

Brodie and the Bomb

*On Aug. 6, 1945, a 35-year-old Yale professor named Bernard Brodie was working as a naval theorist. The next day brought the headline, "First Atomic Bomb Dropped on Japan." Within days, Brodie discarded sea power and began working on a nuclear strategy book, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and the World Order*. Brodie not only served as editor but also authored two chapters. One, a 12,000-word essay titled "Implications for Military Policy," became famous. It contained the passage, "Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose." Brodie was thus the first to cogently express the idea of nuclear deterrence, the watchword of the Cold War.*

The essential change introduced by the atomic bomb is not primarily that it will make war more violent—a city can be as effectively destroyed with TNT and incendiaries—but that it will concentrate the violence in terms of time. A world accustomed to thinking it horrible that wars should last four or five years is now appalled at the prospect that future wars may last only a few days. ...

Is it worth while even to consider military policy as having any consequence at all in an age of atomic bombs? A good many intelligent people think not. ... If our cities can be wiped out in a day, if there is no good reason to expect the development of specific defenses against the bomb, if all the great powers are already within striking range of each other, if even substantial superiority in numbers of aircraft and bombs offers no real security, of what possible avail can large armies and navies be? Unless we can strike first and eliminate a threat before it is realized in action—something which our national Constitution apparently forbids—we are bound to perish under attack without even an opportunity to mobilize resistance. Such at least seems to be the prevailing conception among those who, if they give any thought at all to the military implications of the bomb, content themselves with stressing its character as a weapon of aggression. ...

If it [an aggressor] must fear retaliation, the fact that it destroys its opponent's cities some hours or even days before its own are destroyed may avail it little. ...

If the aggressor state must fear retaliation, it will know that even if it is the victor it will suffer a degree of physical destruction incomparably greater than that suffered by any defeated nation of history, incomparably greater, that is, than that suffered by Germany in the recent war. Under those circumstances no victory, even if guaranteed in advance—which it never is—would be worth the price. The threat of retaliation does not have to be 100 percent certain; it is sufficient if there is a good chance of it, or if there is belief that there is a good chance of it. The prediction is more important than the fact. ...

There is happily little disposition to believe that the atomic bomb by its mere existence and by the horror implicit in it "makes war impossible." In the sense that war is something not to be endured if any reasonable alternative remains, it has long been "impossible." But for that very reason we cannot hope that the bomb makes war impossible in the narrower

"Implications for Military Policy"

Bernard Brodie
Essay in *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power
and the World Order*
Institute of International Studies
Yale University, 1946

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sense of the word. Even without it the conditions of modern war should have been a sufficient deterrent but proved not to be such. If the atomic bomb can be used without fear of substantial retaliation in kind, it will clearly encourage aggression. So much the more reason, therefore, to take all possible steps to assure ... arrangements to make as nearly certain as possible that the aggressor who uses the bomb will have it used against him.

If such arrangements are made, the bomb cannot but prove in the net a powerful inhibition to aggression. It would make relatively little difference if one power had more bombs and were better prepared to resist them than its opponent. It would in any case undergo incalculable destruction of life and property. It is clear that there existed in the [1930s] a deeper and probably more generalized revulsion against war than in any other era of history. Under those circumstances the breeding of a new war required a situation combining dictators of singular irresponsibility with a notion among them and their general staffs that aggression would be both successful and cheap. The possibility of irresponsible or desperate men again becoming rulers of powerful states cannot under the prevailing system of international politics be ruled out in the future. But it does seem possible to erase the idea—if not among madmen rulers then at least among their military supporters—that aggression will be cheap.

Thus, the first and most vital step in any American security program for the age of atomic bombs is to take measures to guarantee to ourselves in case of attack the possibility of retaliation in kind. The writer in making that statement is not for the moment concerned about who will win the next war in which atomic bombs are used. Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose. ■

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