



To: Members of the Congressional Strategic Posture Review Commission
Re: Debunking the Damage Limitation Strategy
Date: December 15, 2008

The findings and recommendations of the Strategic Posture Review Commission will likely influence President Obama's decisions vis-à-vis nuclear weapons policy and military defense strategy in important ways. A number of conservative think tanks and associated commentators have written to you advocating adoption of a "damage limitation strategy" to reduce U.S. vulnerability to nuclear weapons.¹

Proponents of this strategy advocate deploying defensive capabilities (e.g., missile defenses and civil defense programs) to respond to terrorists and, potentially, nations that cannot be deterred. They also advocate development of new offensive capabilities and use of counterforce targeting to strengthen the U.S. deterrent, which they maintain requires revitalizing the U.S. nuclear weapons production complex. Arms control and nonproliferation efforts play a supporting—not primary—role in the strategy, only being useful if they place restrictions on weapon systems that are difficult to target or otherwise mitigate proliferation without constraining U.S. defenses or new weapons development. Concomitantly, damage limitation supporters oppose U.S. movement toward nuclear disarmament as mandated under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as U.S. accession to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).

The idea of limiting damage if the United States suffered a nuclear attack is very compelling, but it is also unworkable and would undermine efforts to reduce the nuclear threat in the first place, as we discuss in more detail below.

Past as Prologue

It is useful to examine the history of damage limitation as a guiding concept in U.S. strategic policy. Advocates of today's damage limitation strategy are the progeny of post-World War II RAND Corporation defense intellectuals who sought to devise a rational strategy that would allow the United States to fight—and survive—a nuclear war. For example, Herman Kahn, perhaps the most well-known advocate of damage limitation measures, wrote:

“Once one accepts the idea that deterrence is not absolutely reliable and that it would be possible to survive a war, then he may be willing to buy insurance—to spend money on preparations to decrease the number of fatalities and injuries, limit damage, facilitate recuperation, and to get the best military result possible—at least ‘to prevail’ in some meaningful sense if you cannot win...I agree with our current national policy that the

¹ See Spring, Baker. “Congressional Commission Should Recommend a ‘Damage Limitation’ Strategy.” The Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, No. 2172, 14 August 2008; other proponents include Keith Payne, J.D. Crouch, Charles Krauthammer, and Daniel Gouré.

primary objective of our military forces is to deter war. However, I feel that there is a second but still very important objective: to protect life and property if war breaks out.”²

Robert S. McNamara introduced damage limitation into the mainstream strategic policy discourse as Secretary of Defense in the 1960s. He was taken with the ideas coming out of RAND and brought defense intellectuals into the Defense Department, where they began to reshape the U.S. nuclear posture. However, the enthusiasm that he and others in the defense community initially had for damage limitation waned as it became clear that the strategy simply *wouldn't work*.³ Analysts concluded that missile defense was unreliable, counterforce targeting impractical, and a strategy based on damage limitation hopeless.⁴

Periodically since then, the same questions have been asked; the same ideas debated; the same arguments and counterarguments made and remade; the same problems and shortfalls consistently re-recognized. Today's calls for adoption of a damage limitation strategy are merely the most recent iteration of these same, tired ideas.

A damage limitation strategy would *increase* nuclear threats.

Most experts agree that the principal nuclear threats to U.S. security are currently: (1) a mistaken, accidental, or unauthorized launch by Russia; (2) unchecked nuclear proliferation leading to hostile and/or unstable regimes possessing and potentially using nuclear weapons; and (3) the acquisition by terrorists of a nuclear weapon that could be used to attack an American or allied city. A damage limitation strategy would fail to address these threats—and even worsen them—for several reasons:

1. Damage limitation would not succeed.

Despite the claim of heightened protection, there is little chance that the defensive and offensive capabilities advocated by damage limitation proponents would actually limit damage in the event of a nuclear attack. Many experts have concluded that straightforward countermeasures available to any nation capable of producing a nuclear-tipped long-range missile would render the U.S. missile defense system ineffective. Yet the systems under development by the United States have not been tested against realistic countermeasures, or under realistic conditions. Furthermore, a “counterforce” first strike against the nuclear weapons of an adversary would almost certainly fail to destroy the entire arsenal, and would likely provoke a retaliatory attack on the United States, U.S. forces abroad, or regional U.S. allies. In addition, counterforce targeting in general could incite an adversary to launch its warheads prematurely out of fear for the survivability of its arsenal.

² Kahn, Herman. *On Thermonuclear War*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960.

³ Kent, Glenn. *Damage Limiting: A Rationale for the Allocation of Resources by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.* Directorate of Defense Research & Engineering, January 1964. Available at <http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/reading_room/18.pdf>.

⁴ Kaplan, Fred. *The Wizards of Armageddon*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983; and Freedman, Lawrence. *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981

Adopting a defensive posture that hinges on programs such as these is irresponsible. As many studies have concluded, damage limitation is unworkable. More than anything else, these systems and schemes provide a false sense of security that could lead to overconfidence in action and concomitantly increased risk of nuclear weapons use.

2. A damage limitation strategy would induce reactions that would decrease U.S. security.

While protection of the country's population and infrastructure is an essential goal of the U.S. strategic posture, it is best accomplished by reducing the nuclear threat. The stance taken by damage limitation advocates is inherently reactive: they argue that our best recourse is to bolster defenses and build new offensive weapons as a hedge against supposedly inevitable attack. However, these actions will increase the risks of both accidental launch and the proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials. For example, Russia maintains an array of nuclear weapons set to launch at the first warning of nuclear attack, which greatly increases the chances of an accidental launch. Moscow is unlikely to agree to de-alert these weapons while the United States pursues projects that are needlessly provocative, including the extension of European missile defense and the development of new, "usable" weapons designed for advanced counterforce targeting. Adoption of a damage limitation strategy would also contradict nonproliferation efforts, as is discussed in more detail below.

3. A damage limitation strategy would fail to diminish the prestige associated with nuclear weapons, a step that is essential to reducing the nuclear threat.

Advocates of damage limitation continue to place a premium on nuclear weapons, viewing them as the indispensable guarantor of U.S. security. They also argue in favor of a revitalized nuclear weapons complex, production of new nuclear warheads, and more "usable" warhead designs. These measures enhance the glamour of nuclear weapons. If the United States pursued such a course, it would only increase the desire of other nations for nuclear weapons and their associated benefits. Furthermore, inducing other nations to adopt damage limitation strategies—even if linked to the principle of nonaggression—is a dangerous proposal. It would likely lead to a defensive arms race and provoke massive spending on ineffectual programs.

4. A damage limitation strategy would lead to the unraveling of international arms control and nonproliferation agreements.

Although damage limitation advocates claim arms control and nonproliferation as components of their strategy, following their recommendations would increase the already substantial strain on the associated agreements, particularly the NPT. Article VI of the NPT commits the nuclear weapons states to nuclear disarmament. Proponents of damage limitation dismiss disarmament as pie-in-the-sky idealism while simultaneously asserting their support for continuance of the NPT. There is obviously a conflict between these two tenets. If the United States disregards its NPT commitment to move in good faith towards nuclear disarmament, then there is considerable risk that other states will eventually tire of the discriminatory implementation of the NPT and either withdraw from the treaty or ignore their own commitments. U.S. noncompliance also reduces its leverage over NPT member states such as Iran.

Damage limitation advocates refuse to acknowledge the geopolitical implications of their proposals. They behave as though the United States operates in a vacuum, where U.S. policy decisions do not affect those of other nations. This could not be further from the truth. What the United States does—the policies it chooses, the weapons it builds, the systems it deploys, the signals it sends—has a profound influence on the decisions of other states. If the United States adopts a damage limitation strategy, it will be telling the world that it does not take arms control and nonproliferation seriously, that it does not value its international commitments, and that it believes its security dilemmas can be solved unilaterally—all dangerous propositions.

The United States should shape the nuclear future, rather than hedge against hypothetical threats.

Recent *Wall Street Journal* op-eds authored by George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn have called on the United States to declare its support for and aggressively pursue a world free of nuclear weapons. Ultimately, this is the only way to prevent more nations—and eventually terrorists—from acquiring nuclear weapons. Adopting a damage limitation strategy would be a significant step backwards in this regard. Meanwhile, the ten steps outlined in *Toward True Security* would do much to improve U.S. nuclear weapons policy and the international security environment in the short-term. As the report argues, “indeed, the United States can proactively shape the nuclear future, rather than anticipate the worst and prepare to hedge against it. In so doing the United States can begin to clear a path to a world free of nuclear weapons.”⁵ The damage limitation strategy would be a hedge against the worst, but it would not bring the United States closer to true security.

Sincerely,

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⁵ Blair, Bruce G. et al. *Toward True Security: Ten Steps the Next President Should Take to Transform U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy*. Federation of American Scientists, Natural Resources Defense Council, & Union of Concerned Scientists, February 2008. Available at <<http://www.ucsusa.org/assets/documents/nwgs/toward-true-security.pdf>>.