Cold Dawn, Long Night?


There comes a time in the life of every great nation when only two choices remain: it can meet a protracted and implacable challenge successfully, or it can disappear from the face of world politics in surrender or ruin. At such a time, much depends on the ability of the people and the leadership of that country to comprehend fully both the nature of the threat with which it must deal, and the consequences of failure.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the United States may be coming to such a watershed in its national existence. Occasional protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, it is no longer possible to ignore the concatenation of challenges confronting the United States in the evolving world order. A growing number of critics, reflecting on developments of the past decade, are expressing deep concern about the ability of this country to maintain its commitments, secure its allies, and safeguard its interests in the ever more complex and dangerous international arena.

It is within this context that Daniel Graham's Shall America Be Defended? SALT II and Beyond should properly be seen. A retired Army Lieutenant General whose last post was as Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Graham is particularly well qualified to write on the subject of American national security. In this book, Graham traces the evolution of American nuclear forces and strategy through the Cold War and afterwards, with particularly good chapters on "The Dawn of the Nuclear Age," "The McNamara Era and the Adoption of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction)," and "The SALT II Debate."

The thesis of Graham's book is as stark as it is straight-forward. Graham contends that while America can and should be defended, the guiding doctrinal orthodoxy in "official" circles has foreclosed the capability to do so by denying the feasibility of defense in the nuclear age. Further, Graham believes that SALT II is the crucible in which the larger question, "Shall America Be Defended?" will be answered once and for all. And unless the appropriate answer is forthcoming, Graham fears that the peculiar American experiment in representative government may come to a regrettable and untimely end.

The basic elements in Graham's thesis can be appraised without great difficulty. The source of our present dilemma, in Graham's opinion, has its origin in America's basic

and persistent misapprehension of Soviet intentions, capabilities, and strategy. Put simply, the U.S. tended to "mirror-image" the USSR, assuming that the Soviets either shared our views on nuclear strategy and nuclear war, or were at least educable, forgetting rather conveniently that neither assumption might be true. Strategies, after all, are shaped in part by the historical experience and prevailing cultural norms of a people. Different experiences and different value systems are very likely to produce different strategies, or at least different notions about security, even in an era dominated by nuclear weapons (pp. 17-31). These differences, Graham notes, are particularly striking in the case of the United States and the Soviet Union, especially with respect to basic Soviet and American views of human, and therefore political, relationships. Given these differences, it is not at all surprising that the Soviets have a grimmer and less compromising cast of mind than Americans where questions of national security are concerned. As Graham aptly put it in one passage (p. 27),

*The cruelties of Ivan the Terrible stand at the beginning of modern Russian nationhood somewhat as the Pilgrims' sufferings at Plymouth Rock stand at the beginning of America's. But while the latter teach the lesson that pain may be banished from all by cooperation, the former teach that only the powerful enjoy precarious security.*

To a considerable extent, these differences appeared in each country's appraisal of nuclear war and, therefore, the appropriate means of dealing with it. American nuclear strategy reflected a combination of self-confidence in this country's place in the world, an aversion to war in principle, and a firm belief in "final just solutions to international problems" (p. 19), even when those problems reflect a fundamental conflict of interests between basically hostile systems or states. Anything, in a word, can be negotiated. The Soviets, however, take a less sanguine (or, perhaps, more sanguinary!) view of the matter (pp. 26-27):

*LIFE IN RUSSIA HAS NEVER ENCOURAGED EXAGGERATED EXPECTATIONS ABOUT HUMAN BENEFICENCE, OR ABOUT THE COMPATIBILITY OF HUMAN INTEREST.... FOR RUSSIA, EVEN MORE THAN FOR GERMANY, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS MEANS [sic] CONFLICT, AND CONFLICT MEANS TAKING OR BEING TAKEN....*

These differences in national character alone would tend to produce conflicting views of war and strategy. But it is not simply a matter of differences in national character determining different approaches to national security questions in the nuclear era. It is also, and perhaps more commonly, a matter of leadership. Graham argues forcefully and at length that the U.S. has not been well served by its Presidents and their key counsellors on these issues, and that Democrats and Republicans alike bear responsibility for the unenviable position in which the U.S. presently finds itself (p. 130). For more than thirty years, Graham charges, each Administration has accepted or espoused a strategy wholly inappropriate to the challenge posed to this country and its allies by the Soviet Union. Both the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations, for example, relied on essentially the same doctrines, although the labels applied to them changed somewhat. Both administrations' strategic doctrines in practice were predicated on American nuclear superiority (p. 39); and they were doctrines "of nuclear deterrence which by the end of the Eisenhower years had become incredible to friend and foe alike." (p. 36)

Nothing that happened (or did not happen!) during those administrations, however, had as great an impact on the United States as what transpired during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. In terms of U.S. strategic nuclear forces and doctrine, the Kennedy-Johnson years were dominated by the same figure: Robert Strange McNamara. Graham definitely
places McNamara at the head of his private pantheon of devils, remarking that (p. 51):

*It is difficult to overstate the determining effect which Robert Strange McNamara's seven-year incumbency as Secretary of Defense has had upon American nuclear strategy and upon the increasingly perilous strategic situation in which the U.S. finds itself today.*

This “determining effect,” according to Graham, is most evident in what he terms McNamara’s “chief legacy” (p. 51): the doctrine of MAD (mutual assured destruction). McNamara and his MADmen essentially believed that the only security in the nuclear age lay in being defenseless, and that effective deterrence required only “the assured capability for destruction...and the openly expressed will to use it” (pp. 65-66). The only problems with MAD, as Graham points out in a somewhat acerbic manner, are that it has no analogue in Soviet strategic doctrine (pp. 44-45), ignores the vastly different requirements for effective deterrence “on a sunny day in June when all is well...(and) when Soviet and NATO troops are locked in combat on the North German plain (p. 73), and—of greatest conceptual significance—fails utterly “to acknowledge the peculiar nature of war” in world politics (p. 61).

Perhaps the only thing more astonishing to Graham than the initial acceptance of MAD has been its retention by subsequent administrations. Nixon criticized MAD and McNamara alike before becoming President, but “Once in office...(he) accepted the McNamara Doctrine” with only nominal changes, and with the endorsement of Henry Kissinger (p. 130). Ford continued to abide by that doctrine (perhaps out of ignorance), James Schlesinger’s entreaties notwithstanding. And today, Graham considers Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to be “in a quandary—he appears to have recognized the follies of MAD, (but) he works for an administration which has not” (p. 127). Indeed, Brown must deal with a dual liability: a MAD U.S. strategic nuclear force—that “chief legacy” of McNamara—and the political-military handicaps of detente—the handiwork of Kissinger.

All of these particular vultures have come to roost in the SALT process. This process reflected (at least on the American side) McNamara’s decisions on nuclear doctrine and his focus on arms control, the Nixon-Kissinger emphasis on detente, and a blend of overconfidence in American strength and “pacificist enthusiasm” (pp. 82-83, 129, 200-201). The clear assumption on the part of the proponents of SALT I was that, as Graham poetically remarks (p. 101),

*After waking up to the cold dawn of mutual vulnerability, both nations would experience a long, sunny day.*

The problem, of course, was that the U.S. acted as if that day would never end, whereas the USSR planned for the equally long but sunless night that—in the Marxist-Leninist view of power and politics in the world—must surely follow. At no time did the Soviets accept the prevailing American wisdom on war and strategy in general, or on nuclear war and strategic doctrine in particular, nor did they see SALT as a reason to reduce their political and military efforts in the world (pp. 50, 84, 173). For some reason, this was a reality that few Americans in official circles seemed willing and able to accept. In Graham’s words (p. 103),

*It cannot be emphasized enough that this debate (about MAD) took place among Americans...(the Soviets) never wavered from the belief that balances of power are way stations to the superiority and victory of some, and to the inferiority and ultimate defeat of others.*

It is precisely such a “way station,” Graham contends, that the U.S. may be approaching in SALT II. Graham clearly
assumes that SALT II will finish what SALT I began, and that the end product will have the undesired and unintended effect of undermining U.S. security beyond the point of no return (pp. 12, 106, 203, 239). SALT I was badly flawed. Contrary to the claims put forth on its behalf, it did not enhance mutual deterrence, control the Soviet arms buildup, maintain our qualitative lead, or contribute to detente, and there is no reason to believe that SALT II will do any better (pp. 140-163, 214-237). On the contrary, it may even be, as Graham suggests, that "SALT II as a treaty...aids and abets the Soviet drive for global military superiority" (p. 227). Indeed, Graham asserts that "The question of whether America shall be defended lies at the heart of the SALT II debate" (p. 14).

GRAHAM'S powerful, and often persuasive, critique of official U.S. strategic doctrine and his equally compelling arguments against SALT II, however, do not reflect a flawless piece of work, and those flaws must be understood in order to appreciate the overall strengths of the book. In point of fact, this study has two serious substantive problems, in addition to the clear need for another stylistic revision and an index to guide the less experienced student of the subject through the complexity of the argument. One is Graham's assertion that "the worst features of American military thought (in the nuclear age) were produced not by American soldiers but by civilians" who, Graham contends, have been incapable of dealing adequately with the reality of war and politics today (p. 24). The other problem is the rather cavalier attitude Graham takes toward the possible ravages of full-scale nuclear war, which, he claims, "cannot destroy the world, but may conquer it less damaged than Europe and Japan we damaged by World War II" (pp. 108,247).

Neither of these positions, in my opinion, are merited, at least as they are presented in this book. In the first place, General Graham—like most professionals—does not take kindly to the intrusion of "outsiders" (in this case, civilians) into his professional domain. But even the general would have to concede (albeit grudgingly) that professional soldiers have not always been realistic and innovative students of military affairs. Battleship admirals and cavalry generals guided force planning and strategic thinking long after technological advances had outmoded their preferred weapons, and their modern counterparts have done little better. Nor is it that "those who continue to hold tenaciously (if not fanatically) to the precepts of MAD are unwilling to deal with the world as it really exists" (p. 107). On the contrary, the prevailing "official" strategic doctrines up to and including MAD and its derivatives—rational or not—are firmly rooted in the American character, just as Soviet doctrine finds its origins in the Russian character. For example, the Soviet and
U.S. predilections for targeting, respectively, political-military targets and cities (i.e., counterforce and countervalue strategies) have their foundation in the broad views of the two political cultures toward war. The Soviets see the spoils of war going to the victors, and—anticipating their own victory—see no point in robbing themselves of the fruits of that victory by destroying their opponents’ socio-economic infrastructure. To Americans, however, those who would wage nuclear war are evil and should be destroyed root and branch, especially since the spoils of nuclear war would never exceed its costs. Political and military arguments which run counter to these fundamental beliefs are not likely to alter either them or the political cultures from which they have risen.

Second, Graham’s dismissal of the consequences of a general nuclear war between the superpowers strikes me as decidedly unrealistic. His specific (but not exclusive) focus on the military effects of nuclear weapons unwarrantedly discounts their collateral impact on society. Much of our physical plant and population (and perhaps more of the Soviet Union’s) might well survive even a massive nuclear exchange. Whether the same could be said for our society, at least as a functioning democracy, is much less certain—who, after all, would help us recover from such a war as we helped Europe and Japan recover from World War II? The shreds of American (and probably Soviet) society that would remain after such a war might or might not make the “survivors envy the dead” (to use Herman Kahn’s classic formulation). Yet they would likely make those survivors subject to any third power (e.g., China) that had been able to avoid becoming embroiled in a Soviet-American war. But even if Graham’s view of nuclear war happened to be literally true, the popular view of nuclear war is that it would be a holocaust, and to argue the contrary weakens the political acceptability of his case. Graham might be well advised to cease speaking of “defending” America in this context, and to speak—and think—in terms of “damage-limitation”—that is, reducing the scope, if not the fact, of the disaster that would accompany a nuclear war.

Despite these flaws, Shall America Be Defended? is both an enlightening and a chilling study. It helps us understand where we are today, and why we have come to our present state. But it also underscores the immense difficulties with which we must contend, and the numerous—and perhaps insurmountable—obstacles to be overcome in any effort we might make to resolve those difficulties.

It would be comforting to believe that both SALT II and the misguided MAD doctrine, on which it is based will be rejected in the coming months, and that all will then be put right. Unfortunately, that outcome may not come to pass, even if the Senate rejects SALT II and the MAD doctrine is dismissed out of hand. Graham observed in this book that “The great pity of the late 1970s is that the legacy of the few years in the late 1960s, when MAD seemed real, persists” (p. 106). But the much greater pity of the early 1980s may be that the fate of SALT II and MAD is immaterial. For even their rejection may come too late to alter significantly a situation made untenable by those MADmen who choose to disregard common sense and strategic vision alike by equating American security with “mutual” insecurity in the nuclear age.