produce a new nuclear warhead.”
- “China and Russia have embarked on an ambitious path to design and field new weapons.”
- creating an “industrial complex that could produce new weapons if the need arose” would permit reduction in inventory

Gates observes that the DoD and DoE undertook the ‘reliable replacement warhead’ program for several years. On the one hand he states that “[n]ew designs build in enhanced safety features and high reliability … ” On the other hand, he insists that “[n]o one has designed a new nuclear weapon in the United States since the 1980s … ” These statements are hard to reconcile except by declaring a difference between design of components and design of a fully completed weapon.

It seems unlikely he means there were ‘RRW’ designs crafted in the 1980s but not thereafter. In November 2004 Congress approved the Reliable Replacement Warhead Program and by 2005 the weapons laboratories had assembled a group of perhaps a hundred personnel to design, as the New York Times put it, “a new generation of nuclear arms meant to be sturdier and more reliable and have longer lives.”7 As Gates notes, Congress has since cut back the program’s funding.


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Do These Administration Papers and Talks Address the Dangers?

Gates’ arguments assume that the case for a continued US nuclear capability has been made and agreed. But consider the possible and probable effects, on the aim of denuclearization, of undertaking a ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead Program’. After all, instituting ZNW would mean that Gates’ image of long-term reliance on nuclear weapons had been rejected. But even adoption of selected elements of a ZNW regime could radically undermine the assumption on which Gates relies. What is unchanging, what changeable? How do cause and effect run? Would committing to the ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead Program’ stymie striving for denuclearization? Would the ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead Program’ actually promote proliferation? How could the United States respond to the assessment, in one or more foreign capitals, that “if the United States places so much emphasis on the worth of retaining nuclear weapons for the long term, it must be in our interest to launch a long-term program as soon as we can.” Can a ‘reliable replacement warhead’ and the Non-Proliferation Treaty coexist?

If nuclearist ‘modernization’ were run in close parallel with good faith pursuit of denuclearization, claims for a ‘reliable replacement warhead’ could be read as part of negotiation about the consequences if others did not join in denuclearization. But that is not how Gates casts history, the world and possibility. Instead, nuclearists dismiss and preclude the possibility of denuclearization, using some of the arguments we have reviewed.

The main problem in Gates’ approach, then, is that it takes the status quo as fixed, and does not consider alternatives. The talk of 28 October 2008 is an exercise in persuasion. Alternatives are ignored: just left out. It is incomplete. And to anyone who suspects that ongoing nuclearism is dangerous, these nuclearist papers and talks do nothing to address the danger.

The Argument With the Democratic Congress

Gates spoke to the Carnegie endowment just a week before the 4 November 2008 election grew Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate, and named Barack Obama President-Elect. As it happens, lines have already been drawn. The
critiques against which Gates was speaking were set out in the Congress earlier in 2008. One subject was the ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead’. The Congressional positions illuminate the match between nuclearists and their moderate opposition, which I will term—revealing something of my own sense of this controversy—the ‘nuclear prudentialists’.

Democrats won a majority in the 110th Congress (January 2007 - January 2009), but their position in the Senate was precarious, and GW Bush could block bills with his veto pen. Nonetheless, legislative history offers an indication where the fault lines lie. We have those sections of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008 that concern nuclear activities of the US Department of Energy, and positions taken by the House and Senate Energy and Water Development Appropriations subcommittees charged with drafting parallel sections of the 2009 bill. But the Appropriations Bill was not brought to a conclusion. Instead, Congress offered, and GW Bush signed, a continuing resolution that maintains funding of Energy Department and other programs into March 2009.

The House and Senate subcommittees agreed that there should be no funding of the ‘Reliable Replacement Warhead.’ The House subcommittee explained its reasoning at some length:

In fiscal year 2008 the Congress rejected funding of the proposed Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW). The President’s budget request for fiscal year 2009 nonetheless included $10,000,000 for RRW. The Committee once again denies this funding.

The Committee is aware of the advantages of a modern warhead design and strongly supports improved surety. The Committee also understands that high margin provides protection against failure due to compound unknowns. The Committee supports trading off Cold

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War high yield for improved reliability, in order to move to a smaller stockpile requiring a smaller and cheaper weapons complex with no need for nuclear testing.

That said, the Committee remains to be convinced that a new warhead design will lead to these benefits. The Committee will not spend the taxpayers’ money for a new generation of warheads promoted as leading to nuclear reductions absent a specified glide path to a specified, much smaller force of nuclear weapons. Similarly, the Committee finds no logic in spending the taxpayers' money on a new generation of warheads promoted as avoiding the need for nuclear testing, while the Secretary of State insists that “the Administration does not support the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.”

The report chides the Administration’s failure to submit plans it had a year earlier required as a prior to any consideration of “funding for most new programs, substantial changes to the existing nuclear weapons complex” or funding of the RRW.

The consolidated House Appropriations Committee’s language on plans sets this requirement:

Before the Committee will consider funding for most new programs, substantial changes to the existing nuclear weapons complex, or funding for the RRW, the Committee insists that the following sequence be completed:

(1) replacement of Cold War strategies with a 21st Century nuclear deterrent strategy sharply focused on today’s and tomorrow’s threats, and capable of serving the national security needs of future Administrations and future Congresses without need for nuclear testing;
(2) determination of the size and nature of the nuclear stockpile sufficient to serve that strategy;
(3) determination of the size and nature of the nuclear weapons complex needed to support that future stockpile.

When the new Congress convenes in early January 2009 it will consider an Appropriations Bill which includes funds for the Department of Energy’s nuclear program.

Looking further into 2009 and 2010, the new Administration will need to bring forward a Congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review, the third since the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991.
“National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century”

The public version of the DoD/DoE paper “National Security and Nuclear Weapons …” is nuclearist. In short, the paper assumes ongoing investment in nuclear infrastructure and pursuit of the RRW:

Over the next two decades, Congress and the American people will be asked to consider initiatives that will help determine how fast and how far the United States can go in transforming its strategic capabilities and nuclear infrastructure to manage the risks and challenges of the 21st century.

And in that vein Secretaries Bodman and Gates write in their covering letter that

Ultimately, a reliable replacement warhead will be needed to sustain nuclear force capabilities, revitalize the nuclear infrastructure, and reduce the nuclear stockpile in a manner that is consistent with U.S. security objectives, including alliance commitments.

Except for references to prior reductions, and the claim that an RRW would be required to “reduce the nuclear stockpile,” there is nothing in this document to acknowledge that nuclear weapons carry risks, nothing to acknowledge NPT Article VI treaty obligations, nothing to suggest that continued reliance on nuclear weapons could promote nuclear proliferation or create opportunities for intending nuclear terrorists. In this report nuclear weapons serve national security … period. The DoD/DoE paper implies ongoing, extended retention of nuclear weapons, and at no point scouts the contrary.

And thus the two lines are drawn. The nuclearist argument assumes nuclear weapons are either desirable or, if not, at least inevitable. The prudentialist argument judges nuclear weapons unnecessary, undesirable (because extraordinarily risky), and at worst catastrophic … and certainly not inevitable.

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The ‘Unforeseen’

We’ve noticed that Robert Gates invokes the unforeseen: “Our nuclear arsenal is vital for a final reason … we simply cannot predict the future. … We have to be prepared for contingencies we haven’t even considered.” Unsurprisingly, the “National Security and Nuclear Weapons …” paper also insists on that argument. It is an instance of a nondisconfirmable proposition, precisely because the future is—as Gates observes—‘unpredictable.’ But that is ‘unpredictable’ in the strong sense, of being surely known. Public policy, oriented to the future, requires that we make reasoned speculations on the future: ‘predictions’ in the weak sense.

Claims about the future are open to argument. They can be—if the subject is consequential, they must be—disputed, that is, reasoned on. The correct response to an ex cathedra dictum is to recognize that it is a prediction in the weak sense and ask ‘is that so? then, why?’ And that is exactly what must be said when confronted by the bold assertion, having invoked “unforeseen operational or technical problems or … adverse changes in the geopolitical environment”, that “a responsive infrastructure and a modern stockpile are needed to provide a cushion or hedge against such contingencies.” What if they are “needed” only if governments fail to negotiate a stable, just and secure abolition of nuclear weapon? What if their pursuit, pending abolition, would render abolition less attainable?

A prudent security policy is risk cognizant. Its authors must imagine possible future threats. Since the capacity to act must be prepared, we expect them to conceive and advocate precautions to be taken, capabilities to be put in place. We expect a discussion about ‘what to do?’, about ‘how much is enough?’ and ‘when must it be in place?’, given anticipated threats and some rational work on the likelihood any threat will emanate.

Nothing of that sort appears in “National Security and Nuclear Weapons …” Instead, we are told there could be ‘unforeseen’ threats, and that therefore the steps its authors promote are ‘needed.’ In this public document, at least, no case is made. The case is simply asserted. That is not enough.
Arms Control Today, the journal of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, asked Barack Obama several questions on nuclear policy. In this excerpt from his 10 September 2008 response I’ve highlit key phrases:

Obama: As president, I will set a new direction in nuclear weapons policy and show the world that America believes in its existing commitment under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to work to ultimately eliminate all nuclear weapons. I fully support reaffirming this goal, as called for by George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn, as well as the specific steps they propose to move us in that direction.[1] I have made it clear that America will not disarm unilaterally. Indeed, as long as states retain nuclear weapons, the United States will maintain a nuclear deterrent that is strong, safe, secure, and reliable. But I will not authorize the development of new nuclear weapons. And I will make the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide a central element of U.S. nuclear policy.10

Obama’s position has much in parallel with that of the 2008 House of Representatives. What distinguishes this Obama statement is his commitment that global ZNW will be a central element of US policy. Other terms cater to the status quo, whether used by presidents who may have wished to control or abolish nuclear weapons, or by nuclearists who pretend for denuclearization but work to keep a ready nuclear force: the term of art is ‘ultimately’. The test will be whether realistic, determined initiatives are offered to other countries with nuclear arsenals.


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